



## Creating culturally sustainable agri-environmental schemes

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### A B S T R A C T

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Evidence is emerging from across Europe that contemporary agri-environmental schemes are having only limited, if any, influence on farmers' long-term attitudes towards the environment. In this theoretical paper we argue that these approaches are not 'culturally sustainable', i.e. the actions are not becoming embedded within farming cultures as part of conventional 'good farming' practice. We propose (following Bourdieu) that, in order to culturally embed the environmental values, beliefs and knowledges that underlie such schemes, policy-makers need to devise approaches that allow the creation of cultural and social capital within farming communities – rather than simply compensating for economic capital lost. We outline the theoretical basis of our position and discuss how the contemporary agri-environmental approach of paying for specified environmental management services restricts the ability of such schemes to generate cultural and, thereby, social capital. Finally, we outline two possible ways of accounting for cultural capital in scheme creation: either through the development of measures of cultural capital that enable its incorporation into contemporary economic models or through a major revision to the way we construct and apply agri-environmental schemes.

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### 1. Introduction

One of the main mechanisms for achieving agri-environmental policy goals is the provision of financial rewards in return for the generation of environmental public goods. In Europe, this approach formed an important part of the 1992 McSharry revisions to the Common Agricultural Policy<sup>2</sup> and, in more *laissez-faire* economies such as New Zealand and Australia, volunteerism has been the main philosophy behind promoting environmental friendly forms of farming. Measured in terms of the impact on land use and/or farmer participation, these policies appear to have been highly successful. In Europe, for example, 30.2 million ha were covered by agri-environmental scheme (AES) agreements by 2002 – a 24 per cent share of utilisable agricultural land (Burton et al., 2008). Similarly, in Australia, the

establishment of the voluntary Landcare<sup>3</sup> program in 1989 saw a rapid uptake of the scheme such that by 1994 Landcare had been adopted by 30% of commercial farming ventures in Australia (Lockie, 1997).

Some commentators expected long-term behavioural changes to result. For example, Lowe et al. (1999: 271) asserted over a decade ago, "it would reasonably be expected that there would already be discernable changes in farmers' attitudes, and even farming cultures, from participation in agri-environmental schemes". Similarly, Valentine et al. (2007: 315), suggest that for New Zealand "Voluntary and economic incentives... are also seen as effective circuit breakers to encourage environmentally sustainable practice that, once accepted by the community, will provide an enduring change even when the financial support is removed." Early promotion of the Landcare program in Australia was also underlain by the assumption that Landcare groups "will accelerate attitude change"

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<sup>2</sup> Payments for voluntary action became the preferred mechanism as a result of strong resistance to initial attempts to introduce mandatory controls on emerging problems of landscape change, wildlife loss and habitat destruction in the early 1980s (Latacz-Lohmann and Hodge, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Landcare, financial rewards are not provided directly for scheme participation. However, the state provides funding for peer support networks, experimental projects, training and planning exercises (Higgins and Lockie, 2002) and, critically, participation has become "a prerequisite for those farmers wishing either to access direct financial assistance for drought relief and/or structural adjustment or to purchase irrigation water entitlements" (Lockie, 2009: 417).

and lead to the “development of more appropriate land management systems” (Curtis and De Lacy, 1996, p. 65).

However, while voluntary agri-environmental schemes are now widespread, their success in promoting sustainable attitudinal and environmental change is being increasingly questioned. In the European Union researchers in Austria (Schmitzberger et al., 2005), Finland (Herzon and Mikk, 2007), Ireland (Aughney and Gormally, 2002), Switzerland (Schenk et al., 2007), the Netherlands (Kleijn et al., 2004), and the UK (Macdonald and Johnson, 2000) have found little evidence that farmers' attitudes have changed despite almost two decades of engagement. At the same time, European ecologists have observed that voluntary agri-environmental schemes are having only a limited impact on species richness and abundance (Kleijn et al., 2001, 2004; Whittingham, 2007). Similarly, in Australia, early research by Curtis and De Lacy (1996) found no significant differences in the stewardship/land ethos of Landcare and non-Landcare participants. Wilson (2004) concludes from reviewing this (and other) evidence that rather than changing environmental attitudes Landcare has been simply preaching to the converted. As a result of a failure to effect change, Lockie and Higgins (2007: 6) have observed a “continuing escalation of agricultural land and water degradation in Australia”.

