

INTERPRETING AGRI-ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN FINLAND AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract

This paper adopts a constructionist, actor-network approach to the study of European agri-environmental policy. The presented results are based on an analysis of theme interview material of farmers and extensionists, implementing EU agri-environmental schemes in together four target areas in Finland and the United Kingdom. The respondents' descriptions of the goals and practices of scheme implementation reveal different actor agendas with differing goals and implications for farmers' participation in the schemes. These agendas are to varying extent acted out in the communication between the network participants. In a material sense, extensionists have several extension methods at their disposal, ranging from scheme publication to farm-level, face-to-face advice. However, it appears that the agendas are linked to the content and quality of communication – the extent to which farmers' environmental values and more general goals are confronted in extension. Instances of extension, where a process of learning takes place, can be identified. While the exploration of farmers' commitment to the schemes yields a typology of three farmer groups with varying motivation, goals and experiences of extension, it appears the farmer approaches may be either enhanced or challenged in the extension process, depending on various factors, including the extensionists' aspirations.

Introduction

This paper analyses the implementation of the national Agri-environmental Programmes from a constructionist network approach. Amongst many social science researchers there is growing interest in the way in which a policy domain like agri-environmental policy evolves through the very process of being implemented. According to this view, based on an actor-oriented approach, policies are not given but are constructed through a networked interchange between human and non-human components. This interpretative approach to agri-environmental policy implementation attempts to explore dimensions of culture and of human rationality, which are often left without attention in the more conventional research agenda (Potter 1998; Moxey et al. 1998; Lowe et al. 1999; Wilson et al. 1999; Wilson and Hart 2001). Constructionist and actor-oriented theorising involves less of a distinction between policy makers and recipients. Shifting focus to locally formed interpretations of the institutions, goals and values in policy implementation, the approach overcomes dichotomies such as the one between exogenous and endogenous forces in change (Marsden et al. 1993; Lowe et al. 1997; Goodman 2001; Kneafsey et al. 2001).

The interpretative approach has prompted suggestions that farm level attitudes and approaches should receive more attention in policy implementation (Morris and Potter 1995; Wilson 1996; Wilson et al. 1999; Potter 1998; Moxey et al. 1998). Also changes in the institutions and the knowledge networks that support the development of agriculture on the operative level are seen to be an integral part of a shift to more sustainable farming (Moxey et al. 1998; Lowe et al. 1999). The significance of farmer attitudes in the adoption and

sustainability of policy goals has recently been highlighted by many researchers of the agri-environmental policy field (e.g. Winter 1997; Bager and Proost 1997; Battershill and Gilg 1997 and Curry and Winter 2000).

This paper focuses on the interpretative struggles taking place in the network of actors implementing the agri-environmental schemes and the implications that these have for policy outcome and farmer commitment to the schemes. The findings are based on an analysis of theme interview material of farmers and scheme extensionists (administrative officials and advisers) in together four target areas in Finland and the United Kingdom. According to the principles of grounded theory, the interview respondents were selected so as to acquire a representative image of the two implementation networks. Theoretical sampling and snowballing were used (e.g. Cresswell 1997; Alasuutari 1994). Only extensionists directly involved in scheme implementation, as defined by their official mandates were interviewed.

Actors, interpretative agendas and communication in extension

In both countries the outlined networks comprise administrative officials and advisers as well as farmers. The data suggests that in Finland, officials from both regional and local level agricultural administration participate in scheme implementation mainly as administrative experts. Local level agricultural officials, whose mandates consist of issues dealing with agricultural subsidies in general, are in frequent contact to farmers in their area and appear to have considerable persuasive power. Regional environment officials participate in the role of environmental experts, both in scheme promotion and in decision-making concerning the allocation and design of specific environmental measures. The agricultural advisory organisation has an important role in providing technical advice as well as promoting the schemes. The UK data in turn reveals that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) regional level officials participate in the implementation network in the role of scheme legislators and administrative experts. Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA) officials, MAFFs local level technical experts, deal directly with farmers in contract design. The most frequently used advisory organisation in the target area appears to be the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), which, as well as aiming to reconcile farming and conservation interests on a wider scale, works in parallel with the FRCA officials in scheme implementation.

