

Submitted for workshop no 3: LEARNING PROCESSES IN RESEARCH AND EXTENSION

# **The Development of Farmers' Dialogue: The Decision Making Process behind a Facilitated Learning Process in Swedish Agriculture**

M Ljung and A Emmelin<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Organisations and institutions within the agricultural sector in Sweden show a growing interest in participatory and collaborative learning and decision making initiatives in policy development. One such initiative is the Farmers' Dialogue, taken by the Federation of Swedish Farmers, LRF.

This paper examines how the Farmers' Dialogue was developed within LRF, and why a broader implementation of the approach failed. The two research questions are: *What importance has collaboration and mutual learning in the process of developing and implementing a collaborative concept and process in a large organisation?* And secondly; *Can a conceptual framework for collaborative learning be used in order to understand and analyse certain qualities of the decision making process?*

Our hypothesis is that a successful implementation of collaborative learning in traditional organisational cultures is dependent on the way these processes are developed. By using soft system as an analytical framework, as it has been developed by Wilson and Morren (1990), and collaborative learning as it has been applied by Daniels and Walker (1999), we critically analyse the Farmers' Dialogue, what happened, and why. We followed the development of the Farmers' Dialogue for more than three years and collected a lot of data, mainly by participant observation.

We conclude that if a sustainable agriculture is to be achieved in Sweden, a core competence among farmers and employees within the whole agricultural sector has to be their ability to learn. This case study shows that the use of collaborative learning approaches in Swedish agriculture in the future are highly dependent on the emergence of learning oriented cultures within the most powerful organisations. But as the case study shows this is a problematic shift in culture for LRF, and probably for governmental bodies and research organisations within the agricultural sector.

Our hope is that this and future studies will contribute to a better understanding of the potentials and obstacles of a broad implementation of collaborative learning processes within the agricultural sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors are affiliated to the Department of Landscape Planning, Ultuna, at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Anna Emmelin is a faculty teaching assistant and Magnus Ljung a PhD candidate. The research has been enabled thanks to funding from MISTRA (the research program 'Food 21: A Sustainable Food Production') and the Federation of Swedish Farmers. Corresponding address: Department of Landscape Planning, Ultuna, SLU, Box 7012, SE-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden (magnus.ljung@lpul.slu.se).

## 1. Introduction

Today's industrialised agriculture in Sweden is not sustainable: Negative environmental impact on water and soil quality, mismanagement of animals, loss of bio-diversity due to the disappearance of small farms, rural areas with social problems, a growing distance between producers and consumers, bad economical farm viability, and a democratic deficit in the farmer co-operatives. We could go on. The evidences is clear: We have to find a new direction.

In 1996 an initiative were taken by the Federation of Swedish Farmers, LRF. It came out of a perceived need to develop a new approach when working with sustainability and development issues among Swedish farmers. To understand the research questions asked in this paper one has to be aware of that the decision making process studied aimed at developing a collaborative learning approach, but that the decision making process itself was not explicitly focusing on shared learning. We have had the opportunity to follow the process closely for over three years with shifting roles and degree of involvement, e.g. as members of the management team, participating in the design process of the test dialogues, as trainers of process facilitators, and as participating observers. Thus, our strong involvement in the development work should be emphasised. Also, over the years the research methodology has constantly evolved.

In this case study we do not focus on the pros and cons of the dialogue-concept<sup>2</sup> developed in the project. Instead we elaborate how the development of the approach took place within LRF. The two research questions thus are:

- *What importance has collaboration and mutual learning in the process of developing and implementing collaborative concepts and processes in a large organisation?*
- *Can a conceptual framework for collaborative learning be used in order to create a better understanding and analyse the necessary qualities of a decision making process which objective is to implement new approaches for collaborative learning?*

Today there are many approaches, methodologies and methods which organisations can apply in order to build a more participatory and learning-oriented culture (Senge et al, 1995; Dukes, 1996; Walker and Daniels, 1997). Our focus is not to present these, but to analyse in what respect the criteria often applied in these approaches are important when developing a collaborative learning process which is designed to fit specific organisational circumstances<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Action, method and then theory?

To understand the specific circumstances for this research, we have to give some background information. It all started in 1996. At this time, the first author worked as an employee within one of the farmers' associations. Being an environmental co-ordinator he was asked to join a national environmental group within the Federation of Swedish Farmers. He was to represent his organisation in the management team of the new initiative. Later, when becoming a PhD-student in 1997, he changed his role in relation to the project. He still was a member of the management team, but now as a research student at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. One year later, in the summer of 1998, when the project changed focus, the second author was involved in the project. From the autumn of 1998 and on, both authors had still another role. They were to be responsible for the conceptual and practical development of a dialogue oriented approach involving farmers and the training of non-professional process facilitators.

It was not until the autumn of 1997 that the project became part of an already existing research project<sup>4</sup>, and integrated in the research studies of the first author. This somewhat unusual background description is important, because it have implications on both theory and method used. Obviously we were much more participants than researchers when working with the project. It was not until the project ended, in February 1999, that we approached the project solely from a research perspective. But in spite of this and ever since the project began in 1996 we have gathered data material such as drafts, notes, formal and informal documents, protocols, conducted interviews, and participant observations.

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<sup>2</sup> In this respect the Farmers' Dialogue will be analysed in other and future studies.

<sup>3</sup> Thus we assume that there is no approach, design or method that you easily can take and use for all problem-situations, if you want to be successful working with collaborative learning and participatory processes. Every process has to be adapted to the specific context and the questions in focus.

<sup>4</sup> The research project is Food 21, financed by MISTRA.

