



Viewpoint

Civil society actors at the nexus of the ecosystem services concept and agri-environmental policies



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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint is based on the premise that it may be reasonable to further integrate the ecosystem services (ES) concept into agri-environmental policies, particularly into agri-environmental measures (AEMs). Building on this, we show that collaboration between the government and civil society actors (CSAs) may offer many opportunities to integrate the ES concept into AEMs. Furthermore, we demonstrate how collaboration with CSAs can be fostered and we provide some future research directions that should be considered.

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1. Introduction

The ecosystem services (ES) concept originated in socio-ecological research and has been adapted by economists over the past several years. Recently, it has been increasingly used in the environmental policy arena (e.g., MA, 2003; TEEB, 2010). Despite much criticism of its technical, social, and ethical aspects (Jax et al., 2013; Noorgard, 2010; Redford and Adams, 2009), the ES concept has been perceived as useful for policy conception and communication (Hauck et al., 2013; Ruhl, 2011). Meanwhile, the integration of the approach into various supranational and national environmental policies has taken place and has already been analyzed by policy researchers and extensively discussed in the realms of politics, policy-making, and administration (cf. Matzdorf and Meyer, 2014; Hauck et al., 2013; Ruhl, 2011). Specifically, EU and US agri-environmental policies have been acknowledged as particularly suited to the integration of the ES concept, in particular, because these policies already include a range of financial incentive instruments.

Agri-environmental measures (AEMs) represent the main financial incentive instrument of EU and US agri-environmental policies. Existing AEMs have been frequently criticized for lacking provisions of additional ES (Hodge and Reader, 2010). The majority of inter-

national governmental AEMs pay for the adoption of prescribed land management practices and make assumptions about resulting improvements in the agricultural environment (cf. Reed et al., 2014). Most AEMs are designed and implemented at the farm scale, whereas the appropriate scale for ES provisioning is ignored (Prager et al., 2012). The nexus of AEMs and the ES concept has recently been emphasized in different scientific publications, along with various strengths and weaknesses of this approach and possibilities for integration (Reed et al., 2014; Matzdorf and Meyer, 2014). Reed et al. (2014) and Matzdorf and Lorenz (2010) show that generally, spatially targeted and ES outcome-based AEMs may be more efficient than existing approaches but include certain challenges, such as ES valuation and commodification, as well as barriers to cross-boundary collaboration.

Integration of the ES concept should result in clearly communicated objectives and payments for specific services. Therefore, the quantification of ES goals is an outstanding requirement for integrating the ES concept with AEMs (cf. Matzdorf and Meyer, 2014) in order to visualize the services provided by nature and their values for humans. These visualized values can provide good arguments for effective environmental protection and may help broaden the social legitimization of payments through AEMs. ES implementation may prevent payments of hidden subsidies, can promote trust in the political process, and may validate farmer contributions to society. By raising social acceptance, the ES concept may help change the interpretation and appraisal of “additionality”. The integration of the concept may help to calculate and

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justify transaction costs and initiate new discussion about farmer surpluses (producer rents), especially if payments yield positive external effects (cf. Matzdorf et al., 2014).

Initial attempts to integrate the ES concept into agri-environmental policies may be observed in higher-level legal environmental frameworks, such as the new EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), or in new high-level administrative entities (Matzdorf and Meyer, 2014). Furthermore, it may be presumed that those who are in charge of devising and revising agri-environment schemes are familiar with the idea that society benefits from agricultural landscapes and are also progressively conversant with the ES and payments for ecosystem services concepts, depending on the respective national agri-environmental policies (cf. Potter and Wolf, 2014). For further ES concept integration and better implementation of the relevant ES strategies, governments must intensely foster the progress and enhancement of variable quantification, monitoring, and control methods. Therefore, the integration of different actors into method development, implementation and integration is necessary.

Suggestions for integration include the promotion of collaboration at catchment or wider spatial scales, the building of social capital, and the creation of partnerships to deliver ES. Consequently, “bridging organizations” have been emphasized as potentially immensely helpful to these endeavors (Prager et al., 2012). The participation of key stakeholders is needed for coordination, facilitation, and implementation (cf. Reed et al., 2014). Civil society actors (CSAs) could serve as such key bridging stakeholders, most importantly to cope with the challenges of ES integration into agri-environmental policies and agri-environmental measures (AEMs). We broadly think of the scope of CSAs as “... people [who] get involved outside of government or purely economic activities in order to (help) shape social processes”¹ (Matzdorf et al., 2014: p. 188). They can be individuals or be formally or informally organized, e.g., in NGOs, foundations, associations, social movements, or citizen action groups.

