

Evaluation “Social learning for sustainability in dynamic agricultural innovation networks” (WP-046)

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Introduction

The greatest problem of “solving” unsustainability is that multiple perspectives on sustainability produce different images for sustainable development to the point of being mutually exclusive. Such heterogeneity in the way different groups of people think and act can result in stalemates when they need to collaborate. A solution for one person may be seen as the source of the problem to the next.

It follows that experimenting towards sustainable development takes place in a heterogeneous, often volatile environment that requires careful maneuvering. The potential of social learning is limited in these environments. The case of sustainable agricultural development is no exception. Frans Hermans’ research unearthed various perspectives on sustainable agricultural development, and as such can help to deal with societal diversity in innovation experiments.

Aim

The aim of this project was to identify current perspectives on rurality and agriculture in the Netherlands, and the associated perspectives on sustainable development. Furthermore, it discusses the consequences of the identified perspectives for sustainable agricultural development. The main research questions were:

1. What are the current Dutch perspectives on rurality and agriculture?
2. What are the current perspectives on sustainable development of Dutch rurality and agriculture?
3. What are the consequences of these perspectives for sustainable agricultural development?

Set-up

Hermans used a mixed set of social sciences methods to answer his research questions. He used interviews and literature from a set of interviewees that was deliberately chosen to be broad, to identify current Dutch perspectives on Dutch rurality and agriculture (research question 1). The interviewees did not originate from specifically targeted organisations, nor were they randomly sampled from current Dutch society. Rather, the pool of interviewees was chosen for its breadth in viewpoints, to ensure that the viewpoints expressed within society were also present within the pool of interviewees.

In a follow-up study, Hermans developed online questionnaire based on the results from the interview study. This questionnaire was aimed to identify existing perspectives on *sustainable development of Dutch rurality and agriculture* (research question 2). This questionnaire was distributed among a broad range of TransForum innovation experiments. The TransForum experiments were chosen because of their specific focus on sustainable development, and because of the large variations in approach to, and perspective on agriculture. The third research question was addressed through discussing the findings.

Main findings

Perspectives on rurality and agriculture

Three perspectives are identified on rurality and agriculture.

1. Agri-ruralist: This perspective focuses on farmers and their family. It regards the farmer as the custodian of landscape and nature. In this perspective the family farm plays an important role. The continuity of the family farm is an important sustainability issue.
2. Utilitarianist: This perspective focuses on market relations, with nature and landscape being important production values. It involves the consumers and producers of food and agricultural products. How to mitigate the adverse effects of intensive farming is an important sustainability issue.
3. Hedonist: The hedonist perspective starts from the intrinsic values of nature and diversity. It involves tourists, city dwellers and animals. Animal welfare and landscape conservation are important sustainability issues.

Hermans' findings point at a diminishing role for the agri-ruralist perspective; his results suggest that this perspective is steadily being subsumed by the utilitarianist and hedonist perspectives.

Perspectives on sustainable development of Dutch rurality and agriculture

In the second study, Hermans identified four perspectives on sustainable development. These appeared to be extensions of the utilitarianist and hedonist perspectives. Two perspectives were mainly utilitarianist and the other two were predominantly hedonist.

The main differences between the four perspectives seemed to centre on two dimensions:

- the role of technology for sustainable development; and
- the role of the countryside.

The hedonist-based sustainable development perspectives are strongly averse of technological solutions for sustainability issues. They regard technology as a cause of unsustainability, not as part of a possible solution. Also, these perspectives favour a multi-functional role for the countryside. Discussion of the specifics of these two perspectives is outside the scope of this review.

The utilitarianist view gave rise to two other perspectives on sustainable development, called the "entrepreneurs" and the "conservative farmers." These perspectives are both technology-oriented, but they differ in the way they place the countryside. The "entrepreneurs" view has no specific role of the countryside in mind, being focused on the international market, while the "conservative farmers" view sees the countryside as agricultural in character, with a small, if any role for other activities. Interestingly, Hermans' results indicate that people from TransForum projects that favour industrial ecology for sustainability issues fall into the conservative farmer category.

Conclusion

The differences between the perspectives on rurality and agriculture show that the Dutch countryside is contested, and that different groups of people have very different views on the Dutch countryside. Furthermore, it appeared that many people share the view that sustainable development is necessary, but it is clear that there are large disagreements about how to work towards sustainable development. Finally, the role of TransForum's intensive animal husbandry projects have met with a lot of local opposition, but the people in these projects apparently hold to the view that agriculture belongs in the countryside.

Meaning for TransForum

TransForum operates in an environment that is fraught with societal diversity. Hermans' results give insight in the nature of this diversity. It appears that the diversity in TransForum's project portfolio conforms to the diversity in perspectives that Hermans identified, suggesting that TransForum's innovation experiments cover the entire range of perspectives on rurality and sustainable development.

Implications for connecting values

Hermans' conclusions about the role of technology and the countryside help to explain cases in which strong value differences exist. For example, different perspectives on the role of technology and the role of agriculture for the countryside have played an important role in the controversy about the New Mixed Farm project. It would appear that the intensive types of agriculture that depend on technology to become more sustainable, are increasingly being seen as incompatible with the Dutch rural area.

Implications for the agro-innovation system

The agro-innovation system needs to proceed with a broad range of sustainability experiments as long as different perspectives on rurality and agriculture persist. Furthermore, it appears that moving intensive animal husbandry out of the rural area may be essential for its future potential for sustainability. Finally, technological solutions for sustainability issues incur a large risk of controversy, and therefore require more attention in terms of image management.