The actor oriented, constructionist network approach reveals various interpretative struggles in the network of actors implementing the agri-environmental schemes in Finland and the UK. Again following the grounded theory approach, the analysis consisted of coding the data so as to first form descriptive categories of extension experiences, tasks, values and goals and then proceeded to explore causal conditions and to specify strategies (see e.g. Cresswell 1997). Official or broad agri-environmental agendas defining the main issues and goals of policy were identified in the general agri-environmental discourse on national level. These can also be seen reflected in the national Agri-environmental Programmes based on the EU Agri-environmental Regulation (EEC Reg. 2078/92). Further, the data suggests that these broad agendas have become interpreted into more complex, sometimes even contradicting actor agendas in the implementation network. The actor agendas, or strategies, not only reflect the coping strategies of the extensionists', combining their personal and the administrative goals while dealing with individual farmers (see Lipsky 1980), but also act as expressions of different political cultures exercised in policy implementation (see Sköllerhorn 1998, 566). They can be seen as the working definitions of the goals of the agri-environmental policy in the implementation process.

Two such actor agendas, outlined mainly on the basis of the goals the extensionists assign to the communication with the farmers, regarding farmers' position in the implementation

network, and the weight placed on the environmental aims of the schemes, will be discussed below. Significantly from the point of view of extension and learning, different goals and strategies of communication can be outlined particularly in regard to farmer participation. The actor agendas are to varying extent acted out in the communication between the network participants. In a material sense, extensionists have several extension methods at their disposal, ranging from scheme publication to farm-level, face-to-face advice. However, the extent to which the agendas are communicated to farmers, is linked to the content and quality of communication. A particularly meaningful concept is reflexivity, the extent to which the competing interpretations of policy goals, measures etc. are expressed and dealt with in the communication (see e.g. Habermas 1984; Sköllerhorn 1998).

First of all, an environmental agenda, prioritising environmental goals at work and portraying the schemes as a means for achieving environmental targets can be identified from the perceptions and goals expressed by some extensionists. These extensionists tend to step outside their official remits, aiming to complement the administrative targets of scheme implementation with advisory ones. For these extensionists, mainly the Finnish Regional Level Environment Officials and the FWAG advisers in the UK, the schemes form a tool for establishing communication links with farmers. Actors with an environmental agenda presume that this requires a dialogue with farmers, who need to be persuaded to change their ways of thinking and support to learn to recognise environmental values on their farm. This is reflected in the approach that they adopt when communicating with farmers - they not only aim at interactive communication but also want to communicate so as to make farmers question their present perceptions of environmental values and the goals they assign to their work. This is portrayed in the following quote from a FWAG adviser in the UK:

'It's got a great deal to do with policy, yes, and policy and the framework within which the farmers work, but also to deal with the psychology of farmers themselves, I think. ... in terms of the work, then I just hope that working with individual farmers, one by one, gets them psychologically moved further in that direction. And that if we can work with the system that I've just described, of legislation, an incentive, and help farmers within it,' (FWAG Kent)

These actors therefore appear to aim at what can be termed reflexive communication (see Habermas 1984; Sköllerhorn 1998). Farmers are acknowledged as political actors in agri-environmental issues, the aim being to engage and enhance their expertise so that extensionists and farmers can work together to develop best possible solutions to agri-environmental problems. An important feature of reflexive communication is an interactive dialogue between farmers and extensionists, which has potential to impact attitudes (see e.g. Aarts and Van Woerkum 1995; Habermas 1984; Lowe and Ward 1996). Reflexive communication is here understood as accommodating the idea that farmers need not only new skills and knowledge, but also opportunities for a dialogue concerning environmental issues and the role agriculture plays in them in order to change their thinking about what the responsibilities of farmers are in environmental issues. The aim of communication is therefore not only implementing a policy but enhancing the adoption of new goals and values as well. Two important factors conditioning the extension process are considered: the interpretations formed by the network participants of policy goals and of the other participants position in the network and moreover, the need to resolve the differences in these interpretations (see Habermas 1984; Grin and Van de Graaf 1996).

