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New tools for advisory services in less favoured areas: Negotiations towards sustainable systems

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SUMMARY – Based on approaches relating to "farming systems", "social learning" and "agency" the paper intends to examine the processes of negotiations as tools necessary for the sustainability of goat and sheep farming in LFAs. This is so, since what has to be managed includes people and projects: a wide range of people holding different points of view and issues which are likely to be controversial. The experience of the Development Agency of Karditsa, working with sheep and goat farmers in the Greek mountains, is therefore outlined in order to determine the new roles of extension agents. The article concludes with brief recommendations relating to extension training.

Key words: Learning, conventions, agency, systems, sustainability, negotiations, training.

RESUME – "Nouveaux outils pour les services de conseil dans les zones défavorisées : Négociations vers des systèmes durables". Basée sur des approches "systèmes agraires", "apprentissage collectif" et "agence", la communication a comme but l'examen des processus de négociation comme outils nécessaires pour la durabilité des exploitations d'élevage des caprins et des ovins dans les zones défavorisées. Les négociations sont nécessaires parce que les systèmes ci-dessus comprennent des personnes et des projets : avec une diversité importante de personnes ayant des vues et des thèmes différents lesquels peuvent probablement être contradictoires. L'expérience de l'Agence de Développement de Karditsa qui s'occupe des exploitants caprins et ovins des montagnes grecques, est évoquée pour déterminer les rôles nouveaux des vulgarisateurs. La communication finit avec des recommandations concernant la formation de ces vulgarisateurs.

Mots-clés : Connaissance, conventions, agence, système, durabilité, négociation, formation.

Introduction

The continuous change of the state of the world markets has become the source of considerable problems for the primary sector of most of the countries all over the world. The application of the GATT negotiation results aiming at global competitiveness enhances mono-sectoral and productivist approaches to development while the WTO negotiations are expected to reinforce them. In parallel, structural adjustment results in cutbacks of the state services and, consequently, the state's withdrawal from the support to local societies/communities.

Nevertheless, a strong trend towards decentralization is also in the agenda supported by policy approaches putting an increased emphasis on the regional and local levels for planning and intervention; new models such as "bottom-up development" arise and the need for participative approaches is stressed. Therefore, a need for policies able to capture the economic, social and environmental parameters and peculiarities of the local arises. This, in turn, means that "space" has to be created for more autonomous decision making, control of resources and definitions of "development" at the local level. Following, the paper intends to examine approaches and tools relevant to the issue of sustainability, especially as far as Less Favoured Areas are concerned.

Social learning

At the micro-level, a livelihood comprises people, their capabilities and their means of living. Livelihood sustainability depends on positive and dynamic competence, the ability to perceive, predict, adapt to, and exploit changes in the physical, social and economic environment

(Chambers and Conway, 1992). Therefore, development has to be understood as a primarily learning process.

Nowadays, the issue of learning lies at the core of many theories/approaches. Habermas (1987) in his theory of "communicative action" argues that participants in interaction co-ordinate their plans for action by coming to an understanding about something in the world. Therefore, goal-oriented actions are interrelated with communicative actions in the sense that the execution of plans by actors is linked to the plans of other interaction participants by way of common definitions of situations and processes of mutual understanding. Agreement, in the form of the intersubjective recognition of validity claims, makes possible networking of social interactions and lifeworld contexts.

Agreement also makes possible "a world-transforming accumulation of knowledge". Due to the dialectical interdependence between the general, pregiven structures of world-understanding and the experience and practice possible within its horizon, historically shaped understanding is affected and changed. The cumulative results of experiencing and acting within the world may well cast doubt on the adequacy of the worldviews informing social practice thus, leading to their transformation.

