From farm advisory work to new practices facilitating learning in rural areas: The case of a saffron association in south-west France

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Abstract

Over the last twenty-five years, agriculture has been shaken by several crises and as a result has undergone shifts - first from a productivist approach to quality production, and now also to multifunctionality too. This shift is bound to affect the practice of agricultural extension workers and advisors. Agriculture has now to demonstrate its legitimacy, with development agents no longer being able to rely on their initial training alone: they need to have additional skills of their own and to invent new practices to match the situations they are encountering.

This paper is based on a particular case – the revival of saffron production in a small region of south-west France – which we consider a good example of these new challenges for agricultural development, since traditional advisory work would not have been possible here.

We analyse the collective action process, while focussing on the facilitation practices of the development agent seconded to the saffron association.

We describe the two main principles which seem to underlie this agent's success, namely being a facilitator within an interactive knowledge network, combining different types of knowledge and learning modes.

The analysis of the saffron situation, together with other work we have done with development agents and instructors, raises three main issues encountered by these agents, all to do with new types of learning for those involved in rural development.

Introduction: facilitation at stake in industrialised countries

With 35 producers, half of whom are not farmers, for a total of 3 kilos of saffron produced per year and, sold at a price of 30 euros per gram, saffron production in the Quercy area (in south-west France) is hardly a typical example of traditional agricultural production… In addition, an 'agricultural advisor'[1] of the local Chamber of Agriculture has been seconded to a saffron association, which makes this example seem even more like a fairytale than an innovation. Our purpose is therefore to show why this example is in fact a relevant case (Mitchell J.C., 1983) of new practices and ways of learning that are emerging in agricultural development. In particular, an analysis of facilitation practices in this particular case allows us a better understanding of the shift from 'agricultural extension' to 'rural facilitation'.

Over the last twenty-five years, agriculture has been shaken by several crises and the role – and title - of development agents in charge of facilitating agricultural activities in the rural world have changed a lot (table I):

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1 'Agricultural advisor' ('*Conseiller agricole*' in French) is usually the official name given to development agents from Chambers of Agriculture.

- The first crisis concerned the legitimacy of the productivist scheme in the farming sector itself, as it appeared to be a model that did not suit all types of farmer (Jollivet M., 1988). Based on a management perspective, the response of agricultural sciences has been to widen their scope of interest from agricultural activity to farming systems (Osty, 1978): producing knowledge to maximise yield was no longer sufficient, extension workers had also to take into account farmers' objectives. They then had to widen their scope from 'technological packages' to the whole farm, shifting from being 'extension workers'[2] to being 'farm advisors' (table I), whose job was to help farmers solve management problems (Cerf and Hémidy, 1999). Social justification of development then moved from 'legal rationality' (complying with the norms of agricultural productivism and good practices defined by agricultural sciences alone) to 'result rationality' (complying with criteria defined by the people involved in the process: producers and clients or consumers) (figure 1).
- More recently, society's demands on farmers are being reformulated, by development institutions and researchers, to include two different notions: multifunctional agriculture (Hervieu, 2001) and social accountability. In particular, farmers are being asked to deal more with local/regional concerns (kinds of landscape suitable for recreational and tourist activities, patrimonial issues, among others) and with environmental aspects. Communication with society at large, while reasserting ties with the local/regional base is becoming not merely an extra issue but a fundamental one. All these changes are bound to affect the practice of development agents. Social justification of development action then moved again from 'result rationality' as defined above to 'consensus rationality' (negotiated 'here and now' with the local community as well as society as a whole) (figure 1). Good practices defined from a management perspective in order to fulfil environmental and societal requirements viewed as 'external' criteria, were no longer sufficient nor legitimate. Agriculture has now to demonstrate its legitimacy, and its value to society in the broad sense and also within a particular local community. Development agents who previously established their own identities as 'farm advisors' or even as 'extension workers', can no longer rely on their initial technical or management science training : they now need to develop additional skills of their own which we can call 'facilitation skills' (Röling, 1998).

