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Participatory policy development for regional sustainability of agriculture

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PARTICIPATORY POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR REGIONAL SUSTAINABILITY OF AGRICULTURE

Abstract

The EU Rural Development Policy framework is a result of complex interactions at different levels - European, national, regional and local. Ideally, the decision making process about its implementation should be shared by these different levels of governance. However, the implementation approaches vary between member states reflecting their individual governance models. This research examines the utilization of the 'bottom-up' approach for the development of visions for regional sustainability of agriculture and pathways to reach them in a model region in Central South Bulgaria – Bessaparski Hills area, which is a Natura 2000 zone, Important Bird Area and High Nature Value farmland.

Key words

Participatory Approach, Rural Policy Development, Regional Sustainability

Introduction

Bulgarian rural areas cover over 80% of the territory and 42% of the population and are at the doorstep of the 2014-2020 programming period of EU rural policy support. This is the first programming period for Bulgaria as EU member-state during the entire programming cycle – from the EU policy formulation to design and implementation at national level. The EU Rural Development Policy framework is a result of complex interactions at different levels - European, national, regional and local. Ideally, the decision making process about its implementation should be shared by these different levels of governance. However, the implementation approaches vary between member states reflecting their individual governance models.

The 'established' approach for development and implementation of Bulgarian rural policy is a typical top-down one: ministry experts develop a draft strategy, which then is discussed with national level stakeholders. The national level stakeholders comprise a wide range of farmers and agriculture producers associations, associations of advisory services and consultants, banks, leasing companies, as well as universities and research institutes and environmental non-governmental organizations. Despite this diverse group, local level interests are rarely taken into consideration during national rural development policy programming. At the same time, there is a growing concern among local communities and people that their voices are not being heard and that the national policies are not addressing their specific challenges and needs.

This research examines the utilization of the 'bottom-up' approach for the development of visions for regional sustainability of agriculture and pathways to reach them including by integrating them in national rural development policies and programmes. It is based on the High Nature Value Farming initiative studied in the framework of the 7th FP project "Farming transitions: Pathways towards regional sustainability of agriculture in Europe" (FarmPath¹). The model region is in Central South Bulgaria – Bessaparski Hills area, which is designated as Natura 2000 zone, Important Bird Area and High Nature Value farmland. The

¹ <http://www.farmpath.eu/>

challenge for participatory policy formulation for this area stems from the fact that Bessaparski Hills covers territories from five municipalities in two districts.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 1 is Introduction. Section 2 provides a short summary of the specific regional characteristics, including public participation experience in local development initiatives. Section 3 gives a brief description of the methods and data used. In Section 4, we analyse the visions for regional sustainability of agriculture and the suggested pathways to reach them. Section 5 summarizes the findings and conclusions.

Characteristics of Bessaparski Hills region

The study area is situated in a transitional zone between the lowlands of Thracia valley and the northern hills of Phodopi Mountains. It is designated as Natura 2000 zone, Important Bird Area and many of its agricultural areas are High Nature Value farmland. Administratively it is divided between two districts (NUTS 3 level) with the majority of the area falling within Pazardjik district and less than 20% of the area in Plovdiv district. At the lower administrative level, it falls within the boundaries of five municipalities (LAU1 level) – Bratsigovo, Peshtera and Pazardjik in Pazardjik district and Stamboliiski and Krichim in Plovdiv district (map 1). This poses a particular challenge as rural policy development and implementation is structured around the administrative units with the following key institutions (Draganova, Peneva, Kazakova, Mishev, 2012):

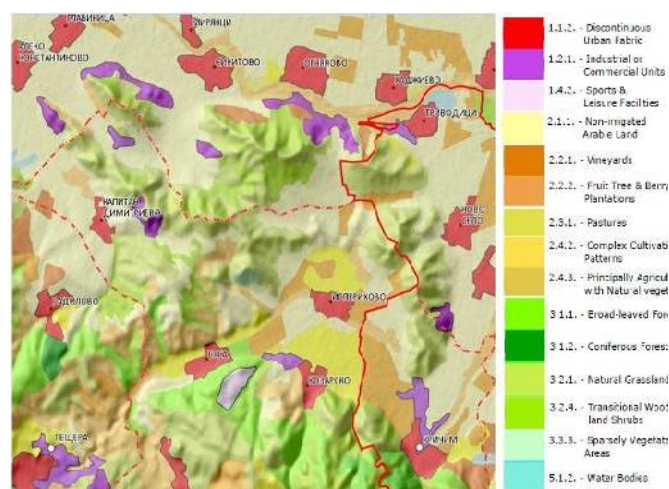
- 1) Local administration – municipal and village mayors, environmental and/or agriculture experts in the municipal administration;
- 2) Municipal offices of Ministry of Agriculture – receiving and filing applications for public support;
- 3) District offices of national administration – Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Agriculture Advisory Service in Pazardjik and Plovdiv; Ministry of Environment, Veterinary and Hygiene Authorities;
- 4) Other public bodies such as chitalishta, which organize cultural and traditional groups and events.