How is one to manage this situation as a researcher? How should one interpret the data, as well as the experiences made? Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994) distinguish between four levels of interpretation. Our aim is to critically analyse and reflexively interpret what happened during the decision making process and why. Thus we, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994) explains, tries to base our analysis on a premise that critical research has as much emphasis on other elements than solely on empirical, constructed data. These 'other elements' are our own experiences from working within and in close relation to LRF since 1994, and a basic understanding of and belief in what is important to keep in mind when discussing sustainable agriculture and collaborative learning. Our analysis could thus best be described as 'empirically grounded imagination' (Norén, 1990) and an 'emergent-spontaneous approach' with important elements of self-ethnography (Alvesson, 1999)<sup>5</sup>. More precisely, the analytical method used in this paper, to manage the problem of interpretation, is through a conceptual and analytical framework. A framework that both is our theoretical platform, as well as part of our method when analysing the empirical data.

The framework is based on Wilson and Morren's (1990) integration of the soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1981) and Kolb's learning theories (1984), but also the much later development and applications done by Daniels and Walker (1996; 1997; in press). Daniels and Walker have in their work integrated, among other aspects, the notions of team learning and learning organisations such as it has been described by Senge (1990). Daniels and Walker (in press) call their approach 'collaborative learning' and that is also what we have chosen to call the described ideal process that is the analytical framework<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, the decision making process was not facilitated in accordance with the analytical framework used. The optimal pre-conditions for a collaborative learning and decision making process were thus never consciously developed. To be sure, it was never even discussed within the management team. To conclude this brief presentation of the research approach:

- *The analysed decision making process* aimed to develop and implement collaborative learning processes, on a broad scale, within the Swedish farming community.
- *The analysed decision making process* was not itself characterised by the same collaborative learning approach that the management team wanted to develop for the farmers to participate in.
- *We use an analytical framework*, based on collaborative learning and decision making principles, in order to identify the differences between the analysed process and what we perceive as an ideal or rational process design.

### 3. An analytical framework to understand the decision making process

We hypothesises that the following assumptions or pre-conditions need to exist if a collaborative learning and decision making process is to be achieved and successful (described in figure 1):

1. People have different ways of constructing reality, which best can be understood as subjective multiperspectivity (Lüscher, 1990), a notion which has to be managed properly.
2. The participants have to have a normative interest in recognising the other, i e to understand and learn from the other, and to be open to changing their own beliefs (Kögler, 1999).
3. The participants have to believe that the best way of managing these two notions, as well as complexity, potential conflicts, and/or the inevitable trade-offs between actors, is through dialogue and deliberation (Isaacs, 1996; 1999).

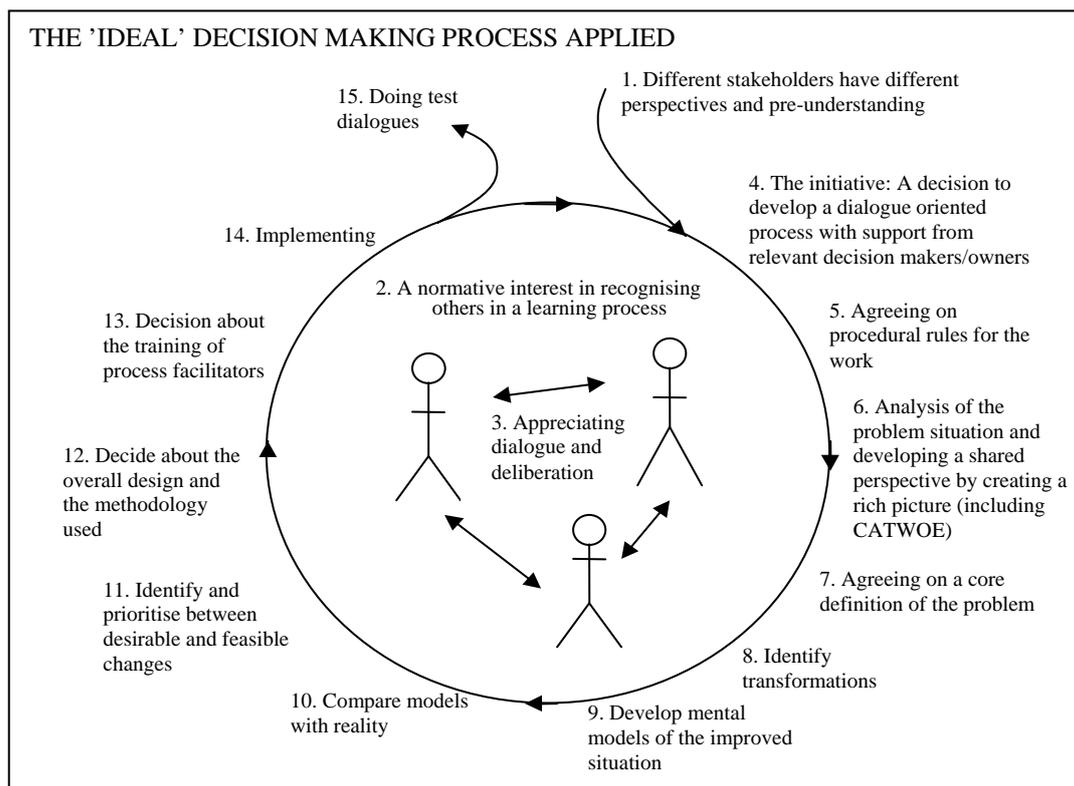
Without these basic assumptions and values, the potential for a successful collaborative learning and decision making process is low (see also Daniels and Walker, in press, for a discussion about collaborative potentials). What the analytical framework (figure 1) describes is in many ways the ideal and 'rational decision making process'. We realise that very few decisions are actually made this way (Bazerman, 1998), but in order to identify if or when learning opportunities disappear, group destructive behaviour enhance, or controversial issues creates grid-locks it function as an analytical framework. By comparing the 'ideal' with the real, one easier can identify the bottle-necks of group-processes like these.