Table I: Roles and designation of development agents over the last twenty-five years

Knowledge and facilitation issues	**Terms used to describe development work and development agents**
Technological packages for production processes to maximise yield	Agricultural extension, extension workers
Farm management: combination of technical means to meet farmers' objectives	Farming advisory work, farm advisors
Rural development	Rural facilitation, rural development agents

[2] The term 'extension' arises from a particular tradition – form the North American land grant university model meaning 'to extend knowledge from a centre of learning to those in need of this knowledge' {Ison, 2000 2611 /id}.

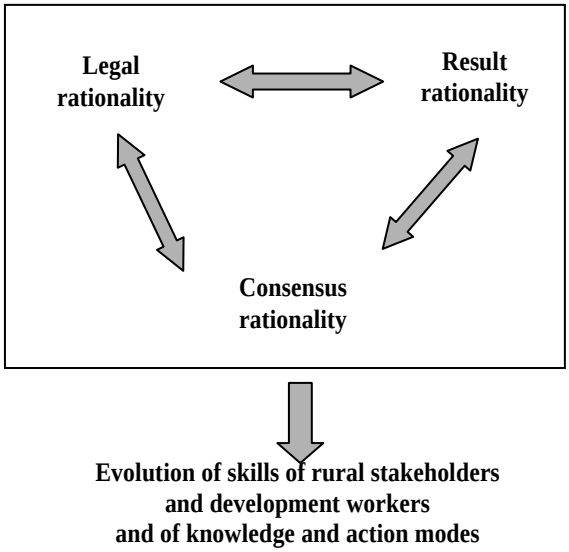

Figure 1: New ways of legitimizing public action (Albaladejo, 2004)

The point we want to put forward in this paper is that these new 'facilitation functions' are no longer functions of 'experts' nor 'specialised technicians': they are first of all functions of the community as a whole, which we have to consider as such in order to be able to understand the emergence of new development métier[3]. This is why we prefer to analyse the facilitation process as a whole, instead of focussing solely on one development agent. The purpose of this paper is thus to illustrate that facilitation in rural development relies nowadays on interactive knowledge networks, which means a large number of stakeholders (including a development agent involved in facilitation), organisational features and procedures. We will then emphasise the role of the development agent in this system, showing that this kind of professional will play an essential role in such a mediation process, in the design stage as well as the implementation stage.

We first describe our case study, the origin of the collective project and why traditional extension or advisory practices would surely have failed. We then analyse the practices and position developed by the people involved, particularly the development agent, in order to facilitate this collective action. Lastly, we draw a parallel between this case and the problems encountered by other rural development agents, with particular emphasis placed on new types of learning for those involved in rural development.

Our case study: an exemplification of the general context

This study is part of a broader research project on facilitating agricultural innovations in rural world. For that purpose, we have been observing this saffron project since its beginning. Moreover, our analysis is drawn from data collected through 10 long interviews we realised with the main actors of this project in 1999, and then again 10 long interviews once the collective institutions have been functioning and the project engaged in quality proceedings.

[3] Following (Schön D.A., 1994), we distinguish the “profession” (involving the application of general principles to specific problems) and the “avocation” (“métier” in French), because the latest is based upon customary activities and modified by the trial and error of individual practice

1.1. Saffron production: why and how?

Commercial growing of saffron disappeared in Quercy with the French Revolution of the 1790s. Individuals passed saffron bulbs down through the generations, but there was no longer a saffron crop in this region (Helfer S., 2002). In 1997, a cultural and patrimonial association established in Quercy set out to start growing this spice again. However, saffron ordered from a Dutch plant breeding cooperative was not in fact saffron (*Crocus sativus*), but another variety of Crocus. This non-agricultural association then sought help from a 'farm advisor' from the local Chamber of Agriculture. They subsequently decided together to expand saffron growing, bringing in many more partners from both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors[4]. As the organisational side of the project grew, they set up a local body ('*Association des Safraniers du Quercy*'[5]) involving a wide range of producers and growers[6] (farmers, non-farmers, hobbyists, etc.) as well as local tourism organisations and a local agricultural cooperative.

Since saffron growing in Quercy is tied in with developing the region's specific image, two trade and cultural fairs are held every year to promote the spice, and a quality drive has been organised to obtain French (Label Rouge) and European (PGI[7]) certification.

