



# How should rural policy be evaluated if it aims to foster community involvement in environmental management?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper brings together different theoretical perspectives to propose an evaluation framework for policies which have the explicit aim to foster communities' involvement in the management of their natural environment in the context of sustainable rural development, such as the EU LEADER programme, Australia's Caring for Our Country, and UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. Previous policy evaluations have over-simplified the complex social-ecological systems on which these policies are intended to act, have lacked specification of the policy level they address and were predicated on the assumption that policies can be designed to produce predictable outcomes.

Based on a concept of 'complex realities' we developed a framework to guide the evaluation of policy effectiveness in social-ecological systems. This comprehensive framework provides the conceptual and theoretical context in which individual evaluation exercises for policy review and future programme design can be embedded. It goes beyond existing frameworks by allowing the identification of factors that explain how and why a policy tool was effective. It provides a structure within which datasets from different sources, relevant stakeholders and relationships can be identified and analysed in a multi-level and multi-scale context. However, we emphasise that policy makers and evaluators' mindsets would have to change to accept uncertainty and the validity of various stakeholders' perceptions and evaluations.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, policies which aim to encourage community involvement, endogenous development, and bottom-up, participatory approaches are becoming more widespread in Europe and globally (Bridger and Luloff, 1999; Lovan et al., 2004; High and Nemes, 2007). There is an increasing emphasis on sub-state entities or non-governmental organisations taking responsibility for the management of their local environments (OECD, 2006). For over a decade, demands for enhanced local participation in local environmental governance and development can be noted in

Europe and more widely (Ray, 2000; Curtis et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2010).

Various policies explicitly identify community engagement as means to support more sustainable management of the environment. A prominent example in Europe is the EU LEADER<sup>1</sup> initiative, first introduced in 1991 and subsequently mainstreamed. Australian natural resource management (NRM) programmes provide an Antipodean example, which follows on from Landcare and other predecessor schemes.<sup>2</sup> A third example are Biosphere Reserves, an international category of designated areas accredited by the

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<sup>1</sup> LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) English translation: 'links between actions of rural development'.

<sup>2</sup> Note: At the time of publication the Australian government had commenced a transition from the Caring for our Country Programme back to the National Landcare Programme. The aims of both programmes are similar.

UNESCO, which aim at fostering sustainable development through strong community involvement and partnership approach.

Community involvement, or participation, is understood as encompassing a broad range of organisation–community–stakeholder interactions; from information provision and consultation to engagement, collaboration and joint decision making (Arnstein, 1969; Collins and Ison, 2009). In this paper, community engagement is treated as directed and purposeful form of community involvement. A bottom-up process encapsulates the idea that environmental management is a process that is open to community-led direction with decisions shaped by local stakeholders and the community.

Community involvement is promoted widely as a vehicle to achieve environmental and development policy goals. In particular, official EU documents have emphasised that participation and a 'bottom-up' approach can harness the creativity and solidarity of rural communities (European Commission, 1996), with the Council committed to "improving governance and mobilising the endogenous development potential of rural areas" (Council of the European Union, 2006). Similarly, one of the six national priorities in Australia's Caring for Our Country programme is "Community skills, knowledge and engagement" (Australian Government, 2011). The global Man and Biosphere (MAB) programme sets the frame for the UNESCO designation of a biosphere reserve. The programme aims to foster full participation of local actors (UNESCO, 1996, UNESCO, 2008) when developing and implementing concepts for conservation and restoration of the environment and landscape, as well as for economic and social development (Kühne, 2010; Schliep and Stoll-Kleemann, 2010; Brunckhorst, 2001).

An underlying assumption of these policies is that a high level of involvement will bring social, economic and environmental benefits to local communities and the whole rural region (EENRD, 2010b), by encouraging stronger identification with the region, larger networks, new businesses, positive attitudes towards future activities, education, and increased participation rates of communities in activities to manage natural resources and to help protect the environment (Curtis and Lockwood, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Effective community involvement could also engender cost-efficient (less costs for control and enforcement) and more sustainable implementation of policies because policies and their aims are understood, accepted and supported by the intended beneficiaries.

