



Organic farming policy development in the EU: What can multi-stakeholder processes contribute?

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses if and how multi-stakeholder involvement can make a worthwhile contribution to the development of agricultural policy in the enlarged EU, using the example of organic farming. A methodological approach to policy design and learning developed and implemented during the design phase for national implementations strategies of the Rural Development Plans in 11 European countries is introduced. Examples of results obtained by this methodology are presented. Conclusions for the design of future bottom-up policy development processes are drawn.

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Introduction

Multi-stakeholder processes bring together major stakeholders of a particular area to participate in a new form of communication, decision finding (and decision-making) on a particular issue (Hemmati, 2002). Several authors have attempted to define different types of participation in multi-stakeholder processes (Biggs, 1989; Lilja and Ashby, 1999; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996). Probst and Hagmann (2003) described linkages between different social actors, according to varying degrees of involvement in and control over decision-making in the relationship. From this point of view, their definition of “collaborative participation” seems appropriate to describe participation in multi-stakeholder processes: “Different actors collaborate and are put on an equal footing, emphasising linkage through an exchange of knowledge, different contributions and a sharing of decision-making power during the innovation process” (Probst and Hagmann, 2003: p. 6). The benefits of multi-stakeholder processes include:

- **Quality:** Stakeholders add specific experiences and knowledge of issue areas that are not easily accessible to others.
- **Credibility:** Multi-stakeholder processes include groups that do not represent the same interests.

- **Likelihood of impact and implementation:** Being part of a multi-stakeholder process, and thus partly responsible for its outcomes, can increase people's commitment to the outcome and enhance their efforts to communicate and implement them.
- **Societal gains:** Democratic participation, equitable involvement and transparent mechanisms of influence create successful communication across interest groups and competitors. Consensus building and joint decision-making can increase mutual respect and tolerance and lead societies out of deadlock and conflict on contentious issues.

The expected outcomes from such multi-stakeholder processes are diverse; the way knowledge is generated and shared depends on differences between the main actors, including perspectives, interests and expectations. Researchers can gain practical experience through working together and being involved in analysis and decision-making. In this context, “stakeholders are those who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group” (Hemmati, 2002). This includes people who influence a decision or can influence it, as well as those affected by it. The appropriate group composition will always include those with authority, resources, information, expertise and need. Thus, a broad range of stakeholders from different societal groups (government, companies, public interest groups and knowledge bodies) must be included, not only in defining the problem, but also in searching for solutions and developing shared visions. Combining researchers' technical and methodological expertise with participants' real work-life experience can help to make research more dynamic and accurate (Stavrou, 2002).

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The objective of this paper is to discuss if and how multi-stakeholder involvement can make a worthwhile contribution to the development of agricultural policy in the enlarged EU, using the example of organic farming.

Organic farming policy development in the EU and stakeholder involvement

Organic farming has become an inherent part of agriculture in the European Union. The first major policy measure concerning organic farming was the EU-wide harmonisation of the definition of organic farming by Council Regulation (EC) 2092/91, in order to ensure market transparency and consumer protection. Governmental support through agri-environmental and rural development programmes, largely made under Council Regulations (EC) 2078/92 and 1257/99, based on the organic farming definition of Council Regulations (EC) 2092/91 and 1804/99, has played a significant role in stimulating an increase in organically managed farms and land area.

These policies were developed by agricultural policy makers legitimated by democratic processes or institutional background, e.g. national “consultative groups” for the implementation of the agri-environmental measures within the Accompanying Measures and the Rural Development Programmes (Council Regulations (EC) 2078/92 and 1257/1999). Representatives of organic farming associations or informal groups were involved – if at all – through informal communication with members of these consultative groups. In part, this was due to the origin and development of the organic farming sector as a private sector connected to a social movement. Until recently, most organic farming organisations were more concerned with the principles of organic farming and their justification, rather than with lobbying for policy support. In addition, due to its relatively small size in terms of profits or persons involved, the organic farming sector did not represent very strong lobbying power; this resulted in very limited lobbying by organic farming organisations in most Member States (Dabbert et al., 2004), in spite of support by environmental organisations. At the EU level, the umbrella organisation of organic farming associations, IFOAM, did not establish a permanent office for lobbying activities close to the European Commission until October 2003.