Reflexive communication is beneficial in situations fairly common in the extension process, where farmers are suspicious of both the extensionists and the policy. The following quote from a British farmer describes the change in his attitude towards environmentalists and the

people promoting the agri-environmental schemes and the process of information acquisition and decision-making prior to contracting to the Countryside Stewardship scheme.

'So, yeah, my opinion has changed, because I did think that some of these people (environmental actors, scheme extensionists) were nuts! ...But, no, I'm quite happy now, and I do look forward to working, and getting that feedback from them. I think it's really informative and it's only positive. There's no negative side. ... It (decision to contract) happened via my next door neighbour who entered into Stewardship, and I saw what was going on there. And talking to him, he started to sort of feed information to me about what they were doing, and I was interested in what they were doing, because it looked sensible, and it looked as if it was working in harmony with the farm. And through talking to an old farmer, and meeting these people, you suddenly realise that they weren't the only good men, and ... I think we have to go with it.' (Farmer, Kent)

The change described in this quote can be termed as the kind of a shift in opinion and actions that constitutes structural learning (e.g. Lowe et al. 1999). This quote describes the significance of authority and power for the reception and processing of information, emphasising the role of discussion and practical examples in attitude change (Aarts and Van Woerkum 1995; Winter 1997; Bager and Proost 1997).

Having explored examples of reflexive communication and learning in the implementation of the agri-environmental schemes, it has to be said that they appear to be more an exception than the rule. Communication in the extension process typically centres on the fulfilment of administrative targets. This kind of instrumental communication places farmers in a passive role as recipients of policy and aims solely at communicating the policy goals and measures to them (see Aarts and Van Woerkum 1995). The extensionists are typically reluctant to question either the farmer's motivation or values. The compulsory farm visit during which an environmental plan is made for the Finnish GAEPS can be regarded as an example of how the extensionists' agenda can impact communication more than the form or the content-requirements. Even when face-to-face, a dialogue can be difficult to establish particularly if the extensionist has rigid administrative objectives to meet, as described in the following quote from a Finnish adviser:

'I have heard of cases where the environment-plan-maker has been on the farm and the farmer has not even known what papers they are filling in... A small proportion of them are that type. But really, when you are making the environment plan and the farmer is sitting next to you and nodding his head, you get the feeling that they understand this thing, and know what this means. It's not always so though, people just don't want to admit that they don't know... .' (Adviser, Pyhäjärvi)

The prevalent, mechanistic model of agri-environmental policy appears to be the inspiration behind a more administratively oriented policy culture identifiable in the actor networks in both target countries. Adopting a more instrumental approach to farmer participation, it implies a binary distinction between policy operatives and policy recipients (see Bager and Proost 1997). Local action and non-materialistic considerations receive less attention than under the environmental agenda. Also the role of the environment is perceived differently - it is almost as if environmental goals are fulfilled as a by-product of efficient scheme administration. This administrative agenda implies an instrumental perception of farmers' role in the network - these extensionists typically aim at administratively fluent and cost efficient implementation of the schemes (see Aarts and Van Woerkum 1994; Sköllerhorn 1998). Communication with farmers is considered important, however only to the extent to which it serves to ensure good policy outcome. The administrative agenda is expressed by

extensionists, who comply strictly with their official mandates, often bound by rigid objectives or the need to adhere to a limited budget. Most prominent examples are the professional advisers employed to complete whole farm plans for the General Agri-environmental Scheme in Finland and the FRCA officials, who are the main agents of scheme contract negotiation in the UK (see also Cooper 1999).