As a result, two part-time jobs have been created: for a farm advisor from the Chamber of Agriculture and for a saleswoman employed by the cooperative. Saffron growing is now a side activity for forty producers and several craftspeople are also involved.

1.2. Facilitating the project: the predicted failure of traditional development practices

Several aspects demonstrate that facilitating this project is not a straightforward matter.
First, the lack of scientific knowledge, for instance about saffron growing and storage (Viard, 2001), shows that science cannot be counted upon (Girard and Navarrete, 2004). This means that extension services lack technical packages for the crops, and are not able to prescribe any standard practices. Some authors have shown that advisory work necessarily implies a prescriptive attitude (Maxime and Cerf, 2002): the lack of technical knowledge of saffron production makes farm advisory work impossible in this type of development procedure. In such situations, the role of a development agent is not to focus his action on the solution of a specific problem, but to help a local group, not only farmers, to deal with the more complex process of building collective skills. This approach is very similar to what authors like Röling (Röling N., 1994) call 'facilitation'.

Next, the saffron group is a loose voluntary body rather than the usual farm-sector group or syndicate. The diversity of its members is striking, in fact, with teachers, pensioners, motor mechanics and employees of various local businesses alongside the so-called 'professional farmers' employed full-time in agriculture and for the most part heavily involved in sector-based organisations. Besides, this project demonstrates that 'agricultural activity' nowadays has a much wider scope than 'farming activity',

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4 This dichotomy among rural partners may seem rather crude, but it has been present in all rural development representations for over a century since all non-agricultural activities were excluded from French rural areas (called 'agriculturisation' of the countryside by some authors), and it has only very recently been questioned {Hervieu, 2001 2709 /id}.

5 http://www.safranduquercy.com/

6 Among the members of the Association, it is worth distinguishing the 40 'producers', aiming at selling saffron, and the 100 'growers'; growing saffron without any commercial objective, and we will use these two different terms in the rest of this paper.

7 Protected Geographical Indication.

because in this age during which agriculture is not the only activity recognized in the countryside (see n°4), agricultural activity is also carried out by non-farmers whose involvement in this area is increasingly being recognised by development institutions. We would therefore have kept Röling's idea of 'agricultural facilitation', if it were not for the fact that facilitation, as the saffron project clearly shows, has to reach beyond agricultural activity and resource management, to include all rural activities: this is why we prefer the term of rural facilitation.

In the saffron project, there is a corresponding mix of technical and social aims among the members, and this too is bound to modify extension practices. For most of them, growing saffron is a social rather than an economic activity, but none of the 35 'producers' consider the economic dimension to be irrelevant. The facilitator will thus need to place at least as much emphasis on inclusiveness and cohesion of the group as on the production aspects.

Results: innovative practices and attitude developed in the course of action

As we want to show that facilitation may not be the prerogative of just one central facilitator, the term 'the farm advisor'[8] will be used when referring to the development agent[9] from the Chamber of Agriculture who is working with the saffron producers' association.

1.3. Facilitating a project throughout its development

Even if the various stages may appear to be separated, while in practice they are combined, the project's progress can be described in 4 partially concomitant stages (figure 2) (Labatut J., 2003). We examined facilitation practices throughout these different stages.

- The **starting point** of this facilitation process was in fact the problem encountered with the Dutch bulb supplier and the involvement of the Chamber of Agriculture, then establishing contact between patrimonial and agricultural worlds;
- The **first stage** involved **forming a group**, by establishing trust among the different participants involved in the project. The farm advisor had to get to know each person involved in the project, his personal history and facilitate meetings. Conviviality is therefore an important value in group facilitation to enable successful debates. This mutual understanding between participants and the farm advisor enabled him to help the group to define individual roles and responsibilities, calling upon the skills of each. Rather than being a sole authority, the advisor is a facilitator who distributes the roles and helps individual or collective initiatives to emerge and to be recognised by others.
- The **second stage** of the project was to **get local institutions to recognise the project**, in order to ensure legitimacy and provide a solid basis for its development (Labatut J., 2003). This " local institutional strengthening " (Hagmann J. et al., 1996) is seen by these authors as the 'major focus ' of a facilitator's activity. In fact, the farm advisor working with the saffron association got in touch with numerous people in various fields such as tourism, commerce, and the craft industry, and also people in political circles in the Lot Department and Midi-Pyrenees region. He then managed to

[8] As we already mentioned, this is the official title of his position in the Chamber of Agriculture. However, as we will argue, it does not fit his real activity and personal identity.

