

25 years of experiences with «systemic approaches» in evaluations in Switzerland

Dieter Zürcher

Frankfurt
25. / 26.1.2011

Table of content

1. The systemic approach developed and applied in the 1980s (NADEL, SDC, KEK-CDC)
2. Why it failed
3. Because the world is not a system
4. Challenges for systemic approaches

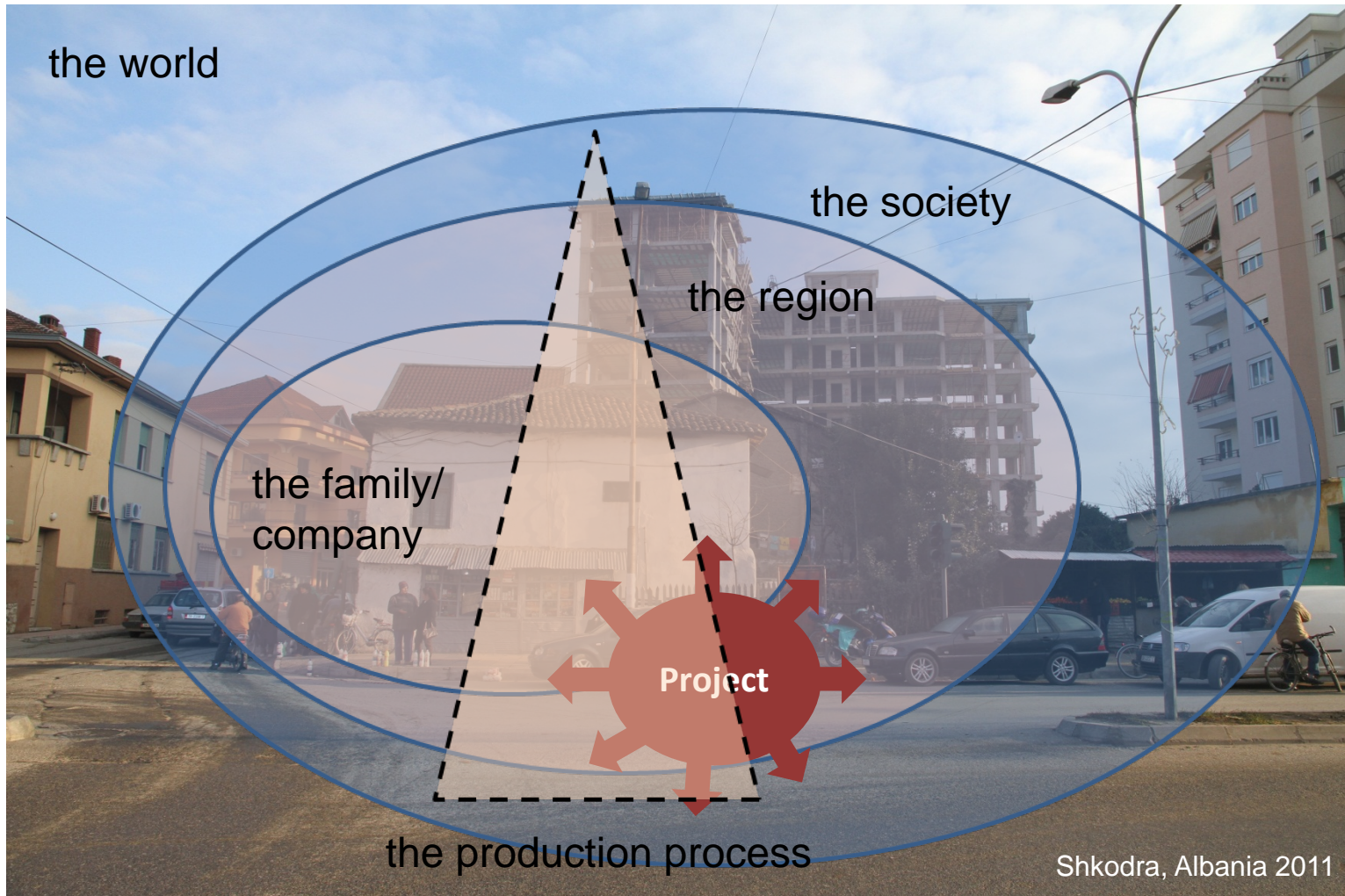
Sources

1. The systemic approach developed and applied in the 1980s (NADEL, SDC, KEK-CDC)

- Roots: systemic thinking schools of the 20th century (Forrester – systems dynamics, Meadows – limits to growth, Vester – cybernetics)
- The approach was based on the principles of «cybernetic self-regulation», «managing complexity», «holistic view» and «open systems»