In her research on the work of the FRCA officials implementing the ESA Schemes in England and Wales, Cooper (1999, 141) describes the officials as subordinate bureaucrats, reiterating the objectives outlined by the then Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food. The data from this research supports Cooper's claim. Value for money is a characteristic goal of communication especially amongst the extensionists who have an administrative agenda. Maintenance or compliance advice, where the main aim is contract upgrading, serves as an example as depicted by the following quote from a British FRCA official:

'... we do have a care and maintenance programme which is trying to re-visit Agreements on a rolling basis, and go back to them and say, "Well, have you thought about doing this, this and this?", you know, getting added value to existing Agreements.' (FRCA official, Shropshire)

Cooper also claims that the FRCA officials use a conciliatory approach in contract negotiation with farmers, aiming to gain farmers' trust through suggesting management practices according to the farmer's own ideas. Evidence of this can be found in the communication between the FRCA officials and farmers from the data of this research as well.

Also in Finland the extensionists with an administrative agenda seem to want to avoid confrontations. This is visible in the marketing of the Supplementary Protection Scheme (SPS), acting as a higher tier of the GAEPS and serving more pronounced needs of environmental protection measures. The advisers completing the environmental management plan may point out possible SPS sites on the farm and encourage the farmer to apply, but only if this is likely to be received favourably by the farmer, as the following adviser describes:

'On the farm, if they are not interested, I won't push it. I will concentrate on the things that they are interested in, because that usually has a positive impact' (Adviser, Porvoonjoki)

The advisers are reluctant to push the farmers towards environmental solutions mainly, it appears, in order to maintain their 'neutral status' and not to derive an adverse reaction from clients. This is also in line with how Lowe et al. (1992) describe pollution control officials' approach in the UK, where if the needed environmental measures were incompatible with the circumstances of the farm, the officials adopted a pragmatic approach, instead of prioritising the concern for environmental issues.

As Cooper (1999) suggests, the conciliatory approach can be interpreted as an example of the routines and strategies developed by field-level policy implementers, to cope with the rift in the official targets and the practical context of their work (see Lipsky 1980 and Lowe et al. 1997). It is also in line with the findings of Lowe et al. (1997) of how pollution inspectors tacitly correlate their 'morality' with that of the farming community in exercising their power to sanction polluting farmers. Hence both the FRCA officials and the Finnish advisers are unlikely to spark up a discussion, where the farmer would acquire new values and ideas. Farmer's favourable reaction is needed to induce an application to a more demanding scheme:

'We had some whom it was possible to guide in the SPS issues and such, so that the farmer got an insight along the lines of "I could be doing this kind of a thing as well".' (Adviser, Pyhäjärvi)

The extensionists with an administrative agenda deal with the discontinuity they perceive between farmers' interpretative frameworks and the environmental goals of the administrative framework they are implementing by resorting to the neutral administrative targets as justification for their authority. They distance themselves from the moral aspects of the agri-environmental issue and, like the pollution inspectors studied by Lowe et al. (1997), seek tacit acceptance of the farming community to complete their task.

This is in stark contrast with the approach described by extensionists, who express an environmental agenda and, who often experience conflicts when confronting farmers' environmental values. As the following quote describing co-operation between farmers and Finnish Environment Officials exemplifies, this can lead to the establishment of good working relations:

'When it (an environmental project) was launched, there was a type of a collision, that happened between farmers and regional environment officials, but that sparked off good co-operation. ... It was a good thing that it happened, both parties adjusted their standpoints afterwards, so that it was beneficial for either party.' (Municipal agriculture official, Pyhäjärvi)

The communication in the encounters between extensionists and farmers can therefore be assessed on an instrumentality-reflexivity scale. The scale describes, amongst other things, the goals of communication and therefore links up with the actor agendas. Turns in communication represent the essential power and normative propositions held by the individuals engaging in it (see Boden 1994). Examples of how extensionists' agendas impact communication in the encounters between farmers and extensionists in scheme implementation are abundant in the interview data from both Finland and the UK. Communication at the earlier stages of the Finnish extension process seems to be dominated by the administrative agenda, whereas the environmental agenda strengthens its stand towards the later stages. In the UK the agendas are more balanced throughout the extension process. It has to be said however, that instrumental forms of communication dominate with pockets of reflexive communication appearing mainly during contract negotiation and group advice in the context of environmental projects. This supports the claim made by for example Röling and Jiggins (1998) that the shift to sustainable farming requires a change from the conventional forms of extension - if structural learning is to be achieved, extensionists have to pay more attention to both values and knowledge in communication.