Our analytical framework describes an 'ideal' process, and rational decision making process design. The different steps are modified so that they applies for the specific context for this case study.

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<sup>5</sup> By the same token the critique we give towards the project and the way it was managed, is also a critique toward our self. There is a lot of things that we, as being closely related to parts of the project, could have done differently knowing what we know today.

<sup>6</sup> See also how Bawden (1992) applies the term collaborative learning in a similar way, as well as the conscious distinction made in this paper to co-learning as summarised by, for instance, Lüdeking (1996).



**Figure 1.** A description of the analytical framework for how the (ideal) development of a relevant approach to complex and controversial issues could be understood, in this case the development of the Farmers' Dialogue (adapted from Wilson and Morren, 1990, and Daniels, 1999).

Studies with similar focus in natural resource management have been conducted by, for instance, Glasbergen (1995). We are also aware of the overlaps with research within such fields as public policy and participation (Yankelovich, 1991), adaptive management (Lee, 1993), environmental communication (Nitsch, 1999), adult learning (Kolb, 1984), organisational learning (Kim, 1993) and social learning (Reich, 1988). We will not elaborate those approaches in this article. Instead we ask: *Do we live as we learn?* The question is whether or not people developing these concepts uses a collaborative learning approach in their own work. We believe that such a study will help us understand the disconnection that often seems to exist between an explicitly expressed good will and the actual measures taken among many policy makers and educators in today's organisations.

#### 4. Five phases that defines the decision making process

One can identify five phases of the project.

##### 4.1 Phase I: Establishing the idea

It all started in June 1996 when a core group of environmental co-ordinators and educators within LRF, and affiliated associations met to discuss how to develop a stronger environmental policy and commitment within the federation as a whole. They were dissatisfied with the accomplishments regarding the Swedish farming communities contribution to national goals. In order to get acceptance for a broad and long-term development project a strategic and intensive lobbying activity started. Key authorities, both among employees and farmer electives, were informed and asked to support the ideas.

##### 4.2 Phase II: Formalising the project

As a consequence of these efforts the national congress of LRF in May 1997 decided: "to make the environmental program 'Heading toward the cleanest agriculture in the world' more tangible, in order to achieve an economically and environmentally sustainable food-production" and in accordance with the will of

the board of LRF do this *"through a broad and thorough process where many of the central and difficult issues are studied and discussed on all levels in both sides' of the organisation"* (LRF, 1997a).

Later, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1997, the board of LRF supported a strategy and action plan for the environmental work within LRF. This plan had been prepared by the environmental co-ordinators within LRF. It said: *"to conduct a broad 'hearing' in the organisation, which will integrate activities that will raise the knowledge level [among the farmers], and with the aim of developing a policy for a sustainable food production that could be presented at the annual national congress in 1999"* (LRF, 1997b). The outcome of this decision was the development project formally entitled 'The road to the market: Guidelines for a sustainable agriculture'. The outcome of the project was dialogue processes called the Farmers' Dialogue, which will not be analysed in this paper.

#### *4.3 Phase III: Developing a top-down approach*

The working group decided to focus on the development of dialogue documents<sup>9</sup>. These documents were to function as input for the farmers and employees participating in the 'dialogue processes'. Experts within LRF wrote the actual texts. A basic material was provided (and we must admit very good material from an informative point of view), for eight identified and highly specific areas. These eight areas had grown out of the discussions in the group, but followed mainly the way the environmental work was formally organised within LRF. Thus there were one document each on animal welfare, pest management, nutrient management, energy and infrastructure, waste, bio-diversity, biotechnology, and social issues (not specified).

It was during the third phase that the project was organised. The working group was formalised as the management team. In addition to the management team (which had in total eight meetings), there were a steering committee (three formal meetings), a working group (two meetings), and two reference groups (two meetings), and some consultants (LRF, 1999b). Of the two reference groups affiliated to the project, one was focused on the market, and consisted of representatives from different stakeholders, ranging from grocery chains, restaurants, governmental bodies, consumer organisations, environmental NGO's, and the Swedish organic control and labelling organisation. The second reference group was internal, and its objectives were to try to create links to the market functions in the different incorporated food processing associations.

#### *4.4 Phase IV: Developing a bottom-up approach*

At the 1998 national congress of LRF a decision was made which emphasised that through strong involvement and a democratic process the owners should *"continue to develop targeted information campaigns toward the members, and in collaboration between the associations build the organisational knowledge about the motives for and tools and methods for our environmental and animal welfare work"* (LRF, 1998). The national congress was thus supportive of the efforts done so far, but were still formulating the approach as a top-down more than a bottom-up approach.

By this time some participants in the management team felt that the original ambition of 1996 had been lost, that the group, the way they had approached the problem, were not able to create the necessary learning process, a democratic re-vitalisation of the organisation, or a dialogical development of guidelines for a sustainable agriculture in Sweden. But it was not until the early summer of 1998 that new ideas seriously were taken into account. The overall aim for the new approach were defined by the management team as to (LRF, 1998c):

- Create a creative and open process
- Raise the participants' awareness, knowledge and involvement in the development of sustainable food production
- Build on the participants' different motives for why they should engage in ongoing processes of change within the farming community
- Building on the participants' own knowledge, but at the same time search information from other sources.
- Create venues for farmers to be heard.