[9] Drawing our analysis on interviews we made with him, we will use the male gender to refer to him. In wider observations in Argentina, Albaladejo (2003b) observed that young women are more numerous among the most "innovative" rural development agents (actually the ones who develop new attitudes and professional identities and also who are working for the "new employers" of rural development such as municipal government, city administrations). But it was not our objective to analyse here this gender issue.

enlarge the scope of the project by involving a number of people who had no initial link with saffron or any agricultural activity. In this way, he created a network which was essential for the proper development of the project. Actually, this stage began at almost the same time as the 'forming a group' phase, because right from the start, the farm advisor needed political support from both within and outside the Chamber of Agriculture in order to go on working on this 'non-traditional project'.

At this stage of the project, the saffron fair organised on the advisor's initiative and with his help provided an opportunity to:

- structure the saffron producers' group and reinforce the links between members by proving to them that they were able to organise a concrete collective action;
- play a role of 'shop window' for the project to attract and influence local and regional political circles.

This dual role of the fair (both internal and external) shows that the advisor was active on two different levels at this time: this is why we consider that the first and second stages were concomitant.

- The **third stage** was the **development of the project** itself: seeking to achieve professionalism and an increase in production, and organisation of sales and marketing. Because of the lack of data and knowledge available about saffron production, specific procedures needed to be adopted to capitalize knowledge and for experimentation purposes. To this end, the farm advisor first made an inventory of saffron producers, and then set up a survey network to list producers' practices and results obtained. Meetings based on these data were then set up to facilitate discussion and learning among producers at the end of each campaign. Moreover, training meetings about peeling techniques and field tours were organised during the harvesting period, notably for new growers. At the same time, a professional firm (an agricultural cooperative) was involved in the project to ensure efficient marketing of the product and luxury packaging was also created.
- Lastly, in the **current stage of formalisation,** where it is hoped that the product will gain recognition by the French Government as a 'higher quality product ' ('*Label Rouge* ') and by the EU as a PGI[10], the advisor has contacted the relevant partners (IRQUALIM[11]). He has helped the group draw up technical specifications, while taking care to ensure that growers retain sufficient freedom and innovative space to preserve their motivation.

[10] cf n°7

[11] IRQUALIM = Regional Institute specialised in quality signs for agricultural products of the Midi-Pyrenees region.