Within this viewpoint, we emphasize that collaboration with civil society offers many opportunities to achieve ES integration and better implementation of the relevant aspects of the ES concept (Section 2). Subsequently, we show how collaboration with civil society at the nexus of agri-environmental policies and ES can be fostered (Section 3). Finally, we provide directions for future research that should be conducted to take a step forward (Section 4). Most of the input for this viewpoint stems from individual and collective research that has been conducted by the research group CIVILand,² whose overall focus was on institutional diversity of PES in Germany, Great Britain, and the US, and the role of the different actors involved, with a strong focus on the actual and possible role of civil society and PES on agricultural lands.

2. CSAs for ES concept integration

As described above, successful ES-based AEMs require knowledge about economic, social, and ecological circumstances at the local scale. Right there, we see many CSAs that embrace on-the-ground experience with nature conservation measures and are embedded in relevant social structures (Schomers et al., 2015).

¹ CSAs can be active at different levels, ranging from the grassroots level up to the international level. CSAs are typically characterized by voluntary engagement, independence, compassion, and creativity, which contribute to social cohesion and building public consensus within modern societies (cf. Matzdorf et al., 2014).

² CIVILand was a research group that had been engaged in Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) in the context of civil society initiatives. It was based at the German Leibniz-Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF) and conducted research in cooperation with various partners in Germany, the UK, and the US: <http://www.civiland-zalf.org/en/>.

Thus, committed individual CSAs, possibly as parts of organizations (e.g., Landcare groups in Germany or Australia; Schomers et al., 2015; Prager and Vanclay, 2010), could be substantially important for supporting the integration of the ES concept into AEMs for multiple reasons. It could be especially important that different CSAs, pursuing different objectives, work together or that CSAs are integrated into a broad local network including different stakeholders groups. In the following we emphasize four areas where CSAs could make a huge contribution to the implementation of ES concept integration in AEMs. We underpinned every aspect with a successful case study example based on CSA involvement (in detail cf. Matzdorf et al., 2014). Generally, many of the arguments for CSA involvement that are emphasized in the following discussion mirror those from the general public participation and collaborative governance literature (e.g., Young et al., 2013; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Reed, 2008; Stringer et al., 2006).

First, regional CSAs can provide a sound understanding of frequent problems encountered with ES concept integration because they are rooted on the spot. They have regional knowledge of ecological problems and economic situations and are often part of a broader stakeholder network. Thus, the integration of CSAs can help to foster the variable quantification of ES and to design more landscape-level targeted schemes, in terms of better project quality (cf. Reed, 2008). For example, this concept can be demonstrated with the case of the German Blühendes Steinburg project, where a nature conservation foundation, together with the local farmer's association, successfully implemented an output-based payment scheme for grassland areas combined with a tendering procedure. By introducing two underutilized payment approaches that are appropriate for a specific situation, they supported areas that lacked existing nature conservation requirements. The focus on indicator species and personal contact between commissioned biologists and farmers, who surveyed the relevant areas together, led to a better understanding of nature conservation (<http://www.sn-sh.de/index.php?id=1112> and Matzdorf et al., 2014). Furthermore, this case shows that by establishing common ground, participatory processes have the capacity to find new ways for participants to work together and for knowledge integration (Stringer et al., 2006).

Second, we found that many CSAs have regional knowledge, links to local networks, and direct contacts to farmers (depending on the individual CSA). Therefore, they can promote (state) programs and help with outreach, in terms of better acceptance (cf. Reed, 2008). As they often enjoy more trust than government actors and speak local farmers' languages, they can identify suitable areas, convince farmers of the value of testing new approaches, and offer them advice and guidance during their participation. This can, for example, be observed in the case of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in Vermont, which supports outreach and assistance by third parties. One of those third parties is Ducks Unlimited, a non-profit organization conducting wetland and forest conservation projects and connecting farmers and landowners to funding sources. They contribute to CREP by identifying appropriate sites and personally contacting landowners (US Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, 2011; US Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, 2005; and Matzdorf et al., 2014). As a further consequence, a higher acceptance of these programs could also lead to better compliance and swifter implementation (cf. Newig and Fritsch, 2009 on participation procedures).

Third, locally engaged CSAs can support and improve not only the quality and performance of ES targeting but also the monitoring of agri-environmental measure outcomes through direct monitoring or the mobilization of other regional players, sometimes even volunteers. This was the case in a German government-financed program for the protection of meadow birds, called Gemeinschaftlicher Wiesenvogelschutz. Here, voluntary site supervisors

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