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Farmer participation in agri-environmental schemes: Regionalisation and the role of bridging social capital

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ABSTRACT

European agri-environmental schemes are being criticised for reinforcing rather than negating an opposition between agricultural production and environmental production, and for assuming instead of securing a public willingness to pay for agri-environmental change. This paper explores if a regionalisation of agri-environmental governance may contribute to overcome these criticisms. The paper empirically explores three regionalised agri-environmental schemes from Flanders, Belgium, with the use of 40 qualitative interviews with farmers and other relevant stakeholders. Building on the Bourdieusian theory of capital and the conceptual distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, the paper analyses whether and why the regionalised arrangements incited farmers to integrate environmental production in their farm management to meet other regional stakeholders' demands for agri-environmental change. In doing so, the paper particularly focuses on the role of bridging social capital in fostering farmer participation in agri-environmental governance, which is a topic that—despite a growing scholarly recognition of the importance of social capital in mediating farmers' environmental behaviour—has to date received scant conceptual and empirical attention. The paper reveals that farmers principally participated in the regionalised agri-environmental schemes to enhance the long-term viability of their agricultural businesses by building up more cooperative and appreciative, bridging social ties with other regional stakeholders. Notably, such participation is only likely to be substantive and lead to long-term, pro-environmental behaviour change of farmers, if farmers actually succeed in building up bridging social capital by receiving other regional stakeholders' appreciation for their agri-environmental work. The paper ends with discussing the implications of these findings for the future design and implementation of socially and ecologically robust agri-environmental schemes.

1. Introduction

To incentivise farmers to conserve and enhance the environment, the EU has long relied on subsidising farmers' voluntary involvement in agri-environmental schemes (AES). AES (now agri-environment-climate schemes—European Commission, 2013) were first introduced into the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the mid-1980s as an option for Member States, and have been a compulsory element of Member States' rural development plans since the 1992 McSharry reforms of the CAP (European Commission, 1992). On top of cross-compliance requirements (the compulsory basic layer of environmental requirements that farmers must meet in order to receive CAP funding), AES are a crucial instrument through which the EU aims to meet societal demand for environmental services provided by agriculture—such as promoting soil and genetic diversity, reducing environmental degradation, limiting wildlife loss and preserving cultural landscapes. In the period 2007–2013, EU expenditure on AES amounted to 22% of the total EU expenditure for rural development (Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2016); in 2013, 46.9 million hectares (more than 25% of the utilised agricultural area of the EU-27) were under at least one agri-environmental commitment (Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2015).

AES involve temporary (five- to seven-year) contracts between Member State agencies and farmers that stipulate the environmental management activities that farmers should perform on

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specified parcels of land in order to be eligible for annual payments. This implementation of AES is legitimated on the basis of two core premises. First, due to productivist pressures, agricultural production and environmental production have come to oppose one another. And, second, the public desires agri-environmental change, and therefore should compensate farmers who are asked to take measures that limit their ability to optimise their agricultural production (Hodge, 2001; Lockie, 2006; Burton and Schwartz, 2013).

Despite a long-standing and widespread acceptance and application of the above rationale throughout Europe, the AES have become subject to fundamental criticisms. One line of criticism is rooted in the observation that the schemes assume rather than secure or stimulate the European public's willingness to pay for agri-environmental public goods (Hodge, 2001; Matzdorf and Lorenz, 2010). Furthermore, the schemes are being criticised for reinforcing instead of negating the opposition between agricultural production and environmental production. As the voluntary schemes are in direct competition with agricultural production and markets, AES tend to fail to incite farmers to integrate environmental interests in their agricultural business development (Hodge, 2001; Lockie, 2006; Siebert et al., 2006; Burton et al., 2008; Jack, 2015).

Refining the above criticisms, a growing body of social scientific scholarship has begun to scrutinise the focus on economic principles that has informed the design of the EU agri-environmental policy (Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011). By stimulating farmers to become involved in AES by means of compensating loss of income incurred from compliance to scheme requirements, the policy works from the assumption that farmers principally adopt an economic rationality when making decisions regarding the environment. Resultantly, the policy overlooks how farmers' embeddedness in social networks (and the social capital implicated in these), and prevailing cultural preferences for landscape appearances within these networks (that structure farmers' possibilities to obtain social status through their landscape management), also shape farmers' willingness to manage agri-environmental amenities (Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Saunders, 2015).