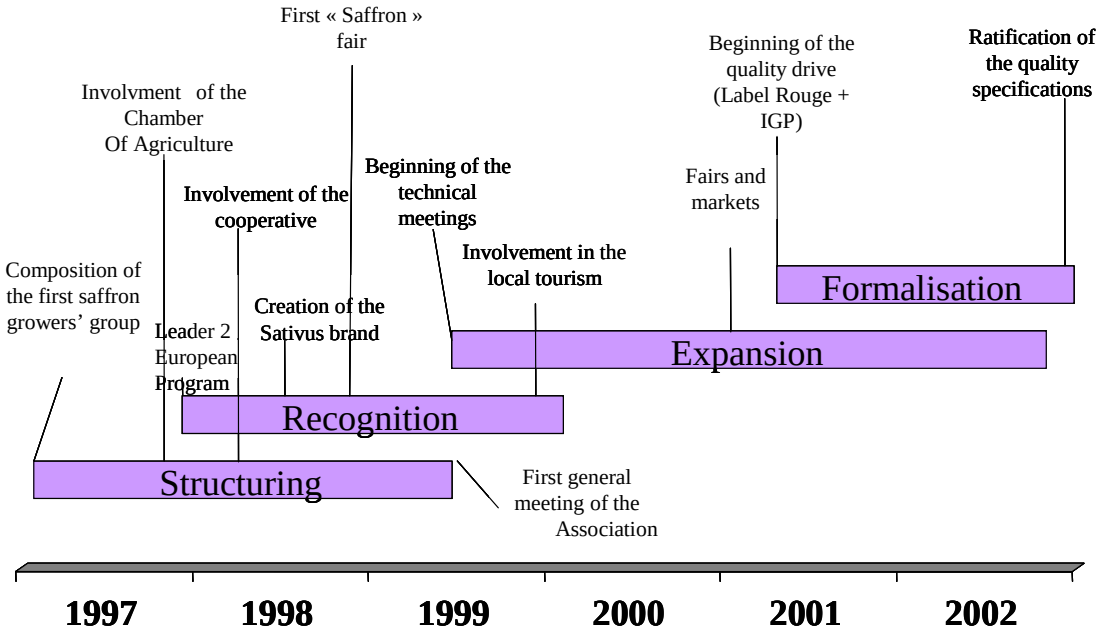

Figure 2: Four stages to describe the progress of the saffron project

What we can see from the history of the project is a dual and vital process of institutionalisation:

- on **a territorial basis**, thus dealing with local elected representatives and territorial institutions (county, local private associations, etc.);
- in the **professional** agricultural area (Chamber of Agriculture, cooperatives, etc.) dealing with corporate elected representatives (who are more numerous than, and different from, local elected representatives).

None of these legitimisation processes can be postponed. The consequence is that rural development can no longer be restricted to the well-established agricultural professional world. Not only professional skills and knowledge are at stake, but also private skills and knowledge (Albaladejo, 2003a). This situation is highly unusual for a 'farm advisor'. We think that, in the Quercy saffron project, the farm advisor is helped in his function by his past experience in mastering complex pedagogical situations.

1.4. Action principles and problems

From the project progress, we can identify two main action principles which seem to underlie the farm advisor's success.

1.4.1. The fact that he is facilitator within an interactive knowledge network and not a sole expert interacting only with farmers

Firstly, he has negotiated an original position in which he is not an expert, but a facilitator.

The position he adopts in his activity is neither prescriptive nor offering technical diagnosis (traditionally ending in recommendations being made). Both approaches would be untenable in view of the lack of technical knowledge about saffron, and also the way people relate to the saffron business and knowledge of it (establishing their own identities, a partly private relationship, etc.). On the contrary, the facilitator is constantly trying to find way of helping the participants to manage their projects in a totally or partially autonomous manner. His position is clearly one of a facilitator aiming at coaching

participants in a project, trying to reach a consensus and using a communicative strategy rather than one of 'teacher '. His role is not to impart knowledge, but to help partners coordinate to acquire and synthesize knowledge from different sources (Hagmann J. et al., 1996). This kind of facilitator thus has a 'facilitating project logic ' (Laurent et al., 2002) . The principles used by the farm advisor in the saffron project also resemble what Röling and Jiggins (1998, p. 306) are hoping for in an 'ecological knowledge system': *"A key feature of facilitation is that it can only be partially based on technical expertise. A major component is the enhancement of interactive processes for social learning, negotiation, accommodation and agreement. This means that facilitators must be well versed in both technical expertise and skills and in social science expertise and process skills*".