Similarly, the social science of conventions (Wilkinson, 1997) gives priority to the examination of agents' co-ordination and the negotiation of agreements in the presence of incompleteness or uncertainty. It examines the conditions for the emergence of co-operation, focuses on the co-operative components of agreements and considers collective learning as the dynamic component of reality. Since all action is both collective and situational, some form of communication and understanding between human beings is required; therefore, there is an ongoing social process of interpreting and identifying situations, mutually adapting interpretations, and determining modes of co-ordination. Collective learning is seen as permanently tied to the process of co-ordination by rules and organizations; rules are considered as dynamic representations of negotiation and institutions as networks with their chief content being practices, transmitted via and interpreted through conventions.

Hence, learning should not be reduced to the subject; instead it should be viewed as an activity in the framework of relationships among subjects. Further, learning has to be conceived as a holistic activity, i.e., as both a practical and a cognitive activity; learning is not a "theoretical" process taking place in the "mind" but a practical-cognitive process taking place within praxis. Finally, knowledge has to be understood as a network, or, better, networks, in which the subject is positioned and which, in turn, construct the various facets of subjectivity. Knowledge is therefore, subject, time and space-dependent. The knowledge production process has, thus, to be understood as the common activity of the subjects in order to fulfil a common objective.

In this respect, social learning (Woodhill and Roling, 1998) is an approach focusing on participatory processes of social change, based on: (i) critical self-reflection; (ii) the development of participatory multi-layered democratic processes; (iii) the reflexive capabilities of human individuals and societies; and (iv) the capacity of social movements to change political and economic frameworks for the better.

According to Bourdieu (1977), people (as social actors) are not always determined by structures, but can manipulate or change them in order to meet their own objectives, needs and desires. The notion of agency attributes to the actor capabilities to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs; people both act and are acted upon. Agency, besides other features, requires organizing capacities. On the one hand, agency depends on the emergence of networks of actors who become enrolled in the projects and practices of other actors; on the other, it calls for the effective channeling of specific items (such as information) through certain networks.

At local level, power struggles arise due to competing sets of claims about reality. Social actors attempt to have their representations of reality imposed upon others and to procure resources and power for themselves. But, the amounts and types of power actors possess and how they are exerted are of crucial importance; people can effect change, but not always in conditions of their choosing. Hence, it is possible to conceptualize local development as a dynamic and on-going, socially constructed and negotiated process. Within this process social actors search for space for manoeuvre, negotiate and struggle. This means that actors try to form alliances with different local (and external actors) to pursue their own social "projects". In such a sense, local development is an emergent property.

Negotiations

Today, there is a growing conviction that sustainability is an idea whose time has come. Sustainability is a powerful but, at the same time, contested, vague and full of contradictions concept; understandings about it are complex, constructed, and contextual. The concept of sustainability raises considerable questions as far as the long-term effects of anthropogenic activities on the environment are concerned since it is now clear that delicate balances are being disturbed and disrupted. Furthermore, sustainability calls for the close examination of the dynamic balance among many additional factors such as political, technological, economic, ethical, cultural and environmental. This, in turn, means that a resolution to the environmental crisis is not primarily a technical problem.

In this context, systems thinking is of extreme importance. Systems are constructs which are helpful when dealing with complex problems; systems analysis addresses complexity and uncertainty by reconstituting the system. Its characteristic is that it involves the understanding of organization or organizing relations through key concepts such as: (i) the whole is more than the sum of its parts; (ii) systems are nested within other systems at various levels of complexity; and (iii) each level has a unique set of "emergent properties"; such properties emerge at a particular level and cannot be predicted on the basis of an examination of the individual system components (Capra, 1997).

Two strands of thought can be clearly distinguished within the systemic approach. On the one hand, "hard" systems are closely related to the problem-solving sequence (structured problems); on the other, "soft" systems deal with unstructured problems, i.e., when the definition of the problem and the designation of objectives is itself problematic (Clayton and Redcliffe, 1996). The latter can be characterized as human activity systems; hard systems are a subset of soft systems. In sum, soft systems are composed by people agreeing to treat the interaction among themselves or between themselves and the wider environment as a system. Then, people share problematic situations and agree on common definitions of a problem and common actions for system management.