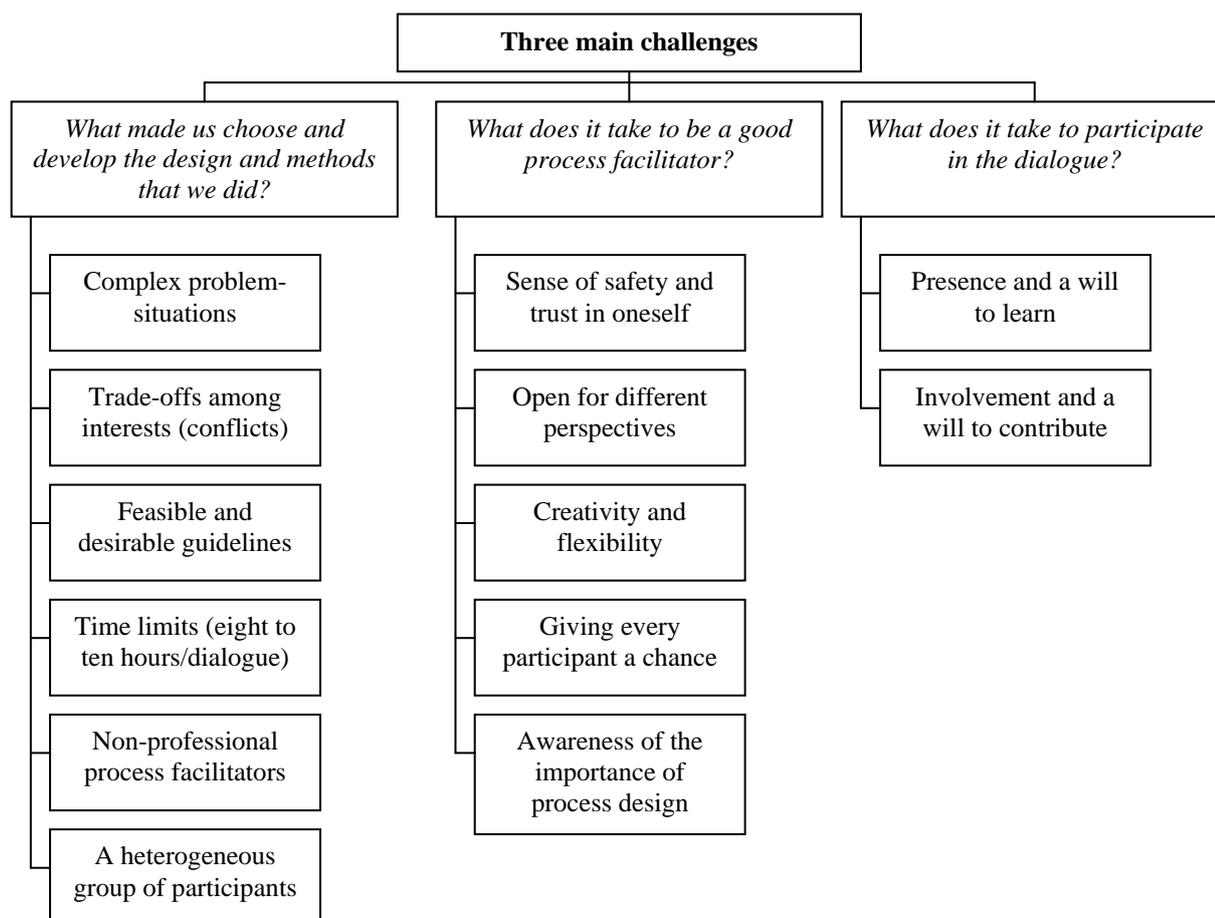
A design was presented for the management team in August 1998<sup>10</sup>. The decision to test the approach was made shortly after, and the planing for recruiting and training of facilitators begun. In short the challenges and arguments behind the chosen approach and design were as described in figure 2.

<sup>7</sup> The two parts of LRF are a) the individual members (app 120.000), and b) the incorporated associations (app 50) (LRF, 1999c).

<sup>8</sup> The steering committee of the project later revised this to the year 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Similar to the work by the National Issues Forums Institute in USA (NIFI, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> This design were developed by the authors of this paper in collaboration with the management team of the project.



*Figure 2. The identified challenges we met when developing a design fitting the collaborative learning approach.*

The final outcome was not theoretically congruent. Inspiration came from different strands of systems thinking and complex problem solving. Experiences from the Future Search methodology as described by Weisbord and Janoff (1995), soft system methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Wilson and Morren, 1990), and with a strong emphasis on critical judgement of systems boundaries (Flood, 1990 and 1999; Ulrich, 1996) shows the rather disperse approach. The ambitions were that the processes were to contain phases for the development of shared perspectives, envisioning, critical systems analysis and value-based action-planing. We also built on the concept of study circles which is very familiar to Swedish farmers (Ljung and Gibbon, in press). The final design was in many ways much more a result of the situational and institutional constrains, our own preferences and what the management team felt comfortable with, than a theoretically congruent and from a methodological point of view desirable concept. Starting with test dialogues, before a broader implementation were expected, we accepted these lacks, and perceived these tests as a learning opportunity.

The training of ten farmers and two employees took place in a two plus two day workshop in November and December 1998. The test dialogues were conducted through January and February 1999 by eleven of the trained facilitators. The design and methods were thus tested by twelve trained, but non-professional facilitators, and evaluated by the approximately 100 participating farmers and participating observers<sup>11</sup>. A follow up meeting were held in the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1999.

