

PUBLIC GOODS AND PRIVATISED EXTENSION - THE ROCKY ROAD TOWARDS AGRO-ENVIRONMENTAL EXTENSION

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Abstract

Ten years after privatising agricultural extension in Brandenburg (North-eastern Germany) the political and economic conditions for integrating public goods issues have taken a change for the worse. The precarious financial and institutional structure of agro-environmental projects, government's loss of influence on extension strategies and contents, and a lack of linkages between important regional and local organisations are characteristics of the so-called "Brandenburg Path" of agriculture and extension.

Based on the situation analysis in two model regions of the GRANO research-programme "Approaches for Sustainable Agriculture in the North-eastern Brandenburg", the paper shows how farmers and extension workers view questions of sustainability, policy-instruments, and the chosen way of extension. Strengths and weaknesses of the privately organised extension system in Brandenburg will be analysed particularly in view of public goods issues. The focus is laid on linkages and funds, the main shortcomings to be overcome within Brandenburg. Looking at Dutch extension experiences, allows to identify some of the reasons for shortcomings within the Agro-environmental Knowledge System of Brandenburg.

Keywords: Brandenburg, privatised agro-environmental extension, knowledge transfer, network conditions

Introduction

The idea of privatising the agricultural extension system in Brandenburg, formerly part of the GDR and now a "new federal state" of Germany, was born in 1991. Looking back, experiences are mixed at best. In particular, feasible solutions to transferring public goods issues within a commercial setting did not evolve. In this paper impediments and reasons for this development are identified. The paper starts with the political and economic conditions that have shaped the way in which the government's strategic concept - the so-called "Brandenburg Path" - has been implemented. Following the re-unification, extension in the former GDR had to be totally re-organised, new structures had to be created, new visions and objectives had to be formulated. All this under difficult economic conditions: serious constraints of the state budget, low capital endowment of the farming sector, high levels of liability and indebtedness of farmers.

The view of the main actors, i.e. farmers and extension personnel, on the question of sustainable development is presented under the assumption that this is another decisive factor. Privatised and largely commercialised extension is demand driven and, in case this demand is weak or even missing, ways and means have to be found to integrate ecological knowledge into the knowledge system. This integration is, however, impeded by the fact that strong linkages are lacking and that there are no built-in stimulants to create or strengthen such linkages.

Within the interdisciplinary research programme "GRANO" a number of activities have been tested which aimed at the infusion of agro-ecological topics into the existing extension system. It would have been unrealistic for the research project, financed by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education for a five year period (1997-2002), to try to change major framework conditions. Rather, attempts were made to change parts of the system by introducing innovative themes and approaches: Relevant knowledge and knowledge sources were identified, linkages were established, exemplary ways of knowledge exchange tested. This approach had been chosen on the basis of two hypotheses: First, that under the given conditions of agricultural policy and actors' attitude towards sustainability, improvements with regard to the integration of environmental issues into agricultural land use are possible. Secondly, exemplary innovative approaches based on a participatory philosophy are sensible and realistic ways to introduce a "bottom-up" change.

1. Framework for agro-environmental extension

1.1. The "Brandenburg Path" - a road to success?

An integrated and differentiated agro-environmental policy ascribes to agriculture more than just a productivity function. In fact, it explicitly states that ecological functions receive equal attention (Pfadenhauer & Ganzert 1992, SRU 1994). This is in contrast to the agricultural policy in the former German Democratic Republic (now the so-called "new federal states") where the strategic policy goal was autarchy from the world market. Food and raw materials were to be produced locally at almost any cost - economic and ecological. Consequently, dramatic changes in land use and farming systems occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, including the separation of intensive crop production from large scale animal production as well as the creation of huge homogeneous plots. This, together with other measures such as reclamation of land by drainage, caused noticeable environmental damage (Ehlers 1991, Haber 1993). Even today, farm managers in the GRANO project region of Uckermark/Barnim attribute current environmental problems to the former socialist agricultural policy.