«Systemic evaluation tries to reveal a network of interwoven elements in order to identify the impact of project activities on the different levels of a system and its interrelated sub-systems» (Menzi/Kläy et al. 1987: 473)

The systemic approach of NADEL, SDC, KEK-CDC



- The systemic evaluation instrument – developed for the livestock sector – divided each «system» into 6 sub-systems with 3-4 elements each:

P 10 Physical setting (10 geography, 11 soil & vegetation, 12

P 20 Demography and social structures (population, decision making, ...)

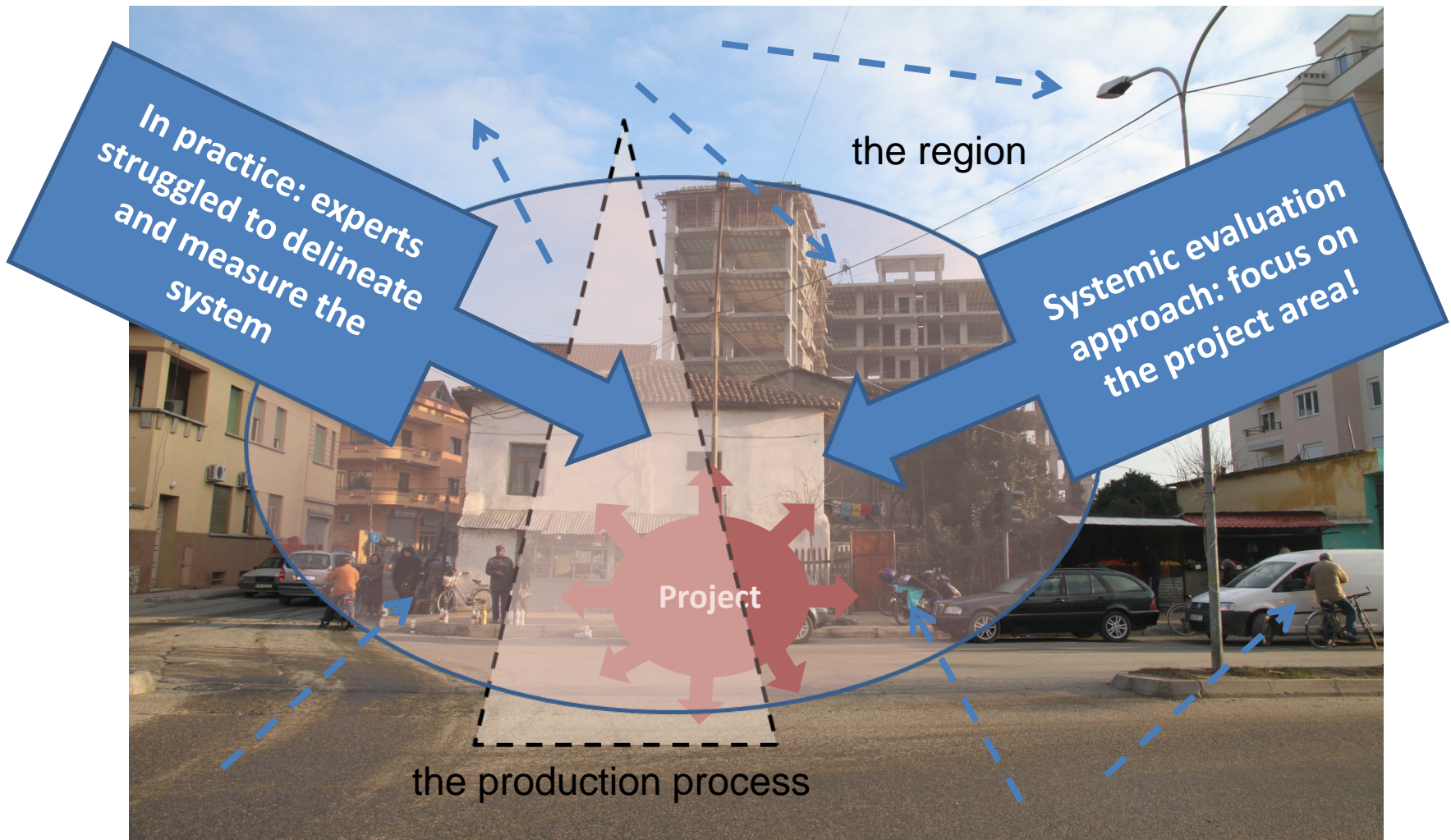
P 30 Norms and values (religion and world view, traditions, and customs,...)