Within such a perspective, agriculture, despite the fact that physical and biological resource management is essential to production, has to be treated as a human activity system – the interface between people and their environments. Concepts such as the (agricultural) knowledge information systems as well as practice relating to natural resources management and the various participatory methodologies in rural development provide quite a number of cases in accordance with the above mentioned considerations.

Negotiations hold a central position within such theoretical and practical approaches. The characteristic stages of the negotiation process can be summarized as follows (Brown *et al.*, 1995):

Forecasting (broad overview of context and options) – Forecasting
Analysis (critical selection of key issues and players) – Co-ordination
Goalsetting (agreement between interests to mutual advantage) – Negotiation
Action (teamwork in achieving explicit goals) – Co-operation
Evaluation (shared learning from monitoring outcomes) – Illumination

The case of the LFAs

The case of the LFAs has a special importance for many EU countries and especially for Greece due to evolving marginalisation. Agricultural marginalisation is a process, driven by a combination of social, economic, political and environmental factors, by which in certain areas farming ceases to be viable under an existing land use and socio-economic structure. The marginalisation process may produce a number of different responses from farmers. In any case, a range of different management choices can be made by farmers with the aim of maintaining viability. In turn, different responses will have a series of consequences for the socio-economic situation and, thus, the land-use pattern, the landscape and the natural environment of an area/region.

In LFAs the small ruminants production systems are of paramount importance. Based on a FAIR3 project¹ the Development Agency of Karditsa has set up a process of formation of different stakeholder groups in their research area. In the first place, the (potential) members of each group are brought together in order to exchange views concerning their businesses (products and services). On a later stage, as the group is formalized, its members start negotiating their common future vis a vis sustainability. So far, significant steps have been taken by two such groups: entrepreneurs involved in rural tourism and artisans. Especially the first group have recently proceeded to the construction of a "quality convention". It is expected that due to the character of the area such a convention will be to the benefit of the local animal breeders through the demand of local products (mainly milk, meat, cheese and butter) since the protection and promotion of culinary heritage is one of the most important elements of the "quality convention". Thus, animal breeders are also currently encouraged to take advantage of tourism and the "quality convention" through the formation of their own group with a view of producing local/traditional/quality products. On a later stage such groups of stakeholders will be brought together in order to negotiate the formation of a local network dealing with the issue of sustainability in their area.

In this process the staff of the Agency plays roles such as: (i) the animator of such processes; (ii) the facilitator of the negotiation processes; and (iii) a linking-pin structure which will bring in touch these groups both among them as well as with external networks deemed necessary by the local people in order to fulfil their projects. They do not try to impose their understandings on the local people; instead they try to listen to the local peoples' understandings of their situation and to bring them together so that they will negotiate such understandings with a view of putting forward common objectives. This is indeed a collective learning situation taking place both during the negotiation and decision making process as well as afterwards in the search for information and knowledge for fulfilling the objectives of their conventions.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the theory and practice of Farming Systems² provides a major alternative to top-down development. So far, vast experience has been accumulated in terms of understanding farmers, eliciting participation, developing tools and methods, and building agricultural and social networks. Nevertheless, agricultural extension and education have generally failed to respond both to the better knowledge available today on learning, communication and development and to the challenges of sustainability. Thus, major efforts are required for the establishment of inspiring and multidisciplinary learning environments in which participative processes will play a key role. In such a context, it is necessary on the one hand to integrate production-oriented/technical subjects with social and environmental domains and on the other to develop new kinds of personal skills and qualities³. Such a transformation is deemed necessary for the utilization, on the part of extensionists and local development practitioners, of innovative approaches and tools such as the aforementioned ones.

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²Framing System is the conceptual framework researchers use to think about the intersection of economic, agronomic, human (socio-cultural) and ecological factors that simultaneously impinge on each farm and form the basis for decision making by the farming household. It is a systemic/holistic, interdisciplinary and participatory approach.

³For example, communication skills, team-group work and conflict resolution as well as a capacity to integrate knowledge and information from diverse perspectives and disciplines.

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