In 1993, Werner & Dabbert, considering local yield potentials, predicted dramatic changes for the agricultural sector in Brandenburg. They calculated that only 15% of the agricultural land would be kept in use in the long run. The state's ministry of agriculture viewed this process as a change towards more entrepreneurship - based on private ownership of the means of production and subject to market mechanisms. The ministry's agrarian policy programme - the so-called "Brandenburg Path" (MELF 1992) - is described as an economic, social, as well as ecological programme using a bottom-up approach and relying on the active role of rural communities. The objectives are to ensure viability of farms, support positive social changes, and safeguard the cultivated landscape of Brandenburg.

In theory, rural actors were meant to be in charge of this process, complemented by agricultural support programmes. These included policy instruments in order to stimulate and finance environmentally sound activities. "Good farming practices" are taken for granted and farmers do not receive extra payments. Additional activities aiming at sustainability may be subsidised and thus have a positive effect on farmers' income. The sheer lack of state counterpart funds in Brandenburg may, however, lead to situations where relevant EU-programmes can not be co-financed.

In the GRANO situation analysis (survey based on qualitative interviews, 1998-1999) we found that farmers no longer believe in the "Brandenburg Path" as a successful collective strategy.

Most respondents were disillusioned and deplored the high dependency of their farm management decisions on external policy frameworks, including support programmes and subsidies. Respondents included 11 farm managers in the Barnim region, 16 in the Uckermark

region, and 10 in the Elbe-Elster region. (For results and methodology used see: Siebert et al. 1999, Boeckmann et al. 2002.) They particularly criticised the lack of consistency with regard to subsidy programmes, the frequent and unexpected changes in subsidy areas, as well as the short duration of contracts that minimise farm-planning security. The low capital endowment as well as the political measures, which are perceived as highly risky, seriously impede the implementation of sustainable land use practices. According to the farmers, payments for ecological services are too low in Brandenburg, compared, e.g., to the neighbouring states. In addition, the lack of co-ordination, information and common decision-making within and between different government and non-government agencies are confusing not only for farmers but also for extension workers. The application process for subsidies is unduly complicated and may deter potential users.

As a reaction, two main strategies are followed by farmers:

- Trying to be less dependent on subsidies by becoming competitive in global markets. This is typical for large enterprises which in some cases extend their businesses to Poland and other Eastern European countries. Information needs are satisfied by using modern media and contacting progressive farmers and consultants in Europe or even overseas. Environmentally sound innovations are adopted if they are economically promising.
- Trying to find alternatives to the traditional system of production. Farmers, especially those with less fertile and leased land, change to extensive land use, in-field segregation, production of non-traditional crops, tourism. They are ready to provide environmental services but expect to be remunerated by local or state authorities.

1.2. Farmers' perception of environmental issues

To most farmers environmental problems are neither a matter of priority nor are they explicitly denied. Rather, they are seen as closely connected with the political, economic, and social problems mentioned above. The rather fragile economic situation of the farms and concerns about continued existence - in some cases due to the advanced age of farm managers - may explain why environmental issues are seen as less pressing. Problems of an economic and social nature, such as temporary or insecure employment conditions, high rate of rural migration, low capital endowment, and high percentage of leased farmland, are seen as directly threatening the future of rural areas. This does not imply that farmers are unaware of environmental problems. On the contrary, when explicitly asked they were very well able to pinpoint regional, local, as well as farm level problems. These observations matched fully with the views of researchers concerning potential environmental risks. The difference was in perception not of facts but of seriousness and thus concerned priorities.

Another important point with regard to farmers' consciousness of environmental problems concerns their judgement on the farming practices presently employed. It was quite obvious that farmers do not draw a clear line between "sustainable land use" and "good farming practice".

Many see themselves sufficiently committed to sustainability by applying conventional, well-tested practices and thus do not feel a need to change drastically their farming concepts. Some define sustainable land use as extensive land use practice, others as biological farming. Independent of their definition of sustainability, most farm managers do know and observe their own land units and those of their neighbours very carefully. They recognise (negative) changes in the environment and do not hesitate to mention these in a personal interview situation.

Going one step further and accepting at least partial responsibilities for improving the situation is obviously quite difficult. Even if farmers admit this responsibility in private they are hesitant to commit themselves in public, e.g., during an official planning workshop.

