

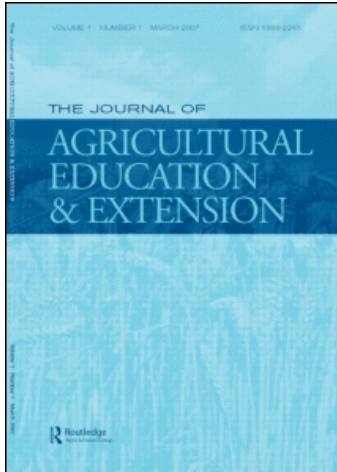
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Editorial

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Editorial

This Special Issue comprises seven papers presented at the Workshop 1.1 of the ninth European IFSA Symposium, held in Vienna, Austria (4–7 July 2010), titled ‘Innovation and Change Facilitation for Rural Development’ (convenors: A. Cristóvão and A. Koutsouris).

Given the increasing attention attributed by international organisations, national governments, development agencies, etc., to sustainable development (SD), particularly after the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), the Workshop invited papers reflecting theoretical work as well as case studies on sustainable rural development, from a variety of cultural and institutional contexts. The specific focus on innovation and change facilitation certainly echoes the emergence of ‘participation’ as a major force in development thinking and practice. Indeed, development theorists and practitioners have supported, for quite some time, the idea of and the need for social participation in development. This has been confirmed by the recognition that SD requires local action and the inclusion of non-state and non-scientific actors, implying consultation, capacity-building and empowerment of citizens (UNCED, 1992). The conceptualisation of sustainability as a process rather than a set of well-specified goals, or, in other words, as an emergent property of a ‘soft system’ (Roling and Wagemakers, 1998), along with the recognition that the term is highly dynamic, can be indefinite and highly contested (and has been adopted by different interests each defending their own discourse of sustainability), further underlines the crucial importance of ‘participation’.

Such a continuing participatory process of questioning, discussion, planning and engagement into appropriate action implies, and indeed is often found to be the case, the involvement of multiple actors in change processes thus establishing, based on their diverse logics and roles, a constellation of diverse relations and actions. In the context of agricultural and rural development, the need for interaction and dialogue between different actors and networks (Long, 1992) has been long pointed out (Chambers, 1993; Scoones and Thompson, 1994). However, although it is realised that flows of communication and exchange between different actors are extremely important, there is often a critical lack of communication and understanding between actors and networks (Koutsouris, 2008).

More specifically, extension discourse and practice have been changing, including the ideas of multi-stakeholder participation, social learning and networking. Despite the fact that the Transfer-of-Technology model (ToT) has a long history of innovations and increased effectiveness in food production, it has been proven limited when issues are complex and uncertain. Therefore, the model has been severely challenged by the understanding that innovation has to be seen, on the one hand, as a social as well as a technical, and, on the other hand, as a nonlinear and fundamentally interactive learning process (Leeuwis, 2004).

2 Editorial

Generally speaking, the overall understanding that SD requires a shift in the way development is approached and practised, as well as that real-world problems defy simplistic explanations, solutions and predictions, have led to the requirement to move across the boundaries of different scientific branches (interdisciplinarity) as well as between scientists and stakeholders (transdisciplinarity). It is worth mentioning here two among the most prominent ‘transdisciplinary’ approaches: ‘Mode 2’ (Gibbons et al., 1999; Nowotny et al., 2001) and ‘post-normal’ science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). Both address the need for new perspectives in situations characterised by irreducible uncertainties and emergent complexity and argue for increased democratic legitimacy (increased participation and transparency) and more open and integrative forms of knowledge production (interactive knowledge-making towards a more socially embedded and more closely tied to contexts of application science).

Nowadays, it is difficult to find development efforts that do not, one way or another, claim to adopt a ‘participatory’ approach and participatory techniques have become an obligatory part of development programmes and projects. However, not only is ‘participation’ itself a highly contested concept (see Koutsouris and Cristóvão, 2004) but, in practice, notwithstanding the projects’ ‘participatory discourse’, numerous obstacles have been proven to prohibit participation. Among them, a major one concerns scientism (i.e. the view that only science can generate knowledge), translated into experts’ attitudes that ‘they know best’ and thus have the monopoly of solutions which they aim to transfer to the local communities who by definition ‘know less’. In such cases ‘participation’ is meant to promote the legitimatisation and acceptance of already taken decisions—to convince ‘beneficiaries’ about what is ‘good for them’ (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000). This may have further repercussions, such as: perceived (on the part of the experts) commonality with respect to the problem as well as homogeneity of the community addressed (Quaghebeur et al., 2004), selective participation (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000) and ‘hard-issue’ bias (Mosse, 2001). As a result, in most such cases, projects fail. When people are offered specific ways in which they should ‘participate’ (they have to participate but this opportunity is offered by the ‘project’ under prescribed conditions) the ‘paradox of participation’ arises (Quaghebeur et al., 2004). In many other instances participation is reduced to methodological packages and techniques, with no philosophical or ideological meaning (Leal, 2008).