#### 4.5 Phase V: The end

For many in the project it came as a shock, when a working group directly under the board of LRF, the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 1999 decided to end the project. The decision was made before the final evaluation was finished or presented, and without notice to the project leader or anyone else in the management team. Since than the project has been thoroughly evaluated, and some of reports completed (LRF, 1999a; LRF, 1999b; Emmelin and Ljung, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> The use of participating observers is not unproblematic. There are an obvious risk that they will influence the group processes in the Farmers' Dialogues negatively. But working with test dialogues and with strong demands for a thorough evaluation, participant observers were accepted as a evaluation tool. We estimate that the observing participants attended 25% of the dialogue meetings.

We can summarise the five phases of the decision making process (figure 3):

<i>PHASE</i>	<i>TIME</i>	<i>MAIN ACTIVITIES</i>
I	June 1996 – May 1997	Lobbying, consolidate the working group
II	May 1997 – September 1997	Create an organisation, legitimise and create acceptance
III	September 1997 – June 1998	Develop and implement a top-down approach
IV	June 1998 – February 1999	Develop and implement a bottom-up approach
V	February 1999 -	Evaluate and re-organise the outcomes

**Figure 3.** *The five phases of the decision making process regarding the Farmers' Dialogue.*

## 5. Analysis

We use the framework presented in figure 1 to analyse the way the decision making process itself matched the values and methods that the management team wanted the final outcome (e.g. the Farmers' Dialogue) to be characterised by. Could the reason why the project was closed, even though the evaluations were positive, be explained by a lack of collaborative learning within LRF, and between the LRF and the project? Were the owners of the project involved in the shared learning and decision-making process?

### 5.1 Multiperspectivity and dialogue

How communication is conducted, in different settings and when using different methods, has been thoroughly studied. In the collaborative learning literature the concept of communicative competence is often used. Daniels and Walker (in press) define communicative competence by the following three dimensions. These dimensions are valid for all participants:

1. Adaptability, which means that competent communicators assess situations and when necessary adapt their expectations and behaviours accordingly. Nitsch (1999) describes this as “*that we, as environmental communicators, have to make the effort to change the perspective, i e learn how to look at the situation from the target group's point of view and try to see it through their eyes*” (p 10).
2. Appropriateness, which means employing communication behaviours that are appropriate to the specific situation, as judged by the participants and yourself.
3. Effectiveness, i e that competent communication behaviours are effective in achieving the shared communication goals.

One member of the management team expressed the overall conversation climate as: “*Few groups [in my earlier experience] have been able, the way we have, to be this open, and the project has benefited from it. There hasn't been any strong positioning.../... The will to develop new ideas has been fantastic!*”. Accordingly, the adaptability and appropriateness of the communicative behaviour among the participants in the management team in general were good. In our observations most participants had the basic communicative competence needed. But the effectiveness did sometimes suffer. The fact that some members did not participate in every meeting, and that some sent substitute members, contributed to a rather repetitive discussion.

One member of the team said: “*Perhaps have we been to similar. We have sometimes had a hard time to keep our discussions on track, to work in a structured way*”. Another comment were that “*the management team have had good discussions and good meetings, but it has been extremely complex issues, and my question is if everyone have been able to be aware of everything. Not even the ones that have been involved in the group since the start seem to know every aspect that is going on*”. Generally the members of the management team

appreciated the existence of different perspectives which were expressed in dialogue and discussions. But at the same time the last quote suggest that at least some members of the management team did not understand the importance of learning. Learning begins with the admission that you do not know everything. This falls back on the notion of multiperspectivity and the importance of having a pluralistic view on learning and knowing (Flood, 1999). An analysis mindset, the will to control the process and know as much as possible, become problematic when the problem situation is ambiguous and with uncertain outcomes.

If the internal communication in the group was good and in many respects could be characterised as the first step to 'learn the way towards the ideal speech situation' (see also Dukes, 1996, p 160), the external communication, with powerful actors outside the management team, was completely different and consciously strategic. The management team had no real power to implement the ideas that were developed. This led to a strategic communication externally. The way the management team tried to create acceptance and an understanding – "how to make them buy our ideas" – were an issue that was discussed back and forth on many meetings. A majority of the members of the management team were afterwards convinced that "we haven't been able to communicate the benefits with the project". But the problem could also have been that there were no will (no normative interest) among the external decision makers to recognise the work that the management team did, i.e. that they would not listen and learn from the knowledge and experiences developed in the project. As one team member expressed it: "To do something completely new in a non-traditional way is hard. One tend to meet an old fashioned thinking.../.../... The decision makers within LRF have given the word 'dialogue' a new meaning [irony]".

The kind of communicative distortions described in the literature such as struggle for power, polarisation of conflicts, dominating individuals, unconscious destructivity, group think, and legitimisation were not present (we are aware that our interpretation of the group processes are rather naive in this respect, but for an overview see Hallgren, forthcoming). We will only briefly discuss the problem of representation and the discrimination of knowledge.

#### *The problem of representation*

The problem of representation has been described by Glasbergen and van der Veen (1995). In co-operative associations where there are many actors who represent a certain group or sector it's important that everyone is represented. This is an unwritten democratic rule and a strong moral value. The rationales are seldom the need for local or specific knowledge, rather it's about the rights and interest of the different groups to be heard. Thus the way managers or electives in co-operatives tend to get involved in these management teams and steering committees are as a representative for a specific interest group. Thus what immediately could be seen as a perfect example of representative democracy can also give rise to a strategic behaviour and polarisation.

