

## 6 The practitioners' quest for sustainable agriculture

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Practitioners have since long started their own quest for sustainable agriculture. The main message derived from the two cases that are reported here is: orientate us, facilitate us and give us responsibility, then we will use our own capacities and resources to go into the right direction. Policy makers and scholars are challenged to continue the quest together with practitioners.

### **Introduction**

In the Roadmap of Brouwer et al (2003), a line of thought is elaborated which could guide the quest for sustainable agriculture (see also chapter 2). We have tried to test this line of thought for its practical use. Starting-point was the idea that practitioners had already started their own quest for sustainable agriculture and that their experiences would offer food for thought.

We studied two cases through interviews and documentation: the environmental co-operatives "VEL & VANLA" and the innovation platform "Duurzame Meierij" (IDM, platform for a sustainable Meierij). In the aforementioned roadmap five basic questions have been identified: why, what, where, how much and how (see chapter 2). Here, we focused on the "how-dimension": how do practitioners strive for sustainable agriculture. Both cases have the intention of working towards sustainability, but as we focused on the "how-dimension" we did not actually test the sustainability claims. A full report of this study can be found in Cino (2004).

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### **Brief description of cases**

VEL & VANLA are two environmental co-operatives in the Friese Wouden (hereafter the Friesian Woodlands) in the Province of Friesland in the Netherlands. They were founded in 1992 and were amongst the first of their kind in the Netherlands. Environmental cooperatives are regional groups of agricultural entrepreneurs, including in some occasions citizens and other rural stakeholders (e.g. environmental organizations, local authorities, animal welfare groups). They aim to integrate environment, nature and landscape objectives into the farming practice from a regional perspective (Wiskerke et al., 2003). The Friesian Woodlands are a combination of small-scale and closed landscapes that are bordered by hedges and relatively open areas. Together VEL & VANLA have 209 members amongst whom 160 farmers and 46 landowners. These members are responsible for 3,550 ha. of land, mainly grassland used for dairy farming. VEL & VANLA strive for a more environmentally friendly dairy farming that actively integrates nature conservation and landscape management. Ecological and economical sustainability should go hand in hand and the relationship with the other stakeholders in the area is thought to be important.

Obstacles in the quest for sustainability, according to VEL & VANLA, are mainly found at the level of policy and its implementation, in the present knowledge system and in the remuneration for sustainable farm management.

The IDM is located in the Province of Brabant in the Netherlands in between the cities Eindhoven, s-Hertogenbosch and Tilburg. The platform strives for a sustainable Meierij (Duurzame Meierij), with a focus on the rural areas. Members represent a number of committees that deal with topics like agriculture, nature and environment and tourism and leisure. The platform checks projects using a model developed by Telos (Brabants Centre for Sustainability Issues) and in which three forms of capital are central: ecological, social-cultural and economical. The area is quite rich in different types of nature. This nature however is threatened by pollution and land use changes. Agriculture is under pressure. On the one hand (parts of) agriculture are seen as a main threat of nature and on the other hand agriculture is threatened by claims on land from surrounding cities.

Obstacles in the quest for sustainability, according to IDM, are mainly found at the level of policy and its implementation, in the price setting for sustainable products and in the perception and attitude regarding sustainability amongst citizens, consumers and the different stakeholders of the area.

### **Lessons for policy makers**

Both cases are challenging policy makers to better define directions, to create better preconditions, but above all to give more responsibility to the local areas and the local actors. Farmers and other actors will then take their responsibility and exploit their own innovative capacities to develop themselves into the right direction. There is a need for criteria to assess sustainability, but from which perspective should these be formulated? Should it be from the perspective of sustainable economic sectors (e.g. agriculture), sustainable areas or sustainable consumption? Governmental rules and regulations should be there to facilitate the achievement of objectives and not in the first place to exercise control.

Giving more responsibility to local areas is supposed to generate more creativity and innovation than prescribing general measures. The different levels of government are challenged to formulate the outline of such responsibility. They seek answers to questions such as:

- How can the democratic legitimacy of responsibility be organised?  
With whom should the government enter into a contract?
- How to combine such legitimacy with the suggestion that people who are actually implicated should play an important role as representatives of interest groups?

### **-Lessons for knowledge institutes**

Knowledge institutes, and Wageningen UR is mentioned explicitly, are expected to focus their knowledge development more on sustainability and to work less in a disciplinary way and more in an interdisciplinary way. Many within Wageningen UR will react by saying that they already work in an interdisciplinary way, focused on sustainability. Apparently this is not obvious to outsiders and consequently reflection on this self image is needed.

Knowledge institutes are also urged to better explore indigenous knowledge and to focus on the facilitation of learning by farmers and other actors in rural areas. The present knowledge system pays little attention to tailor made services for local clients or client groups. This means a challenge, not only for the institutes, but for policy makers and funding mechanisms as well.

### **Income and marketing**

How to recognize 'properly' produced products from products produced according to conventional practices? Both for niche markets and for local markets. Products can be labelled as sustainable, but consumers should not get confused by using too many different labels. There is a tendency for developing labels for many different qualities of products which are sometimes only slightly different. Consumers should be able to find the products they are interested in at easily accessible places. One-stop shopping is highly appreciated by many consumers and therefore sustainable products should be available in supermarkets or shopping centres.

Farmers should receive a fair remuneration for "green" or social services, but not as subsidy, but through products that can be accounted for. A regional fund might serve as an intermediary between producers and consumers of such services.

### **Human factor and relation with neighbourhood**

Awareness-raising regarding the need for sustainability is important. Different actors should all become conscious of the need for ecological sustainability and the fact that a free ride is excluded. How to achieve such awareness is not exactly clear. People within an area can be reached by tangible projects, but how to involve people

that live at distance? It was suggested that alliances with consumers (organisations) and retailers are needed.

### **Practical use of the "Roadmap"**

As for the "Roadmap" and its practical use, we concluded that the roadmap provided useful hints and practical questions. A number of tools for analysis have to be developed further.

In addition to the "how?" question, there is need for a "who?" question. Who should take the initiative and at which level?

### **References**

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