



## Research article

# Agri-environmental collaboratives as bridging organisations in landscape management



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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, landscape and its management has become a focus of policies and academic conceptualisation. Landscape is understood as a concept of interconnected natural and human systems. Its management must take into account the dynamic interdependencies and diverging interests of various stakeholders at different levels. Bridging organisations can provide an arena for trust-building, conflict resolution, learning and collaboration between relevant stakeholders. This paper draws on two strands of literature – landscape governance and co-management of social-ecological systems – to investigate the contributions of agri-environmental collaboratives (AEC) to sustainable landscape management. Based on data from 41 interviews with key informants and AEC members in Germany and the Netherlands, six fields of contributions were identified: policy implementation and service provision; coordination and mediation; awareness raising and behaviour change; care for ‘everyday’ landscapes; maintenance and protection of landscapes (including species and habitats); and income generation and economic benefits. Some of the contributions evolve around the specific role of AEC as bridging organisations, but other contributions such as economic benefits emerge beyond this analytical lens. The paper therefore emphasises holistic, bottom up assessment of AEC contributions and argues that governments should support such organisations through i) funding for facilitators and ii) funding for impact monitoring and data management.

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## 1. Introduction

There is recognition that “care for the landscape requires collaboration between a wide range of individuals and organisations” (Council of Europe, 2000a, Art 5). Farmers are central actors, since a large share of the European landscape is under agricultural use and much of the landscape is ‘produced’ – or at least shaped to a large extent – by farming activities (Prager, 2015). The particular role of farmers is also acknowledged through the Rural Development Regulation (European Union, 2013) which encourages farmers to apply agricultural practices that are compatible with the protection of the environment and the landscape, for example by making payments available for agri-environment measures and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> In addition to farmers, land users such as forestry and municipalities are relevant actors, and local government and

agencies shape the landscape for example through local plans and building regulations. Other (non-farming) residents and entrepreneurs also have a role to play since they influence the landscape through undertaking, for example, economic and recreational activities. With human activities having shaped landscapes for centuries, essentially all landscapes in Europe are ‘cultural landscapes’ (Selman, 2012). The Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000a) further recognises that “the management approach must be a dynamic one and seek to improve landscape quality on the basis of the population’s expectations” (Art. 1 of the commentary on the provisions of the Convention). This statement highlights that the management of cultural landscape needs to involve people, reflect their expectations and concerns, and that the upkeep and protection of a landscape needs action rather than just conservation.

Underlying the policies is the increasing recognition that sustainable landscape management requires co-management and adaptive governance (Folke et al., 2005), with problems of scale and cross-scale interactions identified to be at the core of sustainability challenges (Cash et al., 2006). In addition, there is evidence that

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<sup>1</sup> Art 35 (g) makes provisions to fund joint approaches to environmental projects and ongoing environmental practices, including efficient water management, the use of renewable energy and the preservation of agricultural landscapes.

networking can have considerable impact on the implementation of rural development policies (Marquardt et al., 2011). Collaboration between individuals and organisations needs to be organised, the population's expectations integrated, and land managers' diverging interests negotiated. Farmers need to be encouraged to apply environmentally friendly practices and agreed landscape quality objectives and management actions need to be implemented. Which structure or agency is best placed to take on these tasks? It is unlikely that this task can be carried out by one agency alone but instead needs the input of various actors and the coordination of this input. In this regard, the crucial role of organisations that connect and mediate between different types of stakeholders at different levels has been highlighted in the literature on co-management and adaptive governance (Cash et al., 2006), development research (Brown, 1993, 1991), agricultural extension (Cash, 2001), science policy interaction (Guston, 2001), and knowledge generation and adaptive management (Berkes, 2009). Such organisations are referred to as bridging organisations (Hahn et al., 2006).

Although bridging organisations have been studied in many countries, case studies have tended to focus on individual organisations, for example the Ecomuseum Kristianstads Vattenrike that manages a wetland in Sweden (Hahn et al., 2006; Olsson et al., 2004), the Decision Centre for a Desert City at Arizona State University (Crona and Parker, 2012) or the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Co-op (Eamer, 2006). Others were limited to a selected structural component of bridging organisations, such as their bridging ties but did not consider bonding ties and other contributions (Bodin and Crona, 2009). In addition, a number of studies investigated several groups of one type of organisation with a focus on their environmental contributions, or on a specific habitat or species, such as forest management initiatives (Cheng and Sturtevant, 2012), deer management groups (Davies and White, 2012), or conservation efforts of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (Jacobson and Robertson, 2012). However, landscape management is broader. The European Landscape Convention defines sustainable management of cultural landscapes as “action, from a perspective of sustainable development, to ensure the regular upkeep of a landscape, so as to guide and harmonise changes which are brought about by social, economic and environmental processes” (Art 1e) (Council of Europe, 2000a,b). This indicates the multi-dimensional objectives of landscape policy, encompassing the social, economic and environmental dimension. What role can bridging organisations play in achieving sustainable landscape management, and how can they help achieving landscape policy objectives?