GRANO thus experimented with less formalised fora which proved to be more adequate in this respect. The subproject "Decentralising agricultural policy instruments" institutionalised farmers' participation at regional "round tables" whose foremost objective was to change policy instruments and influence communal decision-making (Hagedorn et al. 2001). As a side effect, increased awareness of and interest in agro-environmental strategies and solutions became visible, soil conservation being one such topic.

In general, openness towards environmental issues and solutions involving collective decision-making were especially visible with young farmers and those farmers of the older generation who were better informed than others. As these persons are not organised - at least not in view of environmental questions - networking plays an important role in institutionalising local decision making and communal level organisations.

2. Privatised extension and public goods issues in Brandenburg

While in the western part of Germany organised extension has always been decentralised and thus rather diverse, the situation in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was, at least superficially, more uniform. Extension was an integral part of an overall system promoting socialist agricultural development according the current interpretation by party and state officials (Ehlers 1991). Within this given framework, however, activities adapted to the individual needs of co-operatives and state farms were frequently possible: direct contacts between farms and universities, research contracting, hiring of specialists, etc. The quality of extension advice received from various organisations until 1989 is still regarded as excellent by today's farm managers (Bokelmann et al. 1996). Some are still co-operating with researchers, experimenting with different options to solve specific problems, and are seen as demonstration farmers by others.

The re-creation of states in Eastern Germany made the existing extension organisations and arrangements obsolete, regardless of their effectiveness and acceptance by farmers. Of the five new states, two (Brandenburg and Sachsen-Anhalt) opted for a privatised system subsidised by the state. At the time, this was not seen as a way to downplay the role of extension. On the contrary, in 1992 the Brandenburg ministry defined agricultural extension as an effective supporting instrument for influencing the process of change in agriculture in the sense of the "Brandenburg Path". Extension was meant to support knowledge transfer and knowledge based farmers' activities, as well as motivating farmers to join the change process. It was, however, explicitly a bottom-up approach, decision-making resting with the farmer. From the very beginning, an organisational set-up was envisaged which would keep government service as small as possible.

In order to be eligible for subsidies, farmers had the option to organise in two possible ways:

- Initiative taken by the farmers: They form a group ("ring") and hire an extension agent who works exclusively for the group. Both, specialists as well as generalists, may be hired. One agent per 20 ring members is subsidised.
- Initiative taken by an extension agent: They help to found a group ("extension association") to which they offer their expertise. They need not work exclusively with this particular association and are often joined by other specialist colleagues. One full position is subsidised per 20 association members.

Privatised and partly commercialised extension was, at the time, a dramatic about-face in extension policy. A short look at the situation a decade ago may shed some light on why this approach was chosen. Internationally, the discussion was in full swing, privatisation seen by some as a panacea to the shortcomings of discredited public extension services (Rivera and Cary 1997). Politically, de-regulation of the former socialist economies, giving more responsibility to private persons and firms, was called for. Regarding the subject matter of

extension, virtually all relevant actors agreed that the focus should be on farm economics. Farmers were believed to be sufficiently knowledgeable in production techniques - the environment not being an issue. And lastly, an end to subsidies from Bonn or Brussels was not in sight.

Cutting down state expenses meant placing direct financial burdens on farmers' shoulders. Whether or not this decision was, in retrospect, a wise one is not at the centre of this discussion. Realistically, the Brandenburg government did not expect farmers to pay fully for extension from the very beginning. Co-financed by the European Union (EU 2328/91 and 950/97), the state offered a phased subsidy programme starting with 90% of the extension costs and gradually declining to less than 50%. However, available resources from both Brandenburg as well as from the EU drained more rapidly than planned and, consequently, extension subsidies were reduced to a virtual minimum in 2001. From 2002 on, the government has not foreseen any further financial support to extension activities demanded by farmers.

