Arranging public support to unfold collaborative modes of governance in rural areas

Wiebke Wellbrock [a,*], Dirk Roep [a,1], Marie Mahon [b,2], Emilija Kairyte [c,3], Birte Nienaber [d,4], Maria Dolores Domínguez García [e,5], Michael Kriszan [f,6], Maura Farrell [b,7]

[a] Rural Sociology Group, Wageningen University, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands
[b] School of Geography & Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway, University Road, Galway, Ireland
[c] Institute Nevork, Brilejeva 12, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
[d] Political Geography, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, Université du Luxembourg, Campus Walferdange (Bat. X, 2.03), Route de Diekirch (B.P. 2), L-7201 Walferdange, Luxembourg
[e] GIEEA — Ecological Economics and Agroecology Research Group, University of Vigo, Lagoas Marcosende s/n, Facultade de CCEE e ADE, 36310 Vigo, Spain
[f] Fachhochschule Südwestfalen, Institut für Green Technology & Ländliche Entwicklung (i.green), Lübecker Ring 2, 59494 Soest, Germany

ABSTRACT

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Raising collective agency is key to successful place-based development approaches. Existing policy arrangements have, however, been criticised, suggesting a need to *effectuate* more collaborative modes of governance. This paper shall contribute to a better understanding of how public support can best be arranged to raise collective agency for a more collaborative mode of governance in rural areas. The paper elaborates on findings of empirical investigations conducted within the EU FP7 project DERREG. It will be shown that differences in *effectuat*ing more collaborative modes of governance can partly be ascribed to different political dynamics, economic and demographic situations as well as the presence of a shared sense of place. To raise collective agency effectively requires a joint reconsideration and restructuring of the division of roles and tasks, including those of public administration. This can be supported *by facilitating* joint reflexivity among development actors and giving room for collaborative leadership and operational flexibility within policy arrangements.

1. Introduction

In the European Union, place-based approaches to rural development are increasingly favoured, because they aim to strengthen the resilience of rural areas against global pressures by decreasing state dependencies and increasing the economic competitiveness of rural areas (Amin, 2004; Barca, 2009; Bristow, 2010; Healey et al., 2003; Lowe et al., 1995; Marsden and Bristow, 2000; Murdoch, 2000; Nienaber, 2007; O'Brian, 2011; OECD, 2006; Ray, 2006; Reimer and Markey, 2008; Shucksmith, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Tomaney, 2010). Place-based development approaches require an increased self-efficacy of rural residents, which can be stimulated through bottom-up development and decentralisation of decision making processes (Amin, 2004; Böcher, 2008; Bruckmeier, 2000; Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008). In this process, various development actors need to develop joint visions and joint activities and create synergies (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Gibney, 2011). Raising collective agency is thus key to place-based development (Amin, 2004; Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Gibney, 2011; Gieryn, 2000; Healey et al., 2003; Massey, 1991; Roep et al., 2009; Swanson, 2001).

Public policy can raise collective agency through supporting communication and dialogue, meaningful partnerships between local and extra-local practitioners, an ethos of social inclusion, and structures for democratic decision making (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Swanson, 2001). In rural areas, however, supportive arrangements aimed at raising collective agency have received numerous criticisms with regard to their effectiveness and operationalization (see Amin, 2004; Cleaver, 2002; Lee et al., 2005; Ray,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 317 482708.
E-mail addresses: wwellbrock@gmail.com (W. Wellbrock), dirk.roep@wur.nl (D. Roep), marie.mahon@nuigalway.ie (M. Mahon), emilija.kairyte@gmail.com (E. Kairyte), b.nienaber@uni.lu (B. Nienaber), ramstein@uvigo.es (M.D. Domínguez García), kriszan.michael@fh-swf.de (M. Kriszan), maura.farrell@nuigalway.ie (M. Farrell).
[1] Tel.: +31 317 482897.
[2] Tel.: +353 91 492376.
[3] Tel.: +370 618 08873.
[4] Tel.: +352 466644 9318.
[5] Tel.: +34 986 813519.
[6] Tel.: +49 2921 378 154.
[7] Tel.: +353 91 494118.

2006; Shortall, 2008; Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001). High and Nemes (2007) argue that institutional arrangements such as LEADER may even suppress participation when implemented as a general recipe showing indifference to the particularities of place. Bruckmeier (2000), for example, contends that LEADER only benefits the elites with considerable agency, that is, with the knowledge and power to influence decision making in their favour, while failing to include marginalized groups. Shortall (2008) further argues that participation might introduce power imbalances and that targeted beneficiaries may choose not to participate as they do not see the benefits. Multi-level governance arrangements seemingly constructed to raise collective agency can thus mask realities about how power and authority remains with central government (Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2006; Jessop, 1990; Jones, 2001). Place-based development approaches thus need more reflexive approaches to governance, replacing hierarchical, policy-centred leaderships with collaborative modes of governance and cross-boundary leadership (Collinge and Gibney, 2010).