Besides the saffron producers' association, it is obvious that progress, particularly concerning the management of saffron growing, does not depend exclusively on research or on producers themselves. On the contrary, progress will rely on the multiple participants of an 'interactive knowledge network', taking up the idea put forward by the OECD, for whom Agricultural Knowledge Systems have gone from *'a model of unidirectional generation and transfer of knowledge […] to a model of interactive knowledge networks with multiple participants' (OCDE, 2000).* One may find the same idea in the concept of *'multi-stakeholder learning platform* ' (Röling N., 1994) (Kibwana O.T. et al., 2001)). In fact, the Quercy saffron producers and their farm advisor are part of a network with diverse partners, such as a regional institute specialised in quality signs for agricultural products (see n°11), a research centre which leads agronomical experiments, chemists at Toulouse University undertaking sensorial analysis of saffron, and the regional tourism committee to ensure the promotion of saffron. All participate in some way, in acquiring knowledge of saffron and its cropping. For the facilitator in charge of the project, it is a matter of being able to interact, to initiate a dialogue and even to negotiate with very different partners, who are far removed from the technical aspects of saffron cropping. The last point may refer to the place of technical knowledge in the avocation of development agents; it should not be as predominant as it was in the past, according to authors such as Röling and Jiggins (1998), because agricultural questions can no longer be treated from a narrow sector-based perspective. The scope of action for the development agent is also broadening to what Giddens called situations of 'co-presence' (Giddens, 1984), and does not remain restricted to situations of 'face-engagement', which are only one type of 'co-presence' (involving gatherings, social occasions, unfocussed interactions and routines). In this respect, the evolution from former agricultural extension to farm advisory work has somewhat limited the social situations in which development agents exert specific skills. The time now seems right to broaden their professional scope again.

As a consequence, the farm advisor does not have a monopoly on project facilitation, even if he has this official role. The President of the association, the cooperative director, and other participants – whether or not they are saffron growers - also participate actively, taking initiatives, engaging in actions, and taking on responsibility. This is in fact the explicit position the farm advisor has adopted and he has constantly to re-negotiate it in relation to the actions of other participants. By facilitating dialogue and free expression within the group, the farm advisor encourages individual and collective ability to find ideas and to elaborate knowledge, enabling participants in the project to respond to new situations. It thus seems natural that saffron growers have become very involved in the project, even coaching newcomers or implementing their new ideas by themselves.

Beyond these participative practices, the advisor's aim is to ensure the long-term viability of the project. For this reason, he has always kept the group open to newcomers and to the participation of outsiders. In this way, he wants gradually to pass on his responsibilities to other people, in order to make the group autonomous.

This situation seems to us a very good example of what facilitation in rural development should be: successful facilitation requires a whole network and not a single, central individual. This leads us to

suggest using the generic term 'rural development agent' (table I), instead of 'facilitator'. Facilitation is a skill and a function that this agent has to develop in addition to other skills, among other local partners, to ensure the success of a mediation process between a local community and external development structures and partners (see the notion of 'territorial project', Kayser, 1994).

This implies a significant change in the role and professional identity of the development agent. When we chose the case of saffron production, we knew that this production, although supported by the Chamber of Agriculture, was on the fringe of the professional AKIS[12] based on traditional agricultural production on farms of more than two equivalent workers and by full-time farmers. We make the assumption that professional institutions, like the Chamber of Agriculture or the cooperative, would probably feel more 'comfortable' supporting radical innovations in saffron production, i.e. innovations that could change the hegemonic position of the professional AKIS. Some leaders and officials of the 'professional' system are aware that the AKIS has to change, which is why some 'social experiments' may be accepted on the fringe of the system. However, this remains risky for the evaluation and careers of development agents who agree to get involved in these 'experiments'.

1.4.1. Types of knowledge and learning modes

The interview held with the farm advisor in charge of the saffron project confirmed that he explicitly encourages the expression of all types of knowledge and that he combines different learning modes.

Contrary to the traditional one-way contribution of information, he facilitates the confrontation between different types of knowledge. For him, legitimacy of knowledge does not come solely from science but also from activity, requiring that scientific and empirical knowledge be blended in 'hybrid knowledge' (Girard and Navarrete, 2004). For instance, he manages to allow expression of different types of knowledge during saffron growers' meetings, including less documented areas such as the moon's influence on saffron production, which would be marginalised in professional agricultural circles. He also set up an experimental project with a local research centre to test the assumptions made by growers about the connection between technical operations and saffron yield. All saffron growers, whether or not they are farmers, are recognised as being able to further knowledge of saffron and saffron production simply because they grow saffron. Therefore, there is a transformation of the relations between the farm advisor (usually introducing a rational and scientific perspective on a crop) and growers, here recognised for their pragmatic and empirical point of view: in this situation, expertise does not come from the advisor, but from the growers themselves, putting them in a situation of potential cooperation instead of dependency. But on the other hand, such a situation may be new for development agents who have not always acquired maieutic skills.