An important step towards broader European involvement of stakeholders was a conference on organic farming in Baden (Austria) in 1999 (EC, 1999), organised jointly by the Austrian government and the European Commission. Probably for the first time, stakeholders were consulted on organic farming issues. This consultation was continued and extended in a similar conference at Copenhagen, Denmark in 2001 (MFLF, 2001). Although both conferences were not formal policy consultation processes, they were organised to provide input into policy development at the EU level. However, these consultations followed a top-down approach. Goals and topics to be addressed, as well as the stakeholders involved, were defined by the organisers.

Since 2001, the European Commission has followed principles of good governance (EC, 2001). Governance refers to the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented. This includes the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interest, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. The objective of the European Commission is to achieve greater involvement of citizens in legislative processes and to speed up the adoption of a common policy framework in all European Member States. One of the five principles of good governance is stakeholder participation in the formulation of policies and their implementation.

An EU-wide effort of stakeholder participation in the development of policies concerning organic farming was the ‘European Hearing on Organic Food and Farming – Towards a European Action Plan’ in Brussels in 2004 (EC, 2004), followed by an online consultation. The main purpose of this hearing was to listen to the views of the widest possible range of stakeholders in the agricultural, environmental and consumer field. Over 100 stakeholder organisations, Agricultural Ministers from Member States, Accession and Candidate Countries participated in this conference. As a result, the Commission prepared an Action Plan (EC, 2004) in the form of a Communication to the European Council and Parliament, including a list of possible actions to boost organic farming. Again, this hearing was organised top-down, only allowing participation of certain invited stakeholders.

The resulting European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming (EC, 2004) did not originally include any specific policy measures, or a budget for specific policy goals. It resulted however, in the much-discussed revision of Council Regulation (EC) 2092/91. The revision process itself has been criticised with regard to insufficient stakeholder involvement (Eichert et al., 2006). Key policy actions within the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming, such as addressing organic farming within Rural Development Programmes, were left to the Member States. Nevertheless, the Action Plan Document provided justification for a range of measures and a list of ideas for national implementation. Currently, all Member States have opted to address organic farming through specific support measures. In the case of only some Member States has formalised involvement of stakeholders in organic farming policy development been initiated by legitimated bodies of governance (e.g. Germany, UK).

Why involve stakeholders in policy development?

The creation, management and transfer of knowledge are crucial to policy development. There is no single ‘best way’ of facilitating policy innovation and learning; however, a broad political debate among stakeholders may contribute to policy development capacities. This debate should help to facilitate the sharing of information, the spatial integration of policy and planning and the creation of multi-stakeholder groups. Finally, it can contribute towards improving the capacities for policy development (Shannon, 2003).

Interactive social research may be regarded a pragmatic, utilitarian or user-oriented approach (Bee Tin, 1999). Such a user-oriented approach to research incorporates a value-base that is committed to promoting change through research. Various names for such research are used: community-based research, participatory research, or collaborative research. It rests on two main principles: democratization of the knowledge process and social change.

Action research forms part of this genre. Interactive social research or action research approaches, based on the interaction between social subjects (Todhunter, 2001) and collaborative policy learning procedures (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Rose 1991; Stone, 2003), are generally favourable for stimulating stakeholders to cooperate in knowledge gathering. These approaches involve ‘ordinary’ people in the development and implementation of research, and thus help to develop a common knowledge and critical awareness (Todhunter, 2001). In interactive social research, researchers identify the user group, work in close collaboration with the users and involve users in identifying research questions, analysing research results and interpretation. In action research, participants co-produce knowledge through their mutual collaboration. Different experiences and competences of participants represent an enrichment opportunity. There is a dual focus in action

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