Map 1: Administrative setup of the Bessaparski Hills model region



Source: Kazakova, Y., 2013, Map of Bessaparski Hills model region administrative boundaries

Map 2: Corine Land Cover 2000 in Bessaparski Hills



Source: MRRB GIS System Security Division, <http://212.122.182.101>, accessed 10 January 2012

At a landscape level, it is a mosaic of land cover and land use as represented by map 2. The agriculture sector in Bessaparski Hills area is characterized by production and processing of fruits, vegetables and herbs and essential oils plants (including roses for rose oil) and livestock production and processing of meat and dairy products. The farming systems in Bessaparski Hills sections of the municipalities can be very different from the farming systems in other parts of these same municipalities. For example, in Bessaparski Hills in Pazardjik municipality we have small-scale fruits and vegetable farms and livestock grazing farms, while in the northern parts of the municipality, there are larger cereal producing as well as intensive dairy farms. Thus, in the municipal development strategy, which ideally is used to feed in national policy formulation, the interests of the smaller area's (Bessaparski Hills) small-scale farms are lost at the expense of larger areas and farms interests. When this is repeated in all five municipalities, Bessaparski Hills farms are forgotten altogether.

Additionally, Bessaparski Hills Natura 2000 site has no management body to look after the interests of its local population and the nature values it maintains. The villages of the study area are generally characterized as lively and populated which is largely due to the favourable geographic location and the proximity to large urban areas. However, the region is also subject to an ongoing decrease in the number of inhabitants. Two of the municipalities (Stamboliiski and Bratsigovo) initiated the establishment of Local Action Groups under the Leader programme. This initiated a process of involving and motivating local people to participate in policy formulation. Unfortunately, none of the two strategies were supported for implementation. Approximately, in the same period there was a big project, implemented by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB), which involved local people in the design and implementation of a Small Grants Scheme to support biodiversity-friendly farming practices and investments. The implementation of BSPB Grants Scheme was highly successful and has proven that the participation of local people in policy support formulation is both cost effective and efficient and enables longer-term sustainability of results (Kazakova, 2012). The research under the FarmPath project was conducted approximately one year after the end of both BSPB and Leader initiatives.

Method

The participatory approach utilized in the project comprised the following main stages:

1. Identifying initiatives at farm and regional level and studying their potential to provide viable models for farming in round-tables with the National Stakeholder Group. Each of the stakeholders proposed initiatives that he or she was aware of and considered appropriate for the project. The National Stakeholder Group and the research team then selected the most suitable ones for the study. At this stage, Bessaparski Hills model region was selected as a High Nature Value Farming area.

2. Identifying the key drivers and evaluating the sustainability of the selected High Nature Value Farming initiative in Bessaparski Hills during focus groups with stakeholders representing the full spectrum of people with rural interests - local farmers and young farmers, administrators, and consumers. The research at this stage was centered around the question: "What are your wishes for agriculture and other land based activities in Bessaparski Hills area in 2030?"

3. Specifying pathways and visions for sustainable agriculture, reflecting both regional differences and technological and social innovation needs for attaining the visions in mixed stakeholders focus group. At this stage, participants had to assess how possible institutional arrangements, support measures and socio-technical networks amongst actors within the farming community, policy, technology and wider society can lead to increased regional sustainability of agriculture.

4. The outputs were further refined in an iterative process of bilateral and multilateral stakeholder consultations. The aim was to involve participants in the ongoing discussions, identification and precision of proposals, leading to a higher level of awareness on the needed rural policy for their region.

5. At the end, a national stakeholder workshop was organized to refine and validate the national level policy recommendations developed on the basis of the Bessaparski Hills model.

Results

Three different visions for regional sustainability of agriculture were formulated during the participatory policy development exercise. Local and regional stakeholders casted their votes and emotions on “Agriculture based on modernized small and medium family farms caring about the natural and cultural characteristics and needs of the region alongside their farms’ economic viability”. Most of the participants shared that this was the *best vision* but the *least likely to happen*, as it contradicts both the current development trend and national policy documents – strategies and legislation.

The *least preferred*, but the *most likely to happen* vision and in reality, already happening vision was “Intensification of agriculture both in the lowlands and mountainous areas with a focus on economic efficiency respecting the minimal environmental requirements with dominating individualism among agriculture producers”. This was also the vision that was felt was mostly promoted by national rural and agriculture policies.

Despite this discouraging finding, the participants felt inspired by the approach and found the research project very useful for spelling out and formulating a common vision for their own region. Many of them expressed interest in disseminating their preferred vision and the necessary pathways to their fellow villagers as well as to regional and national policy makers. Another positive feedback to the research team was the willingness to organize follow-up activities and other common projects between researchers and stakeholders in order to develop further their skills.

Discussion

The main challenge in the process is balancing stakeholders’ and researchers’ perspectives and translate them in meaningful policy proposals. The first tend to get blocked by their immediate farm or legislation-related problems, while the second need to follow a

pre-defined scenario (not least in view of ensuring a cross-national comparability in an international research project).

Two key decisions of the research team made this balancing smooth and successful:

- 1) Involving experienced and knowledgeable facilitators for running the focus groups, round-tables and the final seminar.
- 2) Involving a well-accepted and independent regional expert for the establishment and maintenance of good contacts with local and regional stakeholders.

The participatory approach enables all stakeholders (including researchers) to adopt a more differentiated perspective, to understand better others' points of view and interests, and as a result to develop policy proposals acceptable by all. Last, but not least, it provides an excellent platform for networking between local farmers, consumers, policy makers, farm advisors, researchers and independent experts. The downside is that despite reaching a common agreement on the vision and the necessary policy measures as a part of this research, there is no administrative body, which could take it forward to national level and the responsibility is still diffused among the five municipalities' and two districts' authorities.

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