

Tackling jointly the challenges of rural development and biodiversity conservation in protected areas

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Abstract

European rural communities in protected areas are facing a complex set of challenges. While demographic changes, agricultural concentration processes and globalized markets lead to enormous economic pressure for farmers in small rural structures, the intensification of the agricultural sector puts under threat the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems. By referring to three examples, this paper discusses how collaborative approaches can help in finding a sustainable way of environmental governance that allows to effectively combine economic interests with environmental concerns.

Keywords

Rural development, cultural landscapes, biodiversity, collaborative approaches

European rural agricultural communities in protected areas are facing a complex set of challenges. More and more integrated and globalized markets, competitive and volatile prices for agricultural products and the need to modernize the mode of production and rise the capital stock in order to keep pace with the market are increasingly challenging, especially for farmers in small structured cultural landscapes and in protected areas. As a tangible result, more and more family farms are giving up every year and traditional production systems within cultural landscapes are progressively dependent upon subsidies. After decades of top down policies aiming at mitigating these market driven changes, many rural communities in cultural landscapes and areas under protection face a difficult future. While a decline in small farming and rural depopulation can have significant socio-economic impacts for a whole region, agricultural concentration processes together with the intensification of the agricultural sector also put under threat the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems. A number of ecosystems are linked to traditional agricultural production practices. Both, giving up marginal land (especially meadows, steep or inaccessible land) and intensifying the production elsewhere bear a significant risk of losing biodiversity and may lead to increased vegetation homogenisation. In addition, land use changes may also promote soil erosion and negatively affect water stocks and ground water quality.

Current governance approaches that aim to address and tackle the problem of increased pressure on small farmers, rural depopulation and resulting challenges for the ecosystem usually are based either on command-and-control type arrangements or on market-based incentives. In command-and-control type arrangements, rules and regulations as well as decision-making are linked to hierarchical authority. Command expresses the idea of standards to comply with, control that of negative sanctions as result of non-compliance (see BALDWIN, CAVE & LODGE, 2011). Hierarchical structures such as governments can build on democratic processes as well as on authoritarian bases. In the context of environmental protection, command-and-control arrangements can include regulations at the European, national or sub-national level. In terms of environmental governance, command and control based approaches e.g. include rules and regulations to conserve protected areas as well as the allocation of subsidies for organic farming.

In contrast, market-based approaches are less prescriptive but rely on voluntary exchanges which are guided by individual interests and economic capacities. Decision making is influenced by economic incentives and financial capacities of concerned actors, including individuals, households, companies, governments, etc, while resource allocation is determined by willingness to accept and willingness to pay (WTA/ WTP). Whereas markets are generally seen as being regulated by demand and supply, it is worth noting that also hierarchies can operate here, with decisions being influenced by power relations. Market-based approaches to environmental governance include e.g. agro-environmental schemes, emission trading and other tradeable permit systems, environmental labels or more generally payments for ecosystem services (PES).

However, in many cases, both hierarchical and market-based governance approaches are not very suitable and effective in helping rural communities to address current challenges. In particular, main limitations are that they are generally too short-term or too general, i.e. not adapted enough to specific local problems and circumstances. Against this backdrop, the aim of Civil-Public-Private-Partnerships (cp³), a research project implemented under ERA-Net BiodivERSA/FACCE-JPI, is to analyse how collaborative approaches in environmental governance can help providing a better fit between agro-ecosystem management and the need to reach specific Ecosystem Services (ES), food production and biodiversity targets in rural landscapes.

For this purpose, research is conducted in three case study regions in Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. All three are protected areas where different forms of collaborative environmental governance have been developed. In the biosphere reserve Spreewald, 100 km south-east of Berlin, on the one hand a citizen foundation ('Stiftung Kulturlandschaft Spreewald') works towards raising funds to promote the preservation of the cultural landscape. On the other hand, a local backwater association ('Staubeirat') is meeting twice a year to discuss and plan the issues related to water management and to advise on water level regulation. The case study in the Netherlands is the municipality of Berg en Dal, situated between the river Waal, Nijmegen and the German border and part of the national landscape Gelderse Poort. With a view to promote landscape conservation, a development plan has been set up with the participation of multiple stakeholders, including the government, civil society and businesses. Long term funding for farmers carrying out nature conservation activities has been made possible through the participation of a number of private funders. In Austria, the analysed case study is the Naturpark Jauerling-Wachau. Here, the seven municipalities located in the park have formed an association to closely collaborate and pool community resources. Main activities include the joint park management and biodiversity protection, environmental awareness raising especially among children and supporting local farmers in marketing their products and homemade goods.

By referring to these case studies and preliminary research results, the aim of this paper is to emphasise and discuss how collaborative approaches can contribute to finding a sustainable way of environmental governance that allows to effectively combining rural development needs with environmental protection and conservation concerns. The paper first presents more in detail the challenges and problems that local communities in the studied cultural landscape have to face. It then analyses how local cooperation at the community level can help address these difficulties and contribute towards balancing or combining different economic and ecological interests. Presented data has primarily been collected through exchanges and interviews with local stakeholders, as well as through Net-Map activities. The paper finally discusses strengths and limitations of collaborative strategies as solutions for both sustainably managing the local agro-ecosystem and mitigating the impacts of the ongoing transition of the agricultural production system. Despite the focus on particular examples, the paper is intended to stimulate broader reflections on how rural communities in protected cultural landscapes can cope with the above mentioned challenges.

References

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