

Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Reflecting BESTAndermatt

[Caroline Näther] For 10 years, we researched how a large-scale resort impacts the Swiss mountain village of Andermatt. The study 'BESTAndermatt' draws to a close in 2020. How did residents and the governmental representatives perceive the study? The answers to this question illustrate what advantages and limitations our responsive and transdisciplinary research had.

The ground-breaking ceremony in 2009. Let us start with voices that describe the impact the project had on the village over the years. How do actors that are involved assess the developments the resort stimulated in Andermatt since then?

The village has a new mayor. He points out that the population benefits from several improvements the resort has generated. The number of inhabitants has grown, employment rate and tax income have increased. In addition, the locals now have access to an enlarged ski arena. The beautiful golf course embellishes the landscape. The famous hotel Chedi fits into the village wonderfully.

Members of the advisory group, on the other hand, explain that some of the resort's effects were not fully considered in advance. The price of land and the housing shortage have risen. The resort obstructs the view on the mountains from certain spots. The development required the integration of labour migrants.

How do the different actors assess the impact of the study that accompanied the development long-term? As it shows, some see positive effects. Andermatt is located in the Swiss Canton of Uri. Uri's secretary-general of the economic department states that the study allows an objective view of the situation in the village. The scientific findings can be communicated to the inhabitants and other relevant actors. This may lead to a perspective rooted in facts, rather than assumptions. The secretary, as well as members of the local advisory group, observe that the study helps to understand what goes on in the mind of the locals.

The local advisory group was established as the study started. Its assignment was to serve as a link between different actors. It connected the company Andermatt Swiss Alps, the municipal authorities, the research team of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, and the residents. The members of the advisory group chaired, for instance, discussion groups. These groups debated results of partial studies at various outcome conferences. They also developed ideas, what measures should be taken.



The local advisory group took up apprehensions of the inhabitants of Andermatt in order to convey them to the local council and the company ASA. Thus, the concerns of the local population were passed onto relevant stakeholders. In the local advisory group, members also discussed their own misgivings, questions, emerging issues, and possible solutions. These discussions were chaired by professionals from the Lucerne University of Applied Science and Arts.

The members of the local advisory group felt well-integrated and 'part of the game', as Uri's secretary-general of the economic department states. The first partial study led investor Samih Sawiris to enter into a dialogue with the local population. His company, ASA, established an exchange with a community that has continued throughout the development.

Our study thus had a positive effect, as it incited the exchange between different actors. Political agents, as well as members of the advisory group confirmed this. But they also raised critical issues that indicate the limitation of our research.

Our research has been responsive. This means that it tries to facilitate conversation between the different groups or the stakeholders involved. It enables them to engage actively with the results of the research, and to decide in what areas measures are necessary to improve a situation. Not everybody, however, is convinced that such a study has an impact.

Can a responsive study change attitudes of those concerned? Can it mobilise them? The secretary-general had some doubts. The members of the advisory group also questioned their own position in the project. Their input seemed to them less influential than expected. In their opinion, the local administration did not consider enough the locals' concerns. The members feel that the investor will always stick to his plans, regardless of the villagers' suggestions and reservations.

In addition, the advisory group did not feel supported by municipal or governmental authorities. The group's task was to identify problems and propose solutions. Its suggestions then often were misconstrued as mere opposition, and received little help. This illustrates that many government agents are not yet familiar with participatory and transdisciplinary projects.

The lack of support by the local government resulted in a lack of visibility. Some inhabitants of Andermatt did not know the advisory group existed. They had no access to information about the study. Some members thus wonder if their commitment was really effective.

This shows that responsive and transdisciplinary research needs to include local knowledge. The local knowledge about the place of residence helps to mobilise inhabitants. What residents know about the

environment is relevant if you want to build a successful tourist destination. Thus, the local public is encouraged to self-confidently approach the changes a tourism resort brings.

The study was designed to end in 2020, as the resort should have been finished by then. However, completion is delayed. The economic department of the canton Uri would like to study the development and its impact further. This research could monitor how the resort impacts the sociocultural life, the social structure, and the socioeconomic conditions of Andermatt. The results could then be discussed with different stakeholders. Thus, the possibility exists to continue with our participatory research approach.