The Workshop convenors asked participating authors to address critical questions such as: What are the theories and concepts relevant to analyse innovation and change processes in the context of rural development? Which organisational forms (networks, partnerships, CoP etc.), methods (soft systems, participatory action research, strategic communication etc.) and tools (NICT etc.) have been used to promote collective action? What are the constraints to collective action? What are the results obtained in different situations? Of the 35 submitted abstracts, 24 were selected and respective papers were presented in the IFSA Symposium, following a peer-review process. Out of them, seven papers, which fit the particular scope and purposes of the Journal, are included in this Special Issue and, despite the fact that most of the papers critically discuss cases in the countries where the authors work, have a wider relevance for extension education in wider contexts. The versions presented here have been reviewed again after the Symposium; they are thus improved versions of the Symposium papers.

All papers assume a critical view of conventional extension models and practices and explore alternatives, offering theoretical reflection and/or empirical evidence from a variety of contexts (France, Finland, Nigeria, Wales and Vietnam). From a theoretical point of view the papers mobilise and link a broad set of concepts and ideas, namely on sustainability (Cerf et al.), communication and innovation (Leeuwis and Aarts), social learning (Morgan), social capital (Iivonen et al.), collective action (Mills et al. and Fabusoro and Sodiya), group-based extension (Schad et al.), communities of practice (Morgan) and entrepreneurship (Iivonen et al.).

The papers by Leeuwis and Aarts and Cerf et al. have a stronger conceptual nature. The first wisely combines a dense (but clear) theoretical analysis of communication and innovation theories, also presenting practical guidelines for change agents supporting/facilitating innovation dynamics. The aim of the paper, as the authors stress, is to integrate the major theoretical developments in both communication and innovation sciences into a 'reconceptualised view of the role of communication in innovation processes' (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011: 30). The paper by Cerf et al., based on an action-training approach, explores the ways advisers deal with the 'need to support farmers in developing practices with a positive contribution to sustainable development' (Cerf et al., 2011: 14). The authors argue that, in order to successfully encounter new professional situations, advisers have, on the one hand, to 'acknowledge their historically built professional models' (Cerf et al., 2011: 14) and, on the other hand, to develop new skills which will enable them to support farmers, as individuals or as collectives, in building both the vision of sustainable agriculture and the means to achieve it at a practical level.

The papers by Mills et al. and Fabusoro and Sodiya both use the theory of collective action as an analytical framework, in the first case 'to explore ways in which [agro-environmental schemes] can encourage and enhance the success of cooperative groups in delivering landscape resource management' (in Wales) (Mills et al., 2011: 68), and in the second to study local institutions governing the use of land resources and negotiating access to land and grazing resources in the Fulani agro-pastoralist culture of Nigeria. Both identify key success factors in collective action, specific to each setting. Mills et al., for instance, stress the aspects related to engagement, group characteristics, institutional arrangements and external influence.

The papers by Morgan and Schad et al. focus on learning issues in extension work. Morgan criticises the 'extension approaches that conceive of extension primarily in terms of knowledge transfer' (Morgan, 2011: 97) and underlines the importance of shifting the emphasis to social learning and participatory perspectives. As such, the author takes the Communities of Practice (CoP) model of social learning and explores its application to groups of farmers learning about organic agriculture in Wales. The paper provides evidence about 'the fluid nature of CoPs, and their essentially self-organising nature' (Morgan, 2011: 97) as well as that compeers (in the sense of attitudes to farm business, farming styles and understanding of what organic agriculture entails) associate and engage in social learning more readily, and thus provides hints for extension. Schad et al. present research work developed in the northern uplands of Vietnam, analysing the potential and constraints of group-based extension within a top-down and technically oriented setting. A key finding is that an 'appropriate balance between enhancing leadership and supportive collective

responsibility' (Schad et al., 2011: 83) is critical to people's engagement in and the sustainability of group work.

Finally, Iivonen et al. present a 'phenomenographic study' and provide the readers with elements on how entrepreneurs, in this case local food entrepreneurs in Finland, experience collaboration with researchers. The authors adopt 'as loose theoretical lenses an approach that combines social capital and entrepreneurial behavior' (Iivonen et al., 2011: 37) and assume that '[m]ore intense collaboration between research and development units could promote the learning and knowledge exchange essential for the future innovation potential of small firms operating in food production' (Iivonen et al., 2011: 36). The authors stress the importance of shared goals and trust as key facets of social capital in cooperation process as well as of informal peer-oriented learning by doing in real life contexts. Among the implications is the need for researchers to improve their ability to learn about and adjust their activities to entrepreneurial behaviour, thus to 'adopt an entrepreneurial learning approach in order to provide positive experiences that increase trust in collaboration' (Iivonen et al., 2011: 47).

ALEX KOUTSOURIS and ARTUR CRISTÓVÃO
September 2010

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