P 40 Political and admin. structures (political foundation, service org.,....)

P 50 Economy, market and supply (economic structure, economic policy,)

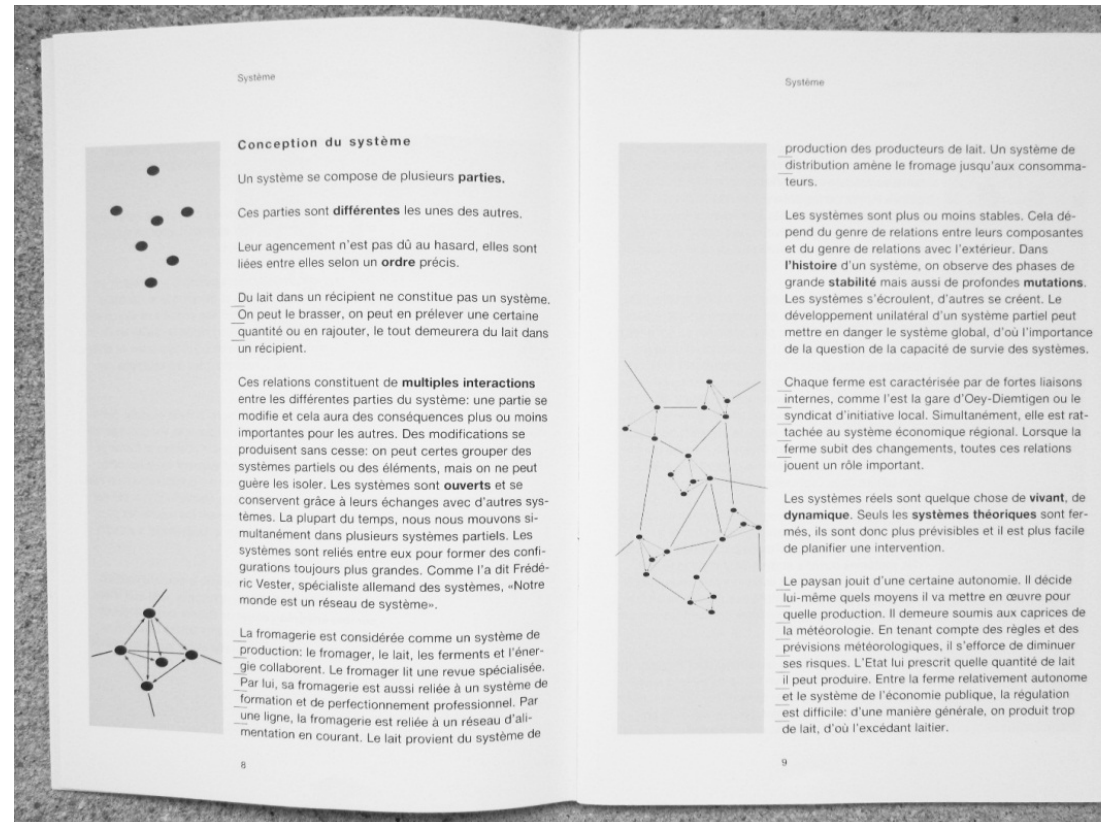
P 60 Education and technical infrastructure (education level, infrastructure,

The systemic approach of NADEL, SDC, KEK-CDC



The systemic approach of NADEL, SDC, KEK-CDC

- The evaluation experts did not understand the manual, therefore
- SDC brochure / slide show to educate evaluators / experts about systemic evaluation (1987)