This paper shall contribute to a better understanding of how public support can best be arranged to raise collective agency for a more collaborative mode of governance in rural areas. The study should thereby extend the discussion of institutional reform in participatory and place-based development approaches (Healey, 2006b; Healey et al., 2003; Shucksmith, 2010). Public support is defined as public policies and programmes, funds, infrastructure and knowledge facilitation provided by European, national or subnational levels of public administration. The paper elaborates on the findings of comparative empirical investigations into supportive arrangements intending to raise collective agency in six European and highly diverse rural areas conducted within the EU FP7-funded project DERREG (Roep et al., 2011). In the following section, the research tool is introduced. This tool, referred to as the learning rural area framework, can be used to map, analyse and compare how public support is arranged to support interfaces through which various development actors learn to work together. Following the framing of the learning rural area, the six case study areas will be highlighted briefly, and the research method will be explained, particularly focussing on the use of the learning rural area framework as research tool. Afterwards, selected policy arrangements are described and compared. Differences in modes of governance across the case study areas will be analysed and discussed with regard to their significance for understanding key developments in rural development policy and practise. It will be shown that the way in which support for joint learning and innovation between grassroots development initiatives and facilitating agents and agencies is arranged differs considerably between the case study areas. Some case study areas seem to be more advanced in effectuating collaborative modes of governance than others. Differences in collaborative modes of governance can arguably be ascribed, at least in part, to the different historical political dynamics, their different economic and demographic situations, as well as an explicit, shared sense of place. To raise collective agency thus encompasses a joint reconsideration and redefinition of the division of roles and tasks, including those of public administration. This can be supported by facilitating joint reflexivity among development actors and giving room for collaborative leadership and operational flexibility within policy arrangements.

2. The learning rural area framework

Public policy can support the raising of collective agency by facilitating interfaces through which various actors jointly learn and innovate. This has been extensively studied and supported with regard to regional development policies (see for example Asheim, 1996; Florida, 1995; Rutten and Boekema, 2007). Within

the rural development literature, however, little attention has been given to the way in which public support can facilitate the creation of interfaces through which joint learning and innovation between facilitating agents and agencies and grassroots development initiatives can occur. Instead, research has focused on facilitating learning and innovation within grassroots development initiatives, such as the role of extension services (e.g. Leeuwis, 2004), or the role of LEADER and participatory processes (e.g. Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Shortall, 2008; Shucksmith, 2010), or the role of social learning processes (e.g. Ellström, 2010; Fenwick, 2010; Wals, 2007) and the role of knowledge or innovation brokers (Howells, 2006; Klerkx et al., 2009; Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2009; Suvinen et al., 2010). In response to this gap, Wellbrock et al. (2012) proposed a research tool, the learning rural area framework, to investigate interfaces through which facilitating agents and agencies and grassroots development initiatives learn to work together in rural areas.

The rural learning area framework is based on the learning region concept, broadly defined as '*focal points for knowledge creation and learning in the new age of global, knowledge-intensive capitalism […]. Learning regions function as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas, and provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning*' (Florida, 1995, p. 527). Within regional development, the learning region concept has extensively been used to study and formulate public policy aimed at supporting joint learning and innovation between academia and industry in order to facilitate the production and transfer of new, scientific knowledge and human capital within high-tech, science, media, and communication and information industries in urban, economic centres (Woods, 2009). Public policy can facilitate the creation of learning regions by ensuring spatial proximity between knowledge institutes and businesses in form of so-called economic knowledge 'clusters' (Asheim, 1996; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Florida, 1995; Morgan, 1997; Rutten and Boekema, 2007; Storper, 1993; Wolfe, 2002).

The current focus of the learning region concept on business-academia-government linkages, also referred to as triple helix (Etzkowitz, 2003), does not, however, serve to study the support for joint learning and innovation in rural areas (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Shucksmith, 2010; Terluin, 2003; Wellbrock et al., 2013, 2012). In contrast to economic knowledge clusters in industry, rural areas are characterised by a high diversity of actors and activities contributing to the development of an area (Roep et al., 2009). Consequently, unlike in economic knowledge clusters, the support for joint learning and innovation required in rural areas is highly context-dependent and problem-specific (Tovey, 2008). Wellbrock et al. (2012) thus broadened the scope of the learning region concept to account for the diversity of actors and activities which jointly contribute to the development of a rural area. This amendment reflects a realisation that development in terms of economic success, particularly under globalising conditions, cannot be achieved by only focussing on economic issues. It is also part of non-economic social, cultural and institutional dimensions operating at more local and regional levels (Jones, 2001; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). It also entails a focus on how dynamics unfold in a particular place (Lyson, 2006; Marini and Mooney, 2006; Woods, 2007).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the learning rural area framework includes the pillar *rural area* comprised of various assets, activities and actors in which 'grassroots development initiatives' are employed by residents of a rural area. Grassroots development initiatives are defined as development activities initiated in response to pressures on the livelihoods of rural residents (Smith et al.). Rural areas can coincide with administrative boundaries