#### *Discrimination of knowledge*

Perhaps the most obvious example of discrimination of knowledge was between substantial and procedural knowledge. When working to develop a collaborative learning and decision making process it's obvious that one has to have as much knowledge about the importance of process design, as about the 'content' of the test dialogues that were to be arranged. But for some people procedural knowledge is not perceived as 'real' knowledge. It is too soft, and too abstract. As an example we can mention that when the dialogue documents were discussed the team mainly talked about the content and the lay-out, not in which context the documents ought to be used or what effect they would have on the learning process.

Related to these aspects, one question that comes to mind is whether or not the use of procedural rules had helped. Ideally a procedural rule helps the participants in a group process to commit to how they desire to relate to each other and how they desire to work as a group. Procedural rules are often used in consensus approaches or in mediation processes. In the work with the development of the Farmers' Dialogue procedural rules were not discussed at all. Our analysis is that it could have helped, but we are not that sure that it would have solved the above mentioned distortions. The main reason for us being hesitant is that such rules do not manage group think, representativeness or discrimination of knowledge, if the group from the very beginning is too homogenous, organised on representational principles, and if the awareness or knowledge about procedural issues is lacking.

#### *5.2 Rich pictures and core definition*

Did the communicative competence in the management team create a foundation for the development of a rich, systemic picture of the situation that were to be improved with the Farmers' Dialogue? In order to systematise the analysis in this respect we use 'the progress triangle' as described by Daniels and Walker (in press). The 'progress triangle' shows how substantial improvements in complex and controversial issues are dependent on the procedures which one uses, and the relationships that emerge among the participants. Without a process that

manage conflicts and complexity, and without strong relationships between the involved participants, the potential for tangible improvements of the situation is small.

The decision making process presented in this paper is seen as a human activity system as described by Checkland (1981) and Wilson and Morren (1990). In order to understand such systems they both employ CATWOE as a mnemonic device. This is helpful when finding what part of the rich picture of the situation that the management team did not fully take into account. Applied on this specific case CATWOE could be understood as (the system in question is the decision making process):

- *Customers* – people and organisations that were to be affected by the function of the system. The most important category was of course the farmers and members of LRF, but also the stakeholders represented in the reference groups, e.g., environmental organisations and food processors etc.
- *Actors* – are the ones responsible for performing activities needed to make the system function properly. The management team and the steering committee of the project were the main actors.
- *Transformation* – the purpose of the system, or the decision making process, was to develop a facilitated and dialogue-oriented approach which would help farmers develop guidelines for a sustainable agriculture in Sweden.
- *Worldview* – is the values and basic assumptions of the stakeholders. These were discussed, but very seldom systematically deliberated at the meetings.
- *Owners* – are the people with power within the situation, e.g., the ones with decision authority over the system. In this case study the owners were the decision makers outside the management team, for instance the board of LRF and executive groups of different farmer associations within the Federation.
- *Environment* – is the context in which the decision making process took place.

When analysing the decision making process it becomes evident that the management team and the steering committee had an understanding of the purpose of their work, the most important actors involved, and also the environment in which the process took place. The farmers, being the most important customers, were not invited in the management team, but they still were represented through the steering committee. Thus, the biggest problem was a *lack of awareness of who the real owners were and the importance their involvement*. If the management team had used CATWOE as a methodology in their work, this problem had probably been obvious and necessary measures could have been taken accordingly. There are several empirical evidence that a more thoroughly worked through apprehension of their problem situation would have helped the management team.

One example is the dramatic shift that occurred between phase three and four of the project was a shift mainly in the emphasis the management team put on procedure and relationships in the Farmers' Dialogue approach. The fourth phase emphasised such aspects as procedure, sharing knowledge, involvement, values, visions, and the right to be heard. But the shift in focus created problem with the implementation of the new ideas. One team member said: *"It is clear that one [the board of LRF and the steering committee of the project, e.g., both the owners and some of the actors in the project] has not understood the information from the project. The information has not been tangible enough"*, and another asked: *"Perhaps the development of these methods have been too abstract?"*. At the same time some perceived the change of focus as necessary and also hard to predict: *"The process of change, from the production of a dialogue document toward a focus on the educational process as such, took a long time but that was also necessary. During the process we gained new insights and it was in many way an innovative work. But the fact that it took time, contributed to the distrust for the project among the decision makers [e.g., owners]"*.

A core definition of the problem situation was never formulated. The disappointment in the management team was widespread over the fact that no well defined goal were given to them from the start, and that the objectives of the whole project still were obscure. Many statements from members of the management team mirrors these general attitudes: *"The problem was that when our project were discussed at the board meeting in September 1997, it was part of the whole environmental strategy for the federation. This lead to a very general request from the owners to the management team"*, and that *"one should be very clear over that the commission exists and what it exactly means. When we didn't get our own budget the whole project also had a very diffuse status in the organisation"*, and finally that *"the reason why the implementation hasn't worked within the board is that wrong people have been representing the board in the project"*. It thus never occurred among the members of the management team that they themselves could develop a core definition of the problem. Its obvious that the management team did not use their learning potential even though they had a communicative competence to do it. At the same time it is not sure if this have had helped. The conflicts were not so much within the management team, as between the management team and other parts of the organisation. Our conclusion is that the main reason for closing the project was that the 'real' owners of the decision making process were not involved in a shared learning process.

The fact that the groups did not realise that they were lacking basic knowledge can partly be explained by the notion of heuristics (Bazerman, 1998). What happened was that when the groups believed that they had understood the problem well enough, often based on an immediate perception and pre-understanding, the groups tended to immediately start generating solutions. If we use our analytical framework it's like 'jumping' from defining the problem to generating solutions without thinking about what the consequences are. In everyday life this is something natural. We need 'rules of thumb' in order to make everyday life easier, but when it comes to complex and controversial issues we have to stay in the phase of reflection and conceptualisation for a while. The role of a facilitator is partly to keep the group in the phase of abstract conceptualisation a bit longer than the participants themselves often perceive as necessary. Altogether this lack resulted in that no rich picture where developed by the group.

