

Environmental co-operatives as instruments for delivering across-farm environmental and rural policy objectives: Lessons for the UK

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Abstract

This paper assesses the potential of environmental co-operatives (EC) to deliver environmental benefits and an integrated and strengthened rural economy in the UK. It is based on research into Dutch EC, which have about 10,000 members, of which a quarter are non-farmers. The paper details the benefits EC have delivered to their members, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, the environment and the rural economy using evidence drawn from interviews with farmer and non-farmer members, farmer non-members, policy makers and academics connected with seven EC. It pays particular attention to the benefits and disadvantages of allowing non-farmer membership. It is argued that EC would be a valuable additional instrument to help deliver landscape-scale environmental, regional and rural policy objectives. However, Dutch EC have received important political and, particularly in their start-up stage, financial support, and similar support would be needed in the UK—it is argued this may be more readily available if UK EC will offer non-farmer membership. Appropriate support could be provided through developments to the Environmental Stewardship Scheme's higher level tier, by safeguarding and extending the spirit of the LEADER plus programme (which explicitly supports collective action) to the delivery of environmental benefits, and/or by encouraging the development of locally based social enterprises.

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Keywords: Co-operation; Environment; Farmers; Non-farmers; Landscape-scale; Rural economy

1. Introduction

The principal problem posed in developing the next tranche of environmental services is the mis-match between the ownership and management of land and the spatial characteristics of watersheds, landscapes and valuable habitats. Gottfried et al. (1996) term this the “economies of configuration” problem. It is a problem because it typically requires intervention at a scale larger than the individual farmer, i.e. collaboration between contiguous land managers. One example of the need to address the “economies of configuration” problem is the European Commissions’ instructions to Member States to implement the Water Framework Directive “at the catchment level”.¹

Concerted and co-ordinated action between and among neighbouring landowners is relatively untried in the UK as it presents substantial additional challenges to arranging separate agreements with individuals.

In recognition of these additional difficulties, and because current instruments have not achieved desired targets (DEFRA, 2005b), DEFRA is actively developing new instruments and approaches. The Rural Strategy 2004 (DEFRA, 2004a) argues that the newly created independent integrated agency, Natural England, will (i) allow better targeting of advice and incentives to deliver integrated resource management for improving water quality through a river catchment scale approach, (ii) create a stronger voice in regional and sub-regional decision-making, and (iii) allow a coherent and area-based

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¹Others include designing collected landscapes, improving water quality, improving the management of floods and water abstraction for irrigation

(footnote continued)

(Anon, 2005; DEFRA, 2004d; DEFRA, 2005b,c; Firbank 2005; Environment Agency, 2005a,b).

approach to the protection of England's most important natural areas. It is DEFRA's declared intention to devolve rural policy by empowering regional and local partners so as to bring "resources and decision-making to a more local level" (Becket, 2004, p. 4). It is prepared to "test innovative solutions to meeting the needs of rural people more effectively" (DEFRA, 2004c, p. 1), and is willing to devolve decision-making to the "voluntary and community sector" (DEFRA, 2004b, p. 85): which including social enterprises.² These changes in favour of the participation of local actors within a local context, with a bottom-up agenda, conform to the ideals of endogenous development, namely that "the well-being of a local economy (at any sub-national scale, from a region down to a village and its hinterland) can best be animated by basing development action on the resources—physical, human and intangible that are indigenous to that locality" (Ray, 1999, p. 259).

This paper examines Dutch environmental co-operatives (EC), which are shown to be examples of endogenous development, which do not have an equivalence in the UK. It reviews their contributions to the delivery of environmental and rural policy, and assesses their potential for delivering similar benefits in the UK. The following section briefly introduces Dutch EC. The methodology used to identify a sample of EC from which research findings are reported is presented in Section 3. Section 4 describes the activities supported by EC, and Section 5 reviews their benefits to farmer members, the government, the environment and for rural development. Section 6 discusses a particularly controversial issue, the benefits and disadvantages of non-farmer membership. Section 7 identifies barriers to establishing similar ECs in the UK and identifies way in which these barriers may be overcome. Section 8 concludes.

2. An introduction to Dutch environmental co-operatives

The first EC was established in 1992 as a self-help group with voluntary membership, principles that still characterise all EC. Others soon followed. EC can be described as local organisations of farmers and often non-farmers who work in close collaboration with each other and with local, regional and national agencies to integrate nature management into farming practices by adopting a pro-active approach based on a regional perspective. They therefore are examples of endogenous development (De Rooij, 2005) which are not found in the UK, though some share key characteristics of social enterprises.

Their origins lie in growing unease amongst farmers with the evolving agri-environment programme (Franks and Mc Gloin, 2006a). Previous Dutch environment programmes,

such as *de Relatienota*' (Nota over de Relatie tussen Landbouw en Natuur; introduced in 1975) and the Nature Policy Plan (Natuurbeleidsplan; introduced in 1990), were criticised for relying too heavily on scientific input, for adopting a very top-down approach and for excluding farmers' opinions (Groeneveld et al., 2004): an unintended consequence was that farmers were depicted as "people with insufficient responsibility for their environment" (Graveland et al., 2004, p. 38). Farmers increasingly felt that government measures were too restrictive, and preferred regionally based, customised solutions. But at the same time, there was a feeling among a significant minority of farmers that "some practices in agriculture are wrong and will lead to catastrophe" (Graveland et al., 2004, p. 25) and that farmers wanted "to put their own particular interpretation on what it means to renew the countryside" (Glasbergen, 2000, p. 243). EC have evolved to become the vehicle through which farmers have most contributed to the evolution of Dutch agri-environment policy. There are about 125 EC in the Netherlands, though the exact number is uncertain as it depends on the definition used.³ Oerlemans et al. (2004) estimate EC to have almost 10,000 members, about 10% of all farmers and 40% of all agricultural land, about a quarter of members are non-farmers: more than half EC offer non-farmer membership.

It is important to note that even to Dutch farmers, with their reputation for co-operation, EC represented an entirely new way of working together: they were a new form of social organisation. EC are self-help groups with a voluntary membership that pays an annual subscription fee, but secure other funding, mostly through the activities they organise and promote. Some, such as *De Lingestreek*, are more akin to informal nature societies others, such as *PION*, are run along altogether more commercial lines and as a consequence need a more developed managerial structure, but generally all EC have a main committee with a chairman, secretary and treasurer, sub-committees responsible for managing individual projects and developing new activities, regular meetings and an annual general meeting at which *inter alia* changes to the group's business plan and constitution can be made.⁴ Each EC maintains a strong emphasis on locality and context in their portfolio of activities, but whilst sharing similar principles, they are clearly a heterogeneous group of organisations.

A key innovative contribution of EC is to enable Dutch environment agencies agree nature conservation and enhancement contracts with groups (i.e. clubs) of land managers. These agreements are able therefore to reach

²A social enterprise is a "business founded for social purposes, which reinvests their profits.... Social enterprises put ethical values at the heart of business and can demonstrate new ways of delivering innovation and responsive public services." (Ed Miliband, Minister for the Third Sector (Miliband, 2006, p. 3)).

³Some EC are formal associations which have registered with local councils and which have established management boards and bank accounts, whilst others are rather informal gatherings of nature enthusiasts, with no formal management structure. Further details can be found in Franks and Mc Gloin (2006a).

⁴The organisation and financing of EC is not a principle focus of this paper, but more details of these aspects are available in Franks and Mc Gloin (2006a).

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