Other studies contend that an extended period of engagement with agri-environmental schemes can turn farmers' motivations from predominantly financial to intrinsically environmental (Bager and Proost, 1997; Fish et al., 2003; Morris, 2004). However, while this may be true in some specific schemes and for some individuals, it is unlikely to be widely applicable. Experimental research suggests that the impact of providing extrinsic rewards such as payment for conducting behaviours is usually to *weaken* the intrinsic motivations rather than to strengthen them. For example, Deci et al. (1999: 659) conducted a meta-analysis of 128 studies and concluded “Although rewards can control people's behaviour – indeed that is presumably why they are so widely advocated – the primary negative effect of rewards is that they tend to forestall self-regulation.” Thus, rather than strengthening environmental attitudes, payments for voluntary actions may actually be forestalling attitudinal change.

Overall, the evidence from both the Northern and Southern hemisphere points to a failure of voluntary agri-environmental approaches to alter the culture of conventional farming or, more critically, to halt environmental degradation and species decline. Rather than ushering in a new farming culture based on a more sustainable relationship between farming and the environment, it appears that the main impact of these payments has been to support conventional agriculture – not only from an economic perspective, but from a cultural/social perspective as well. We contend that such policies are thus not ‘culturally sustainable’ – by which we mean that in failing to become embedded within the culture of local communities, removal of financial reward would lead the re-establishment of pre-existing cultural norms and behaviours. The problem is, as Pretty (2003: 1914) observes, “Without changes in social norms, people often revert to old ways when incentives end or regulations are no longer enforced, and so long-term protection may be compromised”.

If voluntary agri-environmental payments are not embedding ideologies of environmental sustainability, the question is: what *would* make environmental policy culturally sustainable? The issue of the ‘cultural sustainability’ of agricultural policy has received only limited attention in the literature – representing what Nerlich and Doering (2005: 166) observe as a gap in rural and sociological research. The authors suggest – with respect to farmers' response to the foot and mouth outbreak in the UK in 2001 – that,

“future policies for a sustainable agriculture can only work if they are not only economically but also *culturally sustainable* and take into account not only monetary but also human cost ... Policies need not only be politically implemented, they need to be culturally embedded.”

Constructing schemes that facilitate cultural embeddedness would have advantages for both policy-makers and participants. For policy-makers, cultural sustainability would result in a diminished role for the government in facilitating innovation, monitoring, extension and enforcement activities as these activities would increasingly be performed by the peer group. As a consequence, the need for economic support would decline as embeddedness deepened. For the individuals and communities targeted, culturally sustainable policies are likely to be more readily accepted as they would provide intrinsic rewards such as social capital (through increased trust) and cultural capital (through contributing to prestige). In addition, if monitoring and enforcement become social acts rather than regulatory acts (as is the case in effective common-pool resource management – Ostrom, 2000), culturally sustainable policy is likely to be more readily adopted by farming communities.

Current methods for selecting environmental policies involve cost minimisation processes aimed at achieving environmental targets subject to various constraints. Here the assumption is of utility or profit maximisation under neoclassical rational behaviour (Gowdy, 2007), with the cost components including private and public costs (Pannell, 2008), transaction, public finance, and production costs (Goulder and Parry, 2008; Richards, 2000; Keohane, 2000). Policy-makers choose from among a range of instruments measures that enable the government to reach its goal while minimising the sum of private and public costs, public finance impacts, and transaction costs. Legal, political and institutional constraints limit the range of instruments that can be used for any given problem. Within this process ‘culture’ is considered only as one of a number of ‘political feasibility’ constraints (e.g. politics, culture, equity, distribution) – with the focus of the instruments resting squarely on economic principles and utility maximisation. In other words, within contemporary environmental policy-making the importance of social and cultural factors in individual decision-making is minimal. This is despite increasing recognition that individuals are not utility maximisers (e.g. Kahneman, 2003; Venkatachalam, 2008) and decisions concerning the environment are often not made on the basis of economic rationality (Schneider et al., 2010).

In this paper, we present a theoretical perspective on how to make agri-environmental schemes more culturally sustainable. The discussion is centred on three key sections. First, we present a basic outline of Bourdieu's broader concept of capital as a theoretical framework, specifically focusing on cultural capital. Second, we discuss how contemporary voluntary agri-environmental schemes impact on cultural capital generation. Finally, we suggest how cultural capital might be incorporated in agri-environmental schemes either through the development of measures of cultural capital for use in economic policy models or, alternatively, the restructuring of agri-environmental schemes to directly encourage the generation of cultural capital.

## 2. A broader concept of capital? Using Bourdieu as a theoretical framework

To develop an understanding of cultural rewards in farming, this section introduces the philosopher/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital as a framework. This theory has been extensively used in a number of disciplines including economics and sociology

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