This study aims to provide in-depth insights into the contributions of local groups that are involved in managing cultural landscapes using the example of agri-environmental collaboratives (AEC). AEC are a form of place-based collaboration and collective action, based on partnership principles and voluntary participation. They are typically initiated bottom up by local stakeholders, albeit in some cases there have been incentives for their establishment from regional government or research (Prager, 2012). AEC adopt their own constitution and have a mixed membership of farmers, conservationists, municipalities, rural residents, and other stakeholders. Although governmental stakeholders may be members, AEC are non-governmental organisations. These collaboratives exist in many countries under different names but they have in common that they identify sustainable landscape management as their goal and carry out activities that support this goal (Prager, 2012; Prager and Vanclay, 2010). This study investigates AEC in the Netherlands and Germany with a particular focus on their role as bridging organisations, in particular (i) what AEC contribute to sustainable landscape management based on group member

perception, and (ii) to what extent AEC take on the role of a bridging organisation and/or intermediary, and how they fulfil this role.

## 2. Bridging organisations in landscape management

According to Selman (2012, p33), “landscape integrates all natural and human systems and thus operates as a framework of dynamic interdependencies between people and place.” He also stresses that the governance of landscape can be seen as a multi-partite project among key agents embedded within the landscape system, rather than controlling agents operating external to the landscape. This definition resembles the definition of social-ecological systems (SES). SES are understood as coherent, complex adaptive systems, comprised of biophysical and social components, organized at several spatial, temporal, and organizational scales (Cumming, 2011). Therefore, findings from the literature on co-management of SES can be applied to inquiries into sustainable landscape management.

Several authors view bridging organisations as an essential part of adaptive governance structures for SES (Folke et al., 2005; Jacobson and Robertson, 2012). Terminology is varied and includes boundary organisation, bridging organisation and intermediary (Sternlieb et al., 2013). Cash and Moser (2000) describe boundary organizations as “institutions which serve to mediate between scientists and decision-makers, and between these actors at different scales”. They were predominantly seen to work at the science–policy interface. Boundary organizations fulfil three roles: 1) they mediate between science and policy, 2) they exist between two distinct social worlds with definite responsibility and accountability to both sides of the boundary, and 3) they use boundary objects (Carr and Wilkinson, 2005; Sternlieb et al., 2013). More recently, the science–practitioner interface has been included in the work of boundary organisations (Carr and Wilkinson, 2005).

Bridging organizations are said to bridge the divide between communities and other levels of government (Hahn et al., 2006), and thus play a critical role in dealing with uncertainty and facilitating adaptive co-management in social-ecological systems (Olsson et al., 2007), as derived from research in Sweden. Hahn et al. (2006) further suggest that “a bridging organization provides an arena for trust-building, vertical and horizontal collaboration, learning, sense-making, identification of common interests, and conflict resolution. As an integral part of adaptive governance of social–ecological systems, bridging organizations reduce transaction costs of collaboration and value formation and provide social incentives for participating in projects.” They “are often vital in ensuring that governance capacity is developed or maintained”. Berkes (2009) expands on the learning and knowledge exchange role of bridging organisations and adds to Hahn et al.'s list the bridging between scientific and local knowledge (facilitating knowledge ‘translation’), co-producing knowledge, accessing information and resources, social learning, networking, building vision and goals. Bridging organisations coordinate all these tasks and thus enable cooperation. Crona and Parker (2012) proposed the following working definition, building on Westley and Vredenburg (1991): “bridging organizations are organizations that link diverse actors or groups through some form of strategic bridging process. They are organizations in their own right and are relatively distinct in terms of resources and personnel from the parties they seek to integrate.”

Intermediaries are similar to bridging and boundary organizations (Sternlieb et al., 2013), to the extent that some authors merge the definitions of the three terms into one: “Organizations that explicitly focus on this intermediary function are known as boundary organizations or bridging organizations (...), because

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