Sustainable Governance of Rural Areas: Chances, Challenges and Conflicts

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Outline of Topic

Most European countries are increasingly confronted with a specific and yet typical situation where more and more nature areas in the countryside are designated as 'protected' while at the same time exploitation pressures increase in the same countryside. Mining, wind power and bioenergy are examples of industrial exploitation of natural resources, which frequently change the landscape and cause land use conflicts due to a lack of public acceptance. As a response, the 'new rural paradigm' increasingly emphasizes partnerships. This trend is further spurred by the emphasis on participation in international environmental agreements and EU legislation (e.g. Aarhus Convention, Water Framework Directive). The EU is thus a direct driver for rural collaboration, but also more indirectly through policy instruments such as the European Rural Development Programme and LIFE/LIFE+. Urban-rural relations are also changing when many cities become more dependent on rural areas; for recreation and the production of export goods and renewable energy.

New forms of governance empower rural populations, but they also open up the rural arena for actors beyond the local level (e.g. NGOs, big companies etc.), thereby embedding rural populations within new formations of power relations. Therefore, this development toward collaborative governance of rural areas needs to be critically examined and analyzed, in particular with regard to institutional innovations and their impacts. However, the dynamics of rural development may also provide new chances for citizen initiatives in rural areas, for example when they succeed to link up with urban interests or when small villages or regions switch to green energy and become an energy-independent 'energy village' or 'energy region'.

This workshop critically explores rural-urban relations, rural collaborative governance, and citizen mobilization in the light of increasing exploitation pressures, calling for papers presenting rigorous empirical research related to theoretical analysis. Comparative studies are particularly encouraged.

Relation to Existing Research

Remote rural areas today face increasing unemployment and declining population trends – even further worsened by the crisis in the European economy that erodes employment in both the private and public sectors. The number of people working in traditional land based industries (such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries) is declining in these regions, although natural resources in a broad sense continue to form the social and economic basis for most activities in rural areas. Rural areas closer to cities are instead meeting high intensification due to residential, economic and infrastructure sprawl. This is also influenced by a new awareness among primarily urban populations, characterized by a new interest in alternative food chains, organic self-production, innovative relations between producers and consumers, community supported agriculture, renewable bio-energy production, eco-tourism, and concerns about nature and biodiversity.

In Europe, a gap continues to evolve between a conservative view of rural areas and traditional economic development and a proactive view focusing on sustainability and the opportunities of biodiversity conservation and renewable energy production. Consequently, innovative land management models, able of reconciling different perspectives into a positive and energizing project of sustainable rural development, aiming to create

new economic and social opportunities for rural regions and having a greater potential of increasing sustainability and biodiversity, are much needed. Such transition from government of rural areas towards processes of governance has brought about bottom-up approaches to development, which is supposed to empower rural populations in relation to disabling structures of top-down government control. This trend is driven by perceptions of policy failure, which in rural areas is manifested through frequent conflicts related to land use (Ostrom 1990; Hovik et al.2010). It is further spurred by the emphasis on participation in a range of relevant international environmental agreements, such as the Aarhus Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the European Forest Action Plan and the Water Framework Directive. The 'new rural paradigm' has also been framed as a partnership-based approach (Connelly et al. 2006). The EU is a direct driver for collaboration through the implementation of numerous EU directives (as filtered through national legislation), but also more indirectly through numerous policy instruments such as the Structural Funds, the European Rural Development Programme, the LEADER Programme and LIFE/LIFE+. The relationship has for instance been studied in how EU member states' Sustainable Development Strategies support regional policy practice drawing from the research project REGIONET (Berger and Steurer 2008), and in relation to EU programmes such as LEADER or Natura 2000 (Weiss et al. 2011; Sotirov et al. 2011). Knowledge about the success of these programmes is very limited. Some studies report considerable deficiencies in the practical implementation of these programmes (Weiss et al. 2011; Sotirov et al. 2011). Overall, there is a very limited amount of research with a specific focus on EU policies and funding as a driver to collaboration in land use management in rural areas bridging the gap between rural and environmental policies. In addition, there are few studies examining how the design of collaborative governance relates to its output (Emerson et al. 2011), as well as studies comparing different geographical and administrative contexts (Ansell and Gash 2008).