Furthermore, the farm advisor combines deliberately different learning modes within the group of saffron growers. Firstly, since the beginning of the project, he has organised a process of formalisation, favouring in this way a 'cognitive learning mode' (Ingham M., 1994). For example, confronted with a problem of endless discussions between growers, he tried to normalise the observations made by growers by establishing observation units and a chart synthesising the results obtained, the soil conditions of each plot and the cropping practices, for each planting year. Initially, it was a way of establishing a 'common ground' (i.e. assumed mutual beliefs and mutual knowledge: Clark and Brennan, 1991) among growers: their diverse socio-professional origin had created a gap between their individual knowledge bases and such a gap is known to limit learning possibilities in a heterogeneous group (Ingham M., 1994). But this normalisation activity was also a way for him to create 'mediating representations' (Ford et al., 1993) in which observation units and charts on production results become 'soft models' (Checkland P., 1981), facilitating communication among growers.

[12] Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (see Röling).

He also organised observation situations ('field tours' of saffron plantations of each grower) and collective actions (peeling training sessions), encouraging an 'experimental learning mode' (Ingham, op.cit.) Based on the idea that growers need a common experience (in the sense of (Kolb D.A., 1984) in order to understand each other, these two types of meetings allowed participants to exchange ideas while observing and practising together. This is close to the idea of Local Professional Groups (Darré, 1988) or the concept of 'pasture walks ' (Hassanein N. and Kloppenburg J.R., 1995), leading to the 'horizontal organisation' of exchanges (i.e. between producers) concerning experiential knowledge. According to these authors, the exchanges are spontaneous and do not need any guide: individual knowledge can then be extended and socialised. However the example of the saffron association allows us to point out that socialising knowledge in this way may be neither easy nor spontaneous. On the contrary, we would like to emphasise the crucial role of development agents, whose job is not only to stimulate knowledge production in a group of peers as claimed by Ruault (Ruault C., 1994), but also to be a mediator between different forms of knowledge in heterogeneous groups.

Discussion

1.1. Main issues for new extension practices

It is difficult for an extension worker to handle such a position and many problems can arise:

- First of all, it is difficult to **legitimate a position of mediator** with an employer who is used to agricultural projects. The mission of the advisor seconded to the saffron association is very different from the activity of institutions such as French Chambers of Agriculture. The presence of non-farmers (requiring the advisor to expand his network of 'clients') and the importance of issues external to the agricultural domain (namely patrimonial or cultural issues related to saffron) are not readily accepted by institutions which are strongly linked to the agricultural sector. To make this transformation easier to accept, the advisor has to be very careful to get institutions to recognize the interest of the project (cf stage 2 in the saffron project).
- This **diversity of the people** involved in the project is also difficult to handle. When participating in groups the farm advisor is usually the person to whom farmers submit their ideas before discussing them with the group. In the saffron group for example, non-farmer producers are not used to this approach and do not recognise the need to go through the advisor before any collective discussion. Initiatives and ideas proliferate, which makes it difficult to keep the project going in a channelled, coherent direction.
- Likewise, without a facilitator, individual initiatives remain isolated and cannot be compared: the group cannot learn from the results or observations obtained. Facilitation is thus a crucial task, which also relies on the **balance between facilitation and independence** of the group. It is difficult to help a group while maintaining some distance from the project, so that the group can continue on its own without the facilitator.
- Although **tacit knowledge** may be expressed, as in the saffron producers' group, it is often difficult to make use of it. For example, the saffron advisor focuses his technical work on raw data regarding yield, but recognises that it is impossible to draw any conclusions from it which may help producers to manage their crops. This is similar to the point made by (Nonaka I. and Takeuchi H., 1997), for whom tacit knowledge is the most difficult to share and would necessitate a formalisation process which could distort it. Moreover, recognizing that empirical knowledge has a value in such a process constitutes a major change in the way an AKIS legitimizes knowledge, which implies a different kind of participation and the emergence of a different kind of knowledge.