2. Why it failed

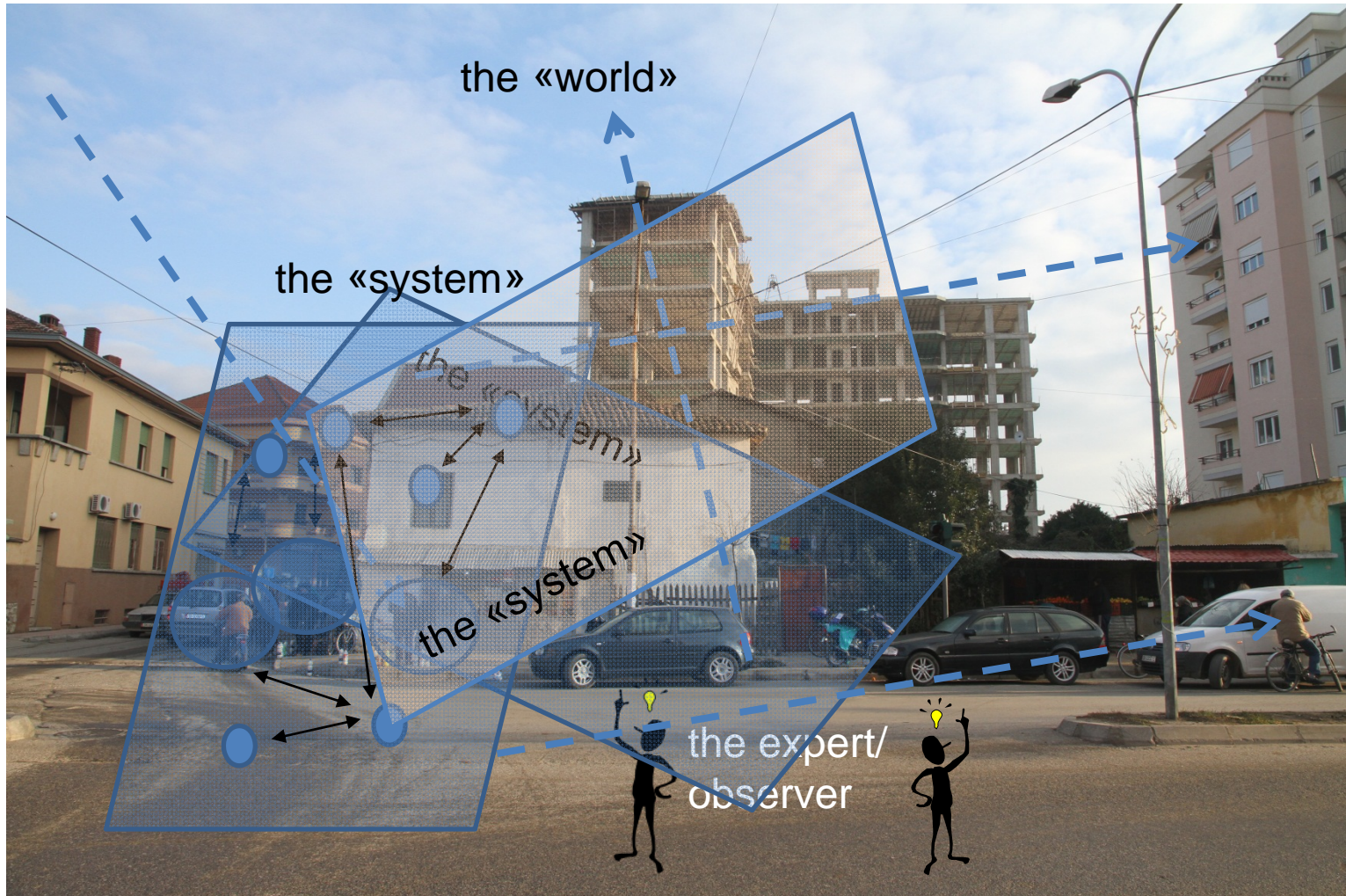
Main experiences and conclusions:

- the relative weighting of the various sub-systems/elements was controversial
- The approach was too complicated: with a lot of efforts unprecise answers were found, often too late
- the time horizon matters: systemic models are often a one time flash
- valuation of effects is tricky: interest of consumers vs. producers

Why it failed

- The approach was followed in a series of ca. 12 sector evaluations
- The approach got forgotten because it was too complex, too rigid
- Dilemma: either «systems» are too trivial with a few sub-systems and elements or then too complex
- Cybernetics and psychological research: a person cannot manage/control more than a few interrelated factors -> development cooperation affects more than a few factors at various levels and with differing dynamics