As mentioned before, even in times, when extension was partly subsidised, farmers looked first and foremost for knowledge, i.e. private goods topics, which would help to optimise farm income. Still, the system had at least the potential to provide advice on a large variety of issues - including ecological aspects. In addition, both extension on ecological and on conventional farming was subsidised. Farms with less profitable businesses, e.g., sheep production, were still part of the system. Bokelmann et al. (1996) found that even under the more favourable conditions in 1994 only about 45% of the farmers in Brandenburg had contracts with extension agents or firms. Although precise figures are presently not available, extension workers report that the continuous reduction of extension subsidies has caused many additional farmers to drop out of the system. As a countermeasure, the ministry had planned to support extension activities - including agro-environmental topics - on a project basis for the time span 2000-2006. As co-financing by the EU can not be ensured any longer a rather limited 1 Mio € p.a. must suffice for all farm advisory work in the state (Expertinterview: MLUR 2001). It may be safely assumed that agro-environmental questions will not be priority issues.

3. Digression: Learning from the Netherlands is learning to be victorious

As a model, the Brandenburg ministry chose the reformed extension system of the Netherlands (Schwartzter 1998) without, we may critically add, being able to provide the conditions, i.e. economic and organisational conditions, that apparently have made it so successful. Over decades and especially after the Second World War, Dutch agriculture had become extremely efficient as the combined result of an entrepreneurial farming class, sophisticated research, a nationwide extension service, and focused government support. At the same time it started to face problems of overproduction, food quality, and environmental pollution resulting in a total overhaul of the agricultural knowledge system and a drastic reduction of the role of the state. Reasons for privatising the extension organisation were partly internal (work efficiency, job satisfaction), partly concerning relationship between agents and farmers (supply rather than demand driven), partly structural (goal and role conflicts), and partly political (treating farmers as regular economic actors).

Some of the prominent features of the new system are (Tacken 1997, Proost & Duijsings 2000):

- Organisational form: market-oriented foundation DLV (Dienst Landbouw Voorlichting);
- Replacement of 60% of original extension staff and drastic staff-reduction (1120 to 700);
- Government subsidies to be gradually reduced. Today, DLV is self supporting;

- Participation of clients at all levels (DLV board, sectoral councils, team committees);
- Farmers have an influence on decision making in agricultural research - but do have to share 50% of the costs (research farms);
- National and international commercial activities, including project implementation for the Dutch government.
- The latter may include agro-environmental topics and projects.
- Today, DLV is still the biggest but no longer the only extension organisation. Farmers use many different sources of information.

Internationally, DLV has been heralded as the foremost example of the successful privatisation of extension. We assume that this judgement is based more on a fascination with privatisation as an end in itself, issues like "lean organisations" and "demand driven services" being in the foreground. Questions of sustainability and the consequential images of extension and its clients are not used as yardsticks. But then, when extension was privatised in Brandenburg there was no such vision either.

One may ask why the Brandenburg copy has been less successful even in the reduced sense of organising a viable commercial consultancy system. In our view, the most important difference concerns availability of resources at all levels. To put it rather bluntly: while the Dutch extension system was privatised under conditions of stability and abundance, Brandenburg's decision was taken in times of political, economic, and social upheaval characterised by a dearth of financial resources. The lack of resources has disastrous consequences for public goods extension. The "project approach" practised in the Netherlands depends on the willingness and potential of governmental or non-governmental organisations to sponsor activities of collective interest.

Though this basic dilemma has conditioned the way in which the extension system in Brandenburg has evolved, it is by no means the only weakness. Other obstacles on the road towards agro-environmental extension will be discussed below. Let us first look at how GRANO collaborators view some of the issues.

4. Farmers' and extension workers' response to the Brandenburg Extension System

A comparison of different extension organisations in Germany had led Jochimsen to hypothesise on the strengths of the Brandenburg system in 1993:

- Low budget requirements for the state;
- No role-conflict between advisory and regulatory function;
- High flexibility of personnel;
- Farmers decide on extension function ("make or buy");
- Highly individualised extension.

Bokelmann et al. (1996) still found farmers and extension agents to have a cautiously positive view of privatisation. A few years later, results from the GRANO qualitative situation analysis showed some disillusionment and scepticism. Some of the farmers and extension workers interviewed explicitly wished to undo **privatisation** and adopt the Chamber of Agriculture system of North-Rhine Westphalia. Knowing that GRANO works on environmental issues, respondents may, in fact, have attached increased importance to public goods issues in the qualitative interviews. Still, it was obvious that, under the present system, environmental aspects can only become integrated if farmers actively demand this kind of information and advice; the system is not designed to offer these services. There is no organised effort to create or influence this demand, no one to provide wider perspectives which may show why agro-environmental topics may be of relevance for the farm.

