

Evaluation “Vital Coalitions” (WP-053)

November 2010

Projectpartners: L.G. Horlings (Telos), F. Hendriks (UvT), A. van den Brink (WUR)

TransForum: Prof. dr. Hans Mommaas

Duration: January 1, 2007 – December 31, 2008

Introduction

TransForum aims to promote sustainable development. Especially in regional programs, this often implies building new urban-rural coalitions, across administrative, spatial and business based boundaries, thus organizing a new trans-sectorial capacity to act. How to do this? Which experiences can be identified?

Aim

To formulate a perspective on and identify conditions favoring the organization of vital urban-rural based coalitions, organizing a more inclusive capacity to act, in order to realize a more sustainable regional agricultural development.

Set-up

Using notions of Urban Regime Theory, a conceptual framework on regional collaboration is developed, paying special attention to initiating forms of public-private self-organization ('vital coalitions'). Based on this heuristic framework, eight TransForum cases are analyzed; and the comparative results reported. Central is the idea that vital coalitions act as empowering entities, they come into being on the basis of a shared desire for a 'capacity to achieve outcomes'.

Main findings

First of all, the researchers have reworked notions of Urban Regime Theory to address (a) the regional (urban-rural) level (b) the notion that change often starts with collaborative forms of self-organization. The result is the dual notion of 'vital coalitions' / 'regional regimes', with the one always coexisting in relation to the other, but with each expressing a different time-spatial and organizational scale. Next, four aspects are identified, expressing the primary building blocks of both: (a) the content of the agenda, (b) the type of coalition, (c) modes of alignment and (b) the pool of resources.

This heuristic framework is applied in a comparative analysis of eight regional innovation cases, expressing different developmental strategies (i.c. enlargement of scale, diversification, urban-rural integration, decoupling of production and soil).

The analysis has identified some common elements in the coalitions formed. These include:

1. actors indeed introduce new developmental strategies, such as in the sphere of regional branding, farm/land management, organizational arrangements;
2. on different levels (local, provincial, sometimes national), they establish new forms of public-private co-operation;
3. the projects pursue an innovation agenda by forming alliances with knowledge institutes which act as intermediary organizations;
4. alignment of actors is often improved by informal contacts and 'negotiations behind the scene';
5. private actors strengthen their power base by forming new 'business communities' based upon the pooling of time, money, knowledge and contacts.

Three types of coalitions are identified, depending on a combination of (a) the type of actors involved, (b) the scale on which the coalition is active and (c) the type of agenda:

1. business oriented coalitions, aimed at creating win-win situations between different production sectors (either within or beyond the agricultural sector);
2. rural-urban alignment coalitions, aimed at creating new linkages and commitment between producers in rural areas and urban citizen consumers;
3. steering coalitions, aimed at negotiating and influencing government decision making out of shared interest.

The project has not been able to evaluate the ultimate success of each of the coalitions studied because of the young age of each of the projects involved. Instead, the project focused on hindering/stimulating factors as identified by the coalition actors involved.

Hindering factors concerned:

- a. organizational policy constraints and implementation problems (especially administrative and public-private divisions);
- b. institutional obstacles (the mismatch between general regulations and specific place bound innovational demands);
- c. clashes between different regional agendas (e.g. between vital coalitions and regime actors);
- d. difficulties in aligning entrepreneurs behind a common cause.

Conclusion

The main thrust of the research was to identify conditions for vital coalitions at the regional level. In order of importance these concerned:

1. a shared sense of direction, based on a shared story line;
2. entrepreneurship and versatile leadership (based on availability of time, open network based attitude, good storytelling, good networking, flexible role playing, the ability to signal and use synchronicity);
3. a responsible and process sensible form of government backing (with the provincial government building in mechanisms to more pro-actively and adaptively respond to initiatives, without smothering them in administrative procedures).

The suggestion is made to view the concept of vital coalitions more as a dynamic process of coalition building and storytelling (or business case building), instead of in terms of a given group of people sharing a set of characteristics.

Meaning for TransForum

This project provided a number of practical tools to achieve new forms or regional (urban-rural) collaborations, supporting the development of new more sustainable forms of agriculture. VC's have a loose bottom up nature and are connected with acute local problems, and can be, and often are, strong centers of innovation. However, they face their own direction-setting problems, which limit their capacity to act. The absence of a regional story line or sense of direction leaves the region fragmented, and much energy lost in confusion or discussion about different possible lines of action. In addition, VC's often need some government support and have to relate to policy discourses. Innovation programs such as Transforum may help in giving them alternative and knowledge based forms of support while searching for new windows of opportunity.

Implications for metropolitan agriculture

The project identified the necessity to anchor MA concept on a triptych including (a) a regional story line (or business case) linking urban and rural values, (b) a regional vital coalition, linking urban and rural interests and (c) government backing mechanisms in the sense of process, initiative and actor sensible forms of support, creating room for institutional maneuvering.

Implication for connecting values

The project underscores the possibility to reconnect regional values, both within and beyond the economic domain (3P), through the targeted support of boundary spanning vital coalitions. However, this implies much sensitivity for region specific conditions, carefully maneuvering on the lines that connect a shared sense of direction, entrepreneurship and government backing.

Implications for the knowledge infrastructure

The project underlines the necessity for a transdisciplinary knowledge infrastructure to act as a third party, feeding regional coalitions with monitoring and opportunity opening knowledge (stimulating a learning environment), thus also acting as a boundary spanning instance, while not taking over responsibility.