3. Because the world is not a system



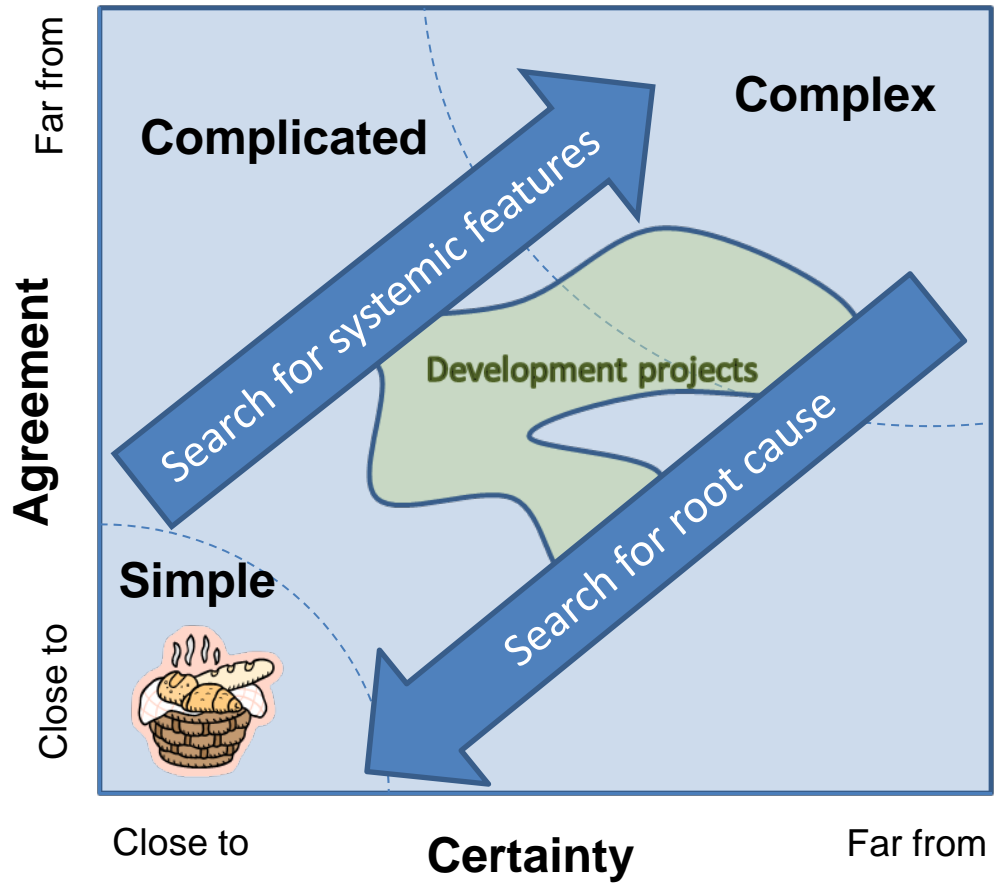
3. Because the world is not a system

The systems' theories have become very diverse: cybernetics, complex adaptive systems, living systems theory, systems dynamics, systems engineering, systems psychology, systems biology,....

4. Challenges for systemic approaches

- There are neither living nor dead systems -> but the world is living (and dying). Theories and system models help to understand the world but are not the world
- Systems tend to become self-referencing worlds. They cannot consider all relevant context factor -> risk of fallacy
- The more complex systems are designed the more difficult it is to discuss and critically review them
- Power relations, interests and access to resources are decisive in systems modelling

Challenges for systemic approaches



Patton (2010)

«We expected from the systemic approach that with a few data a good overall impression of the dynamics of a system can be obtained» Jean-Pierre Wolf (1986)

- Today, systemic thinking approaches have been mainstreamed and are applied for process and/or impact evaluations: e.g. logical framework approach, project cycle management, participatory rural appraisals, context and stakeholder analyses, defining system boundaries, reflexive monitoring and evaluation, etc.

Sources

- Menzi, M. / Kläy A. et. Al (1989): Systemic evaluation – a contribution to Swiss Development Research. In: International Social Science Journal. Reconciling the Sociosphere and the Biosphere Nr. 121, Basil Blackwell /UNESCO
- SDC (1987): Evaluation systemique – Un instrument pour l'évaluation integrale de projets. (elaborated by KEK-CDC)
- Patton (2010): Evaluating the Complex: Getting to Maybe.
- Pers. Communication with Jean-Pierre Wolf (KEK-CDC) and Andreas Kläy (University of Berne)