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## Report of Discussion: Policy and Institutional Development

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The overview on Institutional and Policy Development (B. DENT, 1997) focused on institutions, the generic value of the participatory approach as well as in FSR and policy.

### **Institutions**

Quoting Wolz, Barry Dent agrees that "institutions limit the set of choices of individuals based on values and goals of a given society". The important point is that rules of society are evolving and changing at different paces and it is necessary for the institutional framework to be modified in relation to the needs of society. Several authors indicate that societal and political changes have moved much faster than the institutional framework and as a result, organisations in the agricultural sector are not properly served. Research institutions are challenged with these changes. Several people during the discussion pointed out that research institutions (in Czech Republic, in Spain) are not moving far and fast enough to achieve sustainability with strong environment considerations. Quoting Calatrava's plea for a move towards more systems-based agrarian research with multidisciplinary teams using the participatory approach, Barry Dent questions the generic value of this approach. This point led to a debate.

### **The generic value of participatory research (PR)**

For Barry Dent, one limiting factor in PR is, almost by definition, that it will largely focus on local problems and local issues. So he distinguishes generic fundamental research from specific, local, non-cumulative and non-transferable research. And he calls for the need to develop an alternative paradigm, which takes us beyond participatory research to increase our understanding of the use of information by farm households. For some participants, the generic value of PR, systems research, case studies or other inductive methods cannot be challenged and this value is two-fold :

**a)** The value is in the deep comprehension of the functioning coherence of the studied systems. Using statistical inference alone, we only address certain areas of the farmer's activity, so we produce analysis with fragmented information. Only PR can give a holistic view.

**b)** Generic value is obtained by producing methods. Giving coherence to the observed phenomena, making them intelligible and rendering action relevant, we validate the modelling and methods that have been elaborated and give them generic value.

The example of the creation of AOC in Corsica (cheese or charcuterie), (see Casabianca et al) is a good illustration of the generic value of PR:

- Creation of technical innovations regarding traditional products.
- Participation of farmers in the institutional procedures for protecting these "new" products.
- relation of new technical skills as a result of this PR (Action-Research).

But, it is true that the proof is not conclusive and we have to continue with "obstinate rigour" (L da Vinci) to produce "teachable concepts and methods" (Le Moigne) that will encourage action-groups and colleagues to adopt them. It is for this reason that training and teaching are so important in PR.

### **FSR and Policy Development**

The group spent a major part of Workshop time on this topic. Several people regret that FSR does not influence policy enough. Apparently a mediating level is missing between FSR, which is relevant and efficient at the farm level, and the policy decision makers (macro level). It is easy to justify that policy should be holistic.

Several questions came up:

- Who is deciding policy, using which information?
- How are ex-ante or ex-post policies evaluated?
- Which information is needed to produce good policy? Some participants, for example, pointed out that it seems incredible that policies are built without any understanding of the way in which farm households access or utilise information.
- A difficulty regarding evaluation is that, at any one time, farmers and other rural organisations are subject to a range of different policies. Some participants answered that the farmers are able to combine the measures of several policies in their management. In this area, an important role of FSR could be to predict for different types of farm household the ways in which they would respond to alternative scenarios.

A way to improve ex-ante policy is to know more about farmers' values and functioning mechanisms, that FSR has the ability to produce. But the difficulty of the task is manifest. The debate revealed several sides:

**a)** A frustrating side: It is not possible to make any predictions.

**b)** An optimistic side, albeit indirectly: By insisting on complexity and diversity, FSR can prevent monolithic criteria from building and evaluating policies.

The declared role of FSR is to protect and to promote diversity. The loss of diversity through marketing and standardisation is a well-known fact. The whole group made a plea for decentralisation, subsidiarity, diversity: words used as a sort of slogan. For some participants,

this slogan is too simple and formulating it is not sufficient. Furthermore, if we go too far, financial redistribution within the European Union can become too limited, each country developing its own policy. We need common policy. Anyway, those attending agreed that EU policy already appears to be less monolithic and more flexible. An agreement was reached about the need to develop flexible policies, which are based more on incentives which encourage farmers to make changes than on constraining rules which limit their activity. In view of the important changes proposed to or imposed on the farmers (new CAP, agro-environmental measures) some participants insisted:

- on the importance of a transitional phase.
- on giving the option to farmers either to change or to carry on as before.

Another debate took place on the usefulness of *agro-ecological zones*. Some were in favour of creating, for example, definitions for homogeneous and fragile areas requiring protection. Others were strongly opposed. For the latter, the concept of homogeneity does not exist as such, but it is built up by an actor-group in the framework of a specific project and the limits of the zone are consistent with the objectives of the project. Deciding a priori homogeneous zones is counter-productive and dangerous. By way of conclusion, the participants make a plea that our scientific community move from FSR to Rural Systems Research (RSR) in order to deal with current challenges.