- Lastly, these development agents have to deal with different projects and different partners, which makes it difficult to **accumulate know-how and capitalise on it in a given area of competence** (Laurent et al., 2002) It may therefore prove difficult to train a facilitator of this kind.

1.2. New types of learning for rural development partners

The analysis of the saffron project, alongside other research we have carried out with twelve development agents and instructors[13] (Albaladejo et al, 2003), raises some convergent issues, all to do with **new types of learning for rural development partners**.

According to one instructor, agricultural advisors in the Chambers of Agriculture are now learning new skills in "*establishing relationships and communicating, organising and helping to elaborate strategy*". One Chamber of Agriculture department head summed it up as follows: "*we have to change our perspective, which is too narrowly focssed on farmers and farming*". These new trends are even clearer when it comes to personnel working for rural agencies. One of these people believes they have an advantage over agents working for Chambers of Agriculture, because they do not intervene solely for a specific theme in a given area (their activity is not restricted to the agricultural domain). However, the same person said, with what appeared to be a mixture of pride and disappointment, "*we are not specialists in any particular field, but we create ties with everything and everyone*". This point seems to be linked to the problem of non-recognition by local development professions even if product-specific procedures and more institutionalised approaches have given agents some recognition. This problem of recognition appears to be even more acute in Chambers of Agriculture: "*it's not very rewarding work*" said one rural development department head, "*we're a little like GPs […] we are supposed to be like an octopus with 8 arms and do everything* ". One response to this problem of identity, when compared to specialist agronomist colleagues, was to give rural development agents more specialised tasks to carry out, or *'side specialisations"* (e.g. river contracts, extension work in the management of permanent grasslands, etc.) which apparently do not need (or perhaps merit) full-time advisors. The idea is to give these rural advisors from the Chambers of Agriculture, their own '*technical expertise*', which some agents have referred to as a '*breath of fresh air*'. However, this type of response raises the question of whether this is not merely internalizing the fact that others, perhaps the whole profession, do not recognise development agents as having any particular status. This solution, which does not add anything the professional status of rural development professions, could in fact be a temporary or intermediary solution.

Several extension workers (among those who raised the theme of the crucial importance of group animation), farmers and more globally stakeholders and citizens in rural areas, stressed the fact that it is an '*exhausting activity*' or that '*it is not always pleasant to get on with*' ('*we are running out of steam*', '*too much commitment, all the time, it's tiring*', '*we cannot be perpetually hard at work*'. This is why they think it is important to '*know how to last in this profession…*'. They stressed in particular the importance of complementing the work with groups with work with individuals; this type of work also allows them to get to know better the people with whom they have to work. This is more feasible for the Chamber of Agriculture agents whose job includes individual follow-up advisory activities.

The answer is no doubt to be found in the development of collective skills, often referred to by the twelve people we interviewed. Rather than "*concentrating all of the skills in one person',* we should try to *'organise work collectively*", or, in other words, set up teams which combine skills.

[13] In the LEARNing project (entitled 'Learning in European Agriculture and Rural Networks: institutions, networks and governance), steered by B.Hubert and funded by UE, contract n° HPAM–2002-00056

Conclusion: towards an 'RKIS' for rural facilitation?

Through the case of saffron in Quercy, which we consider as a telling case, we have shown that the farm advisor involved in this project has undergone a dual shift, both in his attitude (being a facilitator, not merely an advisor), and in the scope of his action (moving from the agricultural world to the rural world).

We thus support the view that rural facilitation now relies on:

- situations of co-presence and not face-engagement;
- legitimacy of knowledge based on activity as well as science, requiring development agents to have the ability to combine the two types of knowledge;
- new ways of learning, combining cognitive and experiential learning modes and social learning, as well as organisational methods;
- interactive knowledge networks, connecting both global and local knowledge networks;
- a worldview of agriculture as being larger than farming, as well as a private activity, thus requiring development agents to combine private and professional knowledge

In short, the Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems traditionally used for research on rural development (Röling and Jiggings) and relying on one facilitator seems to us too narrow to encompass all aspects of rural facilitation, perhaps pointing to the need to extend the concept of AKIS to become a Rural Knowledge and Information System (RKIS).

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