### 5.3 The final approach, design and methods

In the spring of 1998 the group perceived it as important that the test dialogues started as quickly as possible. If the management team so far had had hard time being a learning team, the time limit, together with the limitations in decision space and economical resources, now created a sense of crisis (Senge, 1990). It was with this history and in this environment that the final development of the Farmers' Dialogue took place<sup>12</sup>. When the design and suggested methods were presented there was at first a lot of scepticism. Questions were raised, not regarding the design as such, but about the practical implications and the possibility to work it through, and there were also strong doubts regarding the farmers' ability to, by themselves, manage to formulate guidelines based on their own knowledge. One member summarised the mixed feelings that many had when he said: "*I thought that the presented method were very ambitious, but perhaps I was a little sceptical that it would take three whole days to go through the process. Perhaps it also would be too hard to involve many farmers, why perhaps only the already interested and knowledgeable would participate*". In many ways the scepticism expressed was well-grounded and important to take into account, but it also shows the uncertainty and mixed feelings that many had, as well as the lack of involvement of practitioners (e.g., farmers and employees) in the development of the concept. They liked the idea and approach as such, but had a hard time believing that it would be possible to implement it. These doubts created problems when arguing for a broad implementation of the concept within the whole organisation.

### 5.4 Test dialogues and the question of a broader implementation

What were the outcomes of the test-dialogues? The results from the evaluation shows that the Farmers' Dialogue was appreciated by the participants and that the process resulted in suggestions for tangible guidelines in the deliberated strategic areas (i.e. nutrient management, pest management and animal welfare) (Emmelin and Ljung, 2000). Overall it was clear that a collaborative learning and decision making process among the participating farmers were achieved through the Farmers' Dialogue (LRF, 1999a). To elaborate the outcomes of the test dialogues is not the focus of this paper, but it will be discussed in forthcoming publications.

### 5.5 The final decision

Officially three main reasons were put forward why the project was ended:

1. The project ought to be more integrated into already ongoing and strategic projects (such as 'the Farm Entrepreneur').
2. The concept had to be broadened, in such a way that it integrated the whole food chain in one and the same collaborative process.
3. The initiatives taken on national level has to be few and easy to communicate in order to get the farmers' attention. Working with a broad dialogue process to develop guidelines for a sustainable agriculture would create confusion among farmers, when LRF at the same was trying to implement a more entrepreneurial attitude and initiative among the members.

All these rationales are valid, and sound reasonable. But according to one key informant the 'unofficial' reasons why the project was ended was "*a basic disbelief in the project, that it was developed and managed by the 'environmental people', that one didn't recognise oneself in the project [i.e. one's policy and programs], and that the concept had so far been hard to communicate*". One member of the management team referred to the general attitude among the board members as: "*The 'environmental group' could not have done anything which have to do with market driven business development*". Another team member said: "*The probable reason for why they ended the project is that they aren't that interested in environmental issues as they say. To be that inconsequent will sooner or later hit back*". These might all be very striking explanations for why the project was closed, and support our belief that it was the lack of involvement and interest from the owners that indirectly made the project end, even though it was evaluated positively.

<sup>12</sup> This final design was developed by the authors of this paper, on commission from the management team.

A good will and strong beliefs about organisational democracy, local involvement and environmental work are not enough. Economical success in a short term market seems to be more important and deeply integrated in many stakeholders pre-understanding of what enables a sustainable development and organisational survival. It seems to us that some positions were fixed and decision taken before the test dialogues were conducted and evaluated. The decisions were later rationalised based on opinions and rumours. As such the decision was an expression of power.

## 6. Conclusions and implications

There are some general conclusions to be drawn. First of all its obvious that the decision makers that needed to be involved in the process were not. Decision makers with interest in and power to either support or work against the initiative. Thus, the potential to achieve systemic change was almost none from the very beginning. The decision making process could thus best be described as a series of hardly facilitated dialogues among representatives of different interests, i.e. a systematic learning process. The lack of involvement of key decision makers created a situation where the conflicts arose between the management team and other parts of the organisation. Even though the conflicts were managed constructively within the management team, the conflicts between the group and the surrounding world grew stronger the more the team developed their ideas without any involvement from other parts of the organisation.

Secondly, we are quite sure that this situation is not unusual. Ad hoc-solutions on emerging problems can not create a learning process that enables successful management of complex and controversial issues. Instead people get disappointed and exceedingly passive, the interaction becomes more constrained, time is perceived to run out, and one starts to vacillate about the bounds of the decision space etc. Instead of a learning team, we have a management team, and perhaps sometimes even crisis team (Senge, 1990).

Thirdly, we believe that it is not until decision makers within all different parts of the Federation of Swedish Farmers, wish to bring about systemic change, that the potential for initiative like this will be successful within LRF. But there seems to be some new openings. Some representatives within LRF have started to discuss how the experiences made can be integrated in other, already ongoing projects. Although we have to be cautious and not believe that its just a question of timing and implementation techniques. It could as well be a question of a perceived threat towards a dominating discourse in industrialised agriculture<sup>13</sup>.

Fourthly, the awareness in the management team of the importance of a critical judgement of systems boundaries, was lacking. If the management team consciously had worked with such issues, it is clear that the understanding of their own potentials of being successful would have grown. But we also believe that such a critique would have put forward a better understanding of the management team for their own need to work with a collaborative learning approach.