Farmer reactions as policy outcome

Expressing the different agendas in communication is not straightforward. However, extensionists who attach environmental goals to their work are more likely to aim for, and acquire, reflexivity in communication with farmers, whereas the extensionists with an administrative or agrarian agenda do not perceive value debates as beneficial for their ends. However, despite the extensionists' aspirations, the data suggests that it isn't always possible to reach a communication situation, which would support this kind of changes on the extensionists' efforts alone. Farmer response can be decisive; whether and how farmers take up the offer for negotiation of the particular ways of applying the schemes on farm level and how capable they are of acquiring the information they need. Intervention by an external actor, be it government, an NGO or other agencies is neither rejected nor accepted by a community in the exact meaning assigned to the communication by the intervening actor. Arce and Long (1994) talk of the intended and unintended consequences of planned intervention coming 'from above' or initiated 'from below' by local interests or organisations. New items of information, worldviews and various types of social support are acquired,

internalised and reworked vis-à-vis specific situations on the basis of a configuration of knowledge and interpersonal organisation forms. Similarly then, in governmental intervention, a process of adaptation, negotiation and transfer of meaning takes place between the different life-worlds of the 'recipient' community and the intervening actors (ibid.). The exploration of farmers' commitment to the schemes in the research data yields a typology of three farmer groups with varying motivation and goals and moreover, differing experiences of extension.

The three different farmer strategies of relating to the agri-environmental schemes reflect both the interpretative struggles revealed by the actor networks in the two target countries and the techno-economic features of the networks (Lowe et al. 1999). The farmer typologies outlined here can be seen to correspond at least to some extent with those drawn of British scheme participants and non-participants before by for example Morris and Potter (1995), Wilson (1996) and Lobley and Potter (1998). The idea, first introduced by Morris and Potter (1995), of a participation spectrum ranging from resistant non-adopters to active adopters, can be seen reflected in the typology briefly described below.

Firstly, a group of environmental compliers can be identified from the data. As depicted in the following quote, these farmers have contracted to a scheme first and foremost for environmental reasons. The belief that farming has to adapt to the demands of the environment is common:

'I think it's just making farmers more aware of potential pitfalls, and it's really flagging up that they have to become more environmentally conscious, and that everything has to be kept in balance really. It's just a balanced approach,. It's not the be all and end all. I think there's still more to come. I think we've got to improve still more.' (Farmer, Kent)

A group of instrumental compliers have contracted (or chosen not to contract) to a scheme primarily for other than environmental reasons. It is often financial claims that legitimate environmental measures, which under normal circumstances are not considered reasonable:

'But let's say that the system gets stricter, meaning that subsidies go down and ... the price of fertiliser increases, it's a reasonable thing that we also build a manure storage and store everything at home and put it into our field. So that we get the system to circulate, without buying from outside; surely it will grow, but unlikely to yield similar crops.' (Farmer, Pyhäjärvi)

Finally, a group of reluctant farmers express strong doubts as for the environmental impact of the measures and about the grounds on which the government is encouraging farmers to contract to agri-environmental schemes. The schemes are perceived as loss of control over ones land or as relinquishing decision-making power over land-use, these featuring amongst reasons discovered also by Winter et al. (1996) for rejection of conservation advice by farmers.