Innovative solutions for integrated land management require not only an appropriate design but they also need to become known and implemented in practice. The development and implementation of institutional innovations is not trivial and may face a range of barriers, e.g. from competing interests in the land use or from contradicting interests within the administration (Buttoud et al. 2011). The research on regional governance and regional innovation has shown that ideally, local initiatives should be supported by an innovative environment as well as by enabling governmental structures and support instruments (Rametsteiner et al. 2005). In practice, local initiatives are often not able to realize their ideas without institutional support, but also top-down programmes may not reach their goals either because they are ineffective or they do not meet the interests and needs of local actors. The traditional top-down regulatory approaches such as national parks and nature reserves are for example currently questioned due to policy failure, and thus there are experiments of partnership arrangements in these traditional protection forms and also much more use of integrated approaches such as nature parks, Biosphere reserves, contractual nature conservation, etc. (Mose and Weixlbaumer 2007). To understand such institutional innovation and which factors support or hinder it, we need further studies on the roles of different both private and public actors as well as the relevant institutional frameworks (Buttoud et al. 2011; Weiss et al. 2011).

One example of a relevant empirical area is climate and energy policy, which is increasingly in focus in research on rural regions, not least in the EU. In the EU Energy and Climate Package of 2008, the member states agreed that total primary energy consumption from renewable energy shall be increased to 20% until 2020. Depending on the renewable energy potential in the member states, the legally binding targets for the individual member states vary between 49% for Sweden and 10% for Malta (Oberthür et al., 2010). Many member states have tested new forms of governance and various funding schemes (such as feed-in tariffs) to support the increase of the share of renewable energy in the national energy mix. Although most energy is consumed in urban areas, cities depend on the generation of renewable energy in rural areas because the options to produce renewable energy in cities are limited. This requires new forms of urban-rural cooperation (Gailing 2007). Producing energy from solar, wind and biomass changes the land-use patterns and creates new energy landscapes. This is most obvious for wind farms and solar energy plants, but it also implies that farmers switch from the production of

traditional agricultural and forest products to the production of solid biofuels and energy crops (such as corn and rape). This may support green growth in rural areas, but it may also lead to new challenges due to competing land-use demands. New conflicts have thus emerged, such as resistance against wind parks, due to land-use changes that affect the population in rural areas. Most often the potential for conflicts is directly related to new power relationships, in particular if wind parks or solar power plants are established by big energy companies. However, the development of renewable energy may also lead to bottom-up initiatives such as the creation of energy cooperatives, bioenergy villages or solar energy regions. Although research on the resistance against the development of renewable energy has grown in recent years (Wolsink and Breukers 2010), there are still research gaps, for instance with respect to the effects of renewable energy production on protected areas.

Another example of research on land use conflicts in rural areas regards mining, which have played a prominent role in economic development globally (McMahon and Remy 2001). However, mining has inevitable adverse impacts on society and ecology (Bridge 2004), and mining-led development is thus often associated with conflicts between corporate mining objectives, recipient community needs and governmental policy goals for sustainable regional development (Kemp et al. 2011). Conflicts between communities and mining companies have attracted the most scholarly attention (e.g. Bebbington and Williams 2008, Hilson 2002), while there has been less attention to conflicts between communities and the state (Lange 2011, Bebbington et al. 2008). How national mining policies influence the distribution of wealth and rights, how mining affects indigenous peoples and corporate social responsibility are rather well-studied issues (Linde et al. 2012). Research on institutional aspects is much more limited. It has been shown, however, that mining companies are increasingly urged to contribute to long-term local economic development, but their involvement is influenced by factors such as the type of mine, the remoteness of the area, the presence of government and the legacy of prior modes of mining industry intervention (Cheshire et al. 2011). Another study showed that the pressures that mining places on both environment and people result from institutional conditions that separate the governance of mining from that of environmental management and local development (Bebbington and Bury 2009). Overall, however, there is little research on how central policy formulation impacts on local level implementation and the influence of informal institutions, in particular in developed countries (Linde et al. 2012).

Likely Participants

The workshop aims at bringing together a broad range of social science scholars interested in issues related to rural governance and land use. We thus expect an interdisciplinary workshop with political scientists, sociologists, geographers and economists.

Types of Papers required

We welcome proposals for papers that address collaborative rural governance for sustainable development, but in particular those focusing on land use conflicts in relation to exploitation pressures, urban-rural relations and mobilization of non-state actors. Papers with a comparative design are particularly encouraged.

Biographical Notes

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