Farmers did see the need to take over at least part of the **costs of extension**. They felt that clients should not pay more than 60-70% with financial subsidies by the government of about

30-40%. However, in their opinion agro-environmental projects should be completely financed by the government as they concern topics that will benefit society as a whole.

In a general sense, farmers and extension agents are open for **environmental issues** but not necessarily very enthusiastic. For some farmers, the reluctance to experiment with innovations may be a result of bad extension experiences in the first years of privatisation. Extension workers may fear resistance or a loss of acceptance by their clients if they integrate innovative environmental topics into their daily practice. Both complain about the lack of information on ecological themes, particularly on adapted production techniques and agro-environmental subsidies. The latter holds especially true for the definition of local agro-environmental projects foreseen for the future. A co-operation between interested farmers, their extension agents, and scientists was suggested as a possible solution.

5. The flexibility trap - an Agricultural Knowledge System with inadequate linkages and funds

Privatising and commercialising extension is meant to increase organisational flexibility, reduce bureaucracy, foster professionalism, ensure client orientation, and enable a truly participatory approach by performing only those tasks which are directly demanded by clients. While this in fact may happen, extension reform of this type definitely diminishes the organisational basis for extension topics that are not actively demanded by clients. In addition, linkages with non-commercial organisations - governmental or non-governmental - are difficult to establish and maintain as they are not functioning according to market mechanisms. This does not mean that linkages are non-existent. They are, however, largely informal, dependent on goodwill and personal engagement of actors, and thus potentially unstable. The (negative) effects of greater flexibility may not be felt immediately. New organisational forms may co-exist for a while with personal networks developed earlier under different conditions.

With privatisation, state (or national) governments have relinquished an important direct way to exert at farm level. Obviously, this may be intentional and a consequence of no longer treating farmers as a privileged economic group. In the case of Brandenburg, it was, however, a lack of funds that has led to an almost total disruption of this linkage. Furthermore, the state has also given up direct responsibility for the so-called "socio-economic" extension as well as for matters of extension education and training. Formerly, public extension services always had a key role in training advisory personnel especially with regard to those competencies that are not necessarily part of university education. Though a high qualification of personnel is of great interest to a commercial firm, it is most likely that resources would be spent more on specialist than on holistic approaches. It is the latter that is needed for agro-environmental extension.

An analysis of the **Agricultural Knowledge System (AKS) in Brandenburg** has shown that for none of the major problem areas has a viable solution been found. In the following we will look at the three major groups of actors (= sub-systems), pinpoint specific lacunae, and give examples for GRANO interventions.

User Sub-system

Farmers in Brandenburg, as anywhere else, are not a homogeneous group and different types of farmers will be more or less influential. Only full-time farmers are well organised and act as a political lobby. It is interesting to note that the largest extension firm has been founded by the regional Farmers' Association. Still, farmers have been unable to prevent the termination of extension subsidies.

Linkages with research do exist, but they are largely informal and very often based on personal contacts dating back to GDR times. There is no formal representation of farm interest in research priority setting comparable to the Dutch system.

GRANO has encouraged participation of farmers in its activities from the very beginning. The reaction was rather mixed and ranged from strong personal interest and engagement to indifference. With very few exceptions, initiatives actively to influence the research process came from the scientists rather than from farmers.

On the other hand, continuous communication was fruitful, resulting in the establishment of linkages and farmer-to-farmer extension activities during field days initiated by researchers (Heiden et al. 2001). Volunteer farmers conducted demonstrations of agro-environmental innovations which are being developed and or tested together with scientists from regional research centres. Apart from the proven usefulness of a given innovation, it was the development of a trustful relationship between local and external actors that proved to be instrumental for continued co-operation. We thus deduce that transparency of motives and sound professionalism will lead to increased openness towards sustainability issues.