We thus conclude that a good will and a basic communicative competence within the management team was not enough in this project. The management teams work can not be characterised as a systemic learning process. In such a situation, and where the support from the decision makers was weak, the potential for creating and implementing a successful concept is low. It is sad, because the farmers that participated in the test dialogues appreciated it and many of the participants in these dialogues could thus not understand why the project was closed.

At the same time we are convinced that the process will continue, but probably somewhere else, and from other initiatives. As one member of the management team puts it: *"We will never reach the goal. It's a process"* and another added by saying that *"it has been the right time to do this work. Dialogue and process is important if we are to work from the perspective of the farmer, with the farmer as owner of this organisation"*.

If sustainable agriculture is a learning process, a core competence among farmers have to be their ability to learn. By providing them with an opportunity to learn, by creating venues, we also enables farmers in Sweden to build

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<sup>13</sup> With a growing democratic deficit in society and a situation where farmers at best are treated as 'clients', given advice from strongly specialised experts, and at worse as 'consumers' left to the advice from specialised salespersons, we see a deregulation, de-democratisation, and social collapse of many rural areas in Sweden today. But the growing counter-discourse, formulated as a stronger more participatory democracy and a collaborative learning and decision making approach to shared problems in all parts of society, is adding more and more tangible experiences for a sustainable development of agriculture. The farmer as 'citizen' (as much as farmer), as well as the extensionist as facilitator (as much as expert) are two concrete areas of relevance here (see also Barber, 1984; Kemmis, 1990; Röling, Jiggins and Leeuwis, 1998; Oelschlaeger, Taylor and Bavington, 1999).

their own capacity regarding how continuous and life-long learning actually could be achieved in the future. But this is *as important for policy and decision makers within the farmers co-operative and other organisations*. The possibility for adapted venues to be developed is small if there is no broad and basic understanding among people with decision authority and power. The case study has shown that the future use of collaborative learning approaches in Swedish agriculture is much dependent on the development of a learning oriented culture within the dominating organisations. What we have seen as problematic for LRF, is probably as problematic for the governmental bodies and research organisations working within the agricultural sector.

There is a need to develop our understanding of the social psychological dynamics of the decision making processes in organisations, especially those trying to achieve systemic change. We already now a lot about how the ideal learning and decision making process should be designed. But how often does these conditions exist. We believe that there is a great need to develop operative models based on today's institutional and organisational structure in Sweden. Conceptual models are not enough. Many good initiatives seems to end, when the facilitation stops or the projects run out of financial support. When working with the described decision making process we have found that the following doubts and questions often arise. They are, we believe, also relevant when discussing areas for future research with a social psychological, communicative and interactionistic focus:

- How could we better apply techniques of critical judgement of systems boundaries from both the perspective of the individual learner and the group?
- What operational, and thus context specific, models could be developed by management teams in order to manage the often very constrained situations they work under?
- Is it possible to work successfully with collaborative learning and decision making processes on many system levels in a big federation or organisation?
- What strategies could be developed that enables grass-root initiatives, with no resources, no support and very little time, to be successful *within* corporate organisations?
- Is it at all possible within existing ideologies and dominating discourses to believe that systemic change on a broader scale is possible?
- How to get access, as a researcher, to these very problematic processes within organisations? How to study processes from a collaborative learning perspective, which are not designed and facilitated according to 'the rules'?

For us the desired outcome – the Farmers' Dialogue – represent more than many other initiative within the farming community in Sweden today, the core of the integration between the three overall aims of LRF. These aims are a) sustainable agriculture, b) economical viability and c) a growing and active member- and ownership group. Its when, in democratic process like the ones used in the Farmers' Dialogue, we are able to integrate the ecological, social and economical aspects of sustainability, create new relationships between people and organisations, and learn to manage change according to basic democratic values, that we have come closer to a sustainable development of Swedish agriculture. Its obvious that the time for radical re-orientations and innovations in the policy arena isn't here yet. But we are convinced that the time will come.

## 7. Final arguments

We will end by summarising why processes such as the Farmers' Dialogue is important (as well as other collaborative learning processes in natural resource management). We do this by making ten statements, which supports the idea of collaborative learning and decision making processes in Swedish agriculture. Together they build the arguments that the management team somewhat lacked when trying to implement their ideas among decision makers within LRF and its affiliated organisations:

- The Farmers' Dialogue is a venue for dialogue and deliberation about difficult issues regarding our common future, which all will be of great importance for Swedish agriculture and for every member of the Federation of Swedish Farmers.
- The Farmers' Dialogue is an approach that helps us manage the complexity created by the uncertainties and relationships that construct today's agriculture.
- The Farmers' Dialogue helps us develop site-specific and sustainable improvements to sustainability problems.
- The Farmers' Dialogue develops our ability to manage conflicts and trade-offs between interests and diverging values.
- The Farmers' Dialogue raises the farming community's and the farmer association's collective competence, which is an important investment for the future.

- The Farmers' Dialogue contributes to a democratic re-vitalisation of the Federation of Swedish Farmers.
- The Farmers' Dialogue helps us develop cost-effective and successful sustainable solutions to today's problems.
- The Farmers' Dialogue gives the participants an unique opportunity to share their visions, goals and aspirations with colleagues, which will strengthen the sense of community in the organisation.
- The Farmers' Dialogue is wanted and demanded by those who have participated so far.
- The Farmers' Dialogue is a first step to get needed and deliberated experiences and thus a potential to develop context specific approaches in Sweden, something that has been done in many other countries, but where Sweden is a step behind.

Most important of all, it is not until the ones developing these concepts within the agricultural sector, approach the problems according to the same principles that they want others to do (i.e., to live as you learn), that we will be able to create sustainable rural livelihoods in Sweden.

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