Political and scientific interest in overcoming the above criticisms has inspired a quest for innovative agri-environmental governance arrangements. One such innovation concerns a move away from top-down, vertically organised governance arrangements towards regionally organised arrangements (Böcher, 2008; Kneafsey, 2010; Prager, 2015), because "*when shifting agricultural objectives to a combination of environmental and production goals, the relevant management level is often no longer that of the farm, but rather a small territory, watershed, landscape unit, etc., for which farmers and other land users should agree on common rules and adjust their practices to these*" (Renting et al., 2008; p. 378).

In this paper we aim to explore whether and why a regionalisation of agri-environmental governance helps to address the above criticisms on AES by inciting farmers to adjust their farm management practices to meet public preferences for agri-environmental change. In doing so, we are particularly interested in the extent to which the regionalised arrangements incite, and enable and constrain farmers to build up bridging social capital with other regional stakeholders by integrating environmental production in their agricultural business development. Despite a growing scholarly recognition of the importance of social capital in mediating farmers' agri-environmental behaviour (e.g. Mathijs, 2003; Siebert et al., 2006; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Saunders, 2015), the interplay between farmers' bridging social capital and their participation in agri-environmental governance has to date received scant conceptual and empirical attention, which is a lacuna that this paper aims to address.

In the following section, we introduce our conceptual framework that principally builds on the Bourdieusian theory of capital and the distinction between bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Subsequently, we discuss our methodology and introduce three case studies that we have undertaken, involving three regionalised AES in Flanders, Belgium. We then empirically explore farmers' and other regional stakeholders' involvements in these AES, and assess if and how bridging social capital was generative of and generated by farmers' willingness to manage agri-environmental amenities. We end by discussing the implications of our work for understanding farmer participation in AES, and for the future design and implementation of socially robust AES.

2. Conceptual framework: social capital and farmer participation in AES

A key assumption behind EU AES is that farmers are economic rational actors when making decisions concerning the environment and that, therefore, financial incentives work best to incite farmers to deliver environmental benefits to society (Burton et al., 2008; Hanley et al., 2012; Home et al., 2014). In their review of about 160 studies on factors that affect farmer participation in biodiversity policies, Siebert et al. (2006) found that many analyses corroborate that economic motivations play a key role—which is not surprising since farmers need to manage their farms in an economically viable way. Yet, Siebert et al. also found clear indications that "financial compensation and incentives function as a necessary, though clearly not sufficient, condition" to explain farmer support for agri-environmental measures (2006, p. 334). They concluded by pointing to a need for more conceptual and empirical attention for influencing social norms and expectations, which escape scientific attention when focussing principally on farmers' individual economic interests (see also Burton and Schwarz, 2013; Home et al., 2014).

Observations as made by Siebert et al. have informed studies into the role of social capital in governing farmers' willingness to participate in agri-environmental policies. Social capital can be defined as "the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively" (Woolcock and Narayan 2000, p. 226) and is embodied in the ability of actors to gain access to group resources (like information, cooperation) provided by being accepted in a group (Bourdieu, 1986; Tisenkopfs et al., 2008; Sutherland and Burton, 2011). Operationalising social capital principally in terms of the size and density of farmers' social networks and farmers' trust in governmental institutions, a number of researchers have shown that social capital fosters farmers' willingness to participate in AES—most notably because social capital facilitates awareness of AES and reduces transaction costs (Mathijs, 2003; Jones et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2011). Notably, these studies provide an important corrective to the reductive focus on the role of economic capital in guiding farmer involvement in AES. Yet, the studies can be criticised for attending only to how social capital affects farmers' willingness to participate in agri-environmental policy, rather than also to how farmers' actual participation affects their social capital and how this in turn influences farmers' environmental engagements.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital does provide an analytical framework that allows for analysing how farmers' social capital and participation in AES interrelate (Burton et al., 2008; Saunders, 2015). Bourdieu distinguished between three fundamental forms of capital: besides *economic* capital and *social* capital, also *cultural* capital (resources in the form of knowledge, skills, dispositions and the possession of culturally relevant objects—Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011). Central to Bourdieu's theory is that capital can be converted between the three forms via *symbolic* capital (status and reputation). Rural sociologists, including most