The Extension Sub-system

In theory, it is the client who decides on the type of advice that he or she is buying from the extension agent. We would hypothesise that the higher the share of subsidy, the greater the possibility for advisory personnel of including topics on his own initiative. In addition, a long term personal relationship between client and extension worker will, regardless of payment, allow a broad exchange of information. In both cases, time and circumstances seem to work against extension in Brandenburg. Income from extension activities is diminishing which may lead to risk evasion, in other words, to avoiding topics that may be controversial. Many of the older generation extension workers, who are respected for their social competency in addition to being specialists, are retiring. Newly recruited personnel will be pressurised towards specialisation. Extension firms must look for additional commercial activities in order to survive.

Lack of funds prevents farmers from organising new extension rings and a GRANO supported ring project failed mainly due to economic reasons. Although a group of farmers felt the need to co-operate in matters of plant protection, they were neither able to finance an advisor nor to agree on common objectives. They thus continue to be dependent on information from commercial firms.

Extension training is presently organised on a voluntary basis by an adult education academy. GRANO has been instrumental in broadening the spectrum of topics and including agro-environmental themes in the regular programme. Linkages have been established which facilitate the inclusion of these topics in future training programmes (Heiden & Nagel 2001). On an exemplary basis, extension material was developed to support teaching as well as extension. However, neither the training institution nor the production of extension material are on a sound financial basis.

The Research Sub-system

There are no institutionalised linkages between research and extension but manifold informal contacts. However, even during the fairly short GRANO project period we could observe how these informal relationships are constantly diminishing. Transfer of knowledge, in the sense of feeling responsible that operational knowledge is made available to extension or the farmer directly, is not seen as a central task of research. The reward and evaluation system for scientists, both in universities and in research stations, is based on scientific publications. To make matters more complicated, a "modern" research centre or enterprising scientists may

also want to charge for services rendered - which is no problem as long as clients are able to pay.

GRANO project funds have been utilised to experiment with establishing linkages. Meaningful topics were identified, scientific collaborators won, extension materials developed and distributed, meetings with farmers and extension agents organised, etc. Most of these activities were well received and evaluated, but they were free of charge to all concerned. We could show that networking is a feasible way to organise linkages and an alternative to a centralised system. At the same time, it became absolutely clear that networking requires facilitation and organisation, both of which have to be managed and funded. Under present conditions, the initiative will not come from the research side and, at least for Brandenburg, we do not see any NGO to take the lead without project funds. It is the state who, at least in this restricted sense, would have to accept and play a role that it does not want perform for the Agricultural Knowledge System as a whole.

Conclusions: Small steps on the rocky road

When conceptualising the GRANO project, we were aware of the inherent restrictions of a private yet still subsidised extension system to transport agro-ecological innovations. We also hypothesised that - although land users were not hostile to sustainable solutions - a majority would not become active proponents. Thirdly, we were of the opinion that a number of ecologically relevant innovations were "on the shelf" and ready to be integrated into existing conventional farming systems. Fourthly, we hoped that a sufficient number of extension agents could be interested in joining the network of co-operating farmers and scientists. And lastly, we were fairly optimistic that solutions could be found for a decentralised, network-based, participatory Agricultural Knowledge System within the given framework.

We now know that we were overly optimistic. Most seriously, we underestimated the importance of framework conditions. Firstly, public funds for extension do not even cover basic specialist advisory work, much less such extravagances as agro-ecological topics. Secondly, the viscous procedures (not to say resistance to change) of public administration and research organisations have caused undue delays in experimenting with different approaches.

Still, within the four different GRANO projects (only one dealt with agriculture and extension issues) a large number of linkage and networking activities were tested, many with promising results. According to many observers in the region, both the training programmes and farmer-extension-researcher events initiated and organised by GRANO, have filled an important gap. They have shown in practice that there are possibilities of transferring agro-ecological ideas. In addition, many of the linkages that have been established between training organisations, farmers, researchers, and extension personnel may prove to be sustainable.

Behavioural changes do take time and "participation" can not be prescribed. If taken seriously, it is an offer that can be refused. We found that positive results can be achieved through intensive and lasting communication, a "luxury" which public extension can afford but for which private extension would have to charge dearly.

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