'If you're talking in grant money, you're prone to inspection, that's fine as long as the inspector's not going to turn around and say 'O, you haven't done this quite right, so you are not getting the money'... You know, you do your best, you follow the regulations and then they turn around and say, 'O well, it doesn't follow this regulation, paragraph nine, section C, sorry, you're not getting the money'. And this has been the criticism of that Stewardship Scheme, arable.' (Farmer, Kent)

Certain parallels can be drawn between farmer experiences of extension, the quality of communication and the strategy the farmer has adopted to commit to a scheme. Farmers

response to extension appears to depend on how willing farmers are to adopt environmental goals and expertise and the goals they attach to the schemes to start with. Also farmers' ability to estimate the need for technical knowledge and ask the right questions can be decisive. The farmer strategies of internalising the schemes into their everyday farming practices can be seen to be both shaped by and to impact extension (see also e.g. Wilson and Hart 2001). The environmental compliers farmer group expresses the most experiences of reflexive communication, participation in environmental projects and contact to environment officials, hence bearing further resemblance to the active adopters described by Morris and Potter (1995). The instrumental compliers on the other hand cite less experiences of reflexive communication - less examples of attending environmental projects or discussion groups, or in Finland of confronting environment officials. The reluctant compliers, as can be expected, are characteristically dissatisfied with the amount and quality of advice they have received, and especially in the UK express distrust towards extensionists and the schemes.

As Morris and Potter (1995) suggest, farmers' experiences of extension may be a result of a reactive approach on the behalf of extensionists. This seems to be the case especially in the UK, where particularly the extensionists with an administrative agenda are typically conciliatory and reluctant to recruit farmers with a 'bad attitude'. However, the results also show that particularly at the early stages of the extension process all farmers contemplating on contracting to a scheme, whether reluctantly, with an ulterior agenda or eagerly, participate in similar forms of extension. However, the quality of communication - the extent of reflexivity - tends to vary due to farmer response and the extension agenda.

Conclusions on reflexivity and learning in extension

The results of this research clearly indicate that policy goals evolve in the communication between farmers and extensionists, and that this process offers good prerequisites to influence farmers' commitment to the environmental goals of the schemes, as is visible from the examples of learning, cited in the data. Reflexive communication appears to be behind the learning experiences described by farmers, where their attitude towards environmental measures and values has changed.

However, the research results described in this paper suggest that the prevalence of an administrative agenda in the network of actors implementing the schemes induces a conciliatory approach, which fails to question the ulterior motives farmers may attach to scheme contracts. The administrative agenda yields instrumental communication and is equally inefficient at addressing the lack of trust and negative attitudes expressed by some farmers. Focussing on the fulfilment of administrative objectives in the form of a high number of contracts providing the highest possible environmental value for money, instrumental communication fails to push farmers along the participation spectrum towards more environmental attitudes and goals. It can even be said that the instrumental and reluctant farmer strategies are enhanced in this kind of communication.

Although not all extensionists with an environmental agenda manage to induce reflexive communication, they are more likely to question the ulterior motives of farmers. These extensionists, mostly with environmental backgrounds, are not as conflict adverse as the ones with an administrative agenda and appear readier to interact with farmers. If farmers take up the offer of negotiation, fruitful working contact may be established once mutual suspicions have been addressed.

Although no generally applicable model of communication can be suggested to ensure that learning takes place in the implementation process, some recommendations can be made. In order to include the reluctant and instrumental compliers in the process of positive learning towards the environmental goals of the schemes, the need for information, possible ulterior

motives and the attitude with which the farmer is entering the extension process need to be identified. This implies need for face-to-face individual or group extension. Regarding policy, it can be said that the mechanistic model of agri-environmental schemes is probably not beneficial for the process of learning. Strict administrative objectives divert attention from the environmental targets of the schemes and fail to convey how successful the schemes are in embedding environmental values and goals onto farm level decision making. Moreover, reaching reluctant farmers can be seen as much a question of policy model as of communication strategy. In Finland the horizontal programme brings nearly all of the farming population within potential reach of policy extensionists whereas in the UK the geographically targeted programme model allows extensionists to concentrate on farmers who are likely to yield a valuable scheme contract.

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