Despite the growing number of policies that aim to foster communities' involvement in the management of their natural environment, there are a number of unresolved issues around evaluating the effectiveness of such policies. The "evaluation of rural development policy and strategies is highly complex" (OECD, 2006, p.136). Issues relate to defining communities of interest and place, multiple and poorly defined policy objectives, difficulties in attributing cause to effect, determining the aggregation level and dealing with aggregation effects, challenges around defining a base-line, timing of the evaluation and the distinction of immediate, intermediate and ultimate outcomes. These more technical difficulties are coupled with socio-political and institutional difficulties, such as imbalances in knowledge integration (scientific versus lay/local knowledge) and the reluctance amongst some policy makers to carry out evaluations since results might show that policies have not delivered.

<sup>3</sup> The terms 'environmental management' and 'natural resource management' are both used in this paper depending on the literature that is referred to. Australian literature tends to use natural resource management (NRM), whereas European literature uses environmental management.

First, it is important to acknowledge that the notion of 'community' is inherently complex. Communities of place have neither well-defined (geographical) borders, nor are they homogeneous. Differences may relate to age, class, ethnicity and gender, as well as interests and power. Communities of place may include "many 'communities of interest', with highly unequal capacities to act" (Shucksmith, 2010, p. 208).

Second, current evaluation approaches are often not clear about which part of a policy they aim to assess. In addition, current approaches are often not holistic enough to incorporate less tangible outcomes or take into account the multiplicity of values and aims, and (unintended) by-products (see Section 2). Part of the problem is that current approaches are based on the perspective of an older – but still largely dominant – "modernist paradigm of policy making predicated on the assumption that policies can be designed to produce predictable outcomes, even in very complex settings" (Connick and Innes, 2003, p. 178). To date, insufficient attention has been given to the question of how rural policy should be evaluated, in particular those policies that aim to foster communities' involvement in the management of their environment.

Specific indicator frameworks have been designed to assist evaluators collect the appropriate data to analyse outputs and outcomes e.g., the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework Monitoring (CMEF) in the EU and the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) in Australia. However, there is no comprehensive framework that provides the theoretical and conceptual context in which individual evaluation exercises can be embedded. This paper addresses the absence of such a framework that could be applied in different settings to help judge different policies that aim to foster community involvement in environmental management. Motivated by our own frustration in trying to evaluate policy effectiveness, we draw on empirical work in Australia and Germany to iteratively develop an evaluation framework. We reflect on issues and findings in case studies, and compare them to two theoretical concepts which have been identified as central in the literature: governance and social capital. Based on these iterations we have developed an evaluation framework for policy analysis that follows our concept of 'complex realities'. The framework is expected to support:

- Comparison of the claims made in relation to a policy tool<sup>4</sup> with the extent to which it actually fosters community involvement in environmental management, i.e. evaluating whether and to what extent an objective has been achieved;
- Identification of which factors influence the implementation of a policy tool and the extent to which these factors help or hinder achievement of community engagement, and thereby explain how and why the policy tool was effective (or otherwise).

The latter is an ambition that goes beyond frameworks that simply serve policy evaluation carried out for the purpose of policy review and future programme design. Rather, it embeds the evaluation into a broader critical reflection of how society tries to achieve sustainable development. Our framework reaches further than existing frameworks in the requirements it places on policy makers but also on communities' contribution to evaluation.

In the following section we discuss issues associated with policy evaluation. Section three covers the conceptual and theoretical background, outlines the concept of complex realities and explains how the core concepts of governance and social capital inform the evaluation framework. The framework is presented in section four

<sup>4</sup> We refer to policy tool here as one part of the policy hierarchy that our framework helps to evaluate. The policy hierarchy is explained in detail in Section 4.

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