

# Learning, collective action and empowerment for rural reorganisation

Patrick Steyaert<sup>a</sup>, Mark Paine<sup>b</sup>, Egon Noe<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>INRA, SAD APT, Thiverval-Grignon, France; <sup>b</sup>University of Melbourne, Faculty of Land and Food Resource, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>c</sup>University of Aarhus, Department of Agroecology and Environment, Aarhus, Denmark - [psteyaert@grignon.inra.fr](mailto:psteyaert@grignon.inra.fr)

## Setting the scene

This is the third time an IFSA workshop is addressing learning processes associated with research and extension in rural and farming systems. The sustained interest in the topic can be explained by the growing awareness among farming systems practitioners and researchers that we are facing numerous uncertainties in our work. We are becoming more sensitive to the need to invent other ways to build innovations. Societal problems like environment protection, rural development, food safety and food quality, or risks from climate change are forcing the agricultural world to confront its own world views and consider these views in the light of other stakeholders. In this context, collaborative approaches to rural development have become a means for exploring multiple stakeholders' perspectives on possible futures, and the types of interdependencies that are required to build these new futures.

The aim of this workshop is to go a step further in addressing scaling up issues of learning processes both practically and theoretically. It seems this scientific goal is difficult to reach. Most of the contributions to this workshop address classical questions, to build a better understanding of how learning processes can be practiced within projects and organisations. They address the changing role of experts in facilitating such kinds of processes. Nevertheless, both theoretical and case study contributions show with great evidence the potential of collaborative approaches to development. On the one hand, they illustrate pragmatically how researchers and practitioners do take part in the renewal of the relationship between knowledge and action: their activity is not only a *matter of facts* – producing objectified knowledge – but also a *matter of concern* – transforming values and engagement patterns. On the other hand, most of them at least state the need for (and the current lack of) institutional change, often exploring what conditions are required to achieve change.

On the practical level, posters and full papers cover a variety of applied domains, showing how much agriculture is concerned not only with internal outcomes like increasing productivity and product quality, but increasingly with external outcomes that are questioning the role that agriculture plays and could play in society. Examples include environmental protection, rural livelihoods, short markets and the development of local food networks. These issues reveal a lot of interdependencies between people and research when its aim is not only to produce knowledge but also to achieve technical and social change. In all cases, researchers and developers acknowledge it is important to take account of local knowledge in building and agreeing upon new ways to use and keep common resources.

Irrespective of the situations, learning is mostly seen as a process that must be understood or that can be facilitated by the use of models and tools. Numerous words are used that reveal the will to involve stakeholders in problem finding and problem solving processes like co-conception, co-construction, collective, collaborative or reflexive learning, companion modelling, etc. While all case studies are very rich and demonstrate the high potential of these approaches to transform complex situations of change, these words show how much these approaches are not exempted from some kind of ideology of participation and agreement. There is clearly a need to build more robust theories and methodologies to strengthen their normative, cognitive and instrumental background. Several papers being presented at this workshop contribute to this goal by adopting various angles that one could take on the study of learning processes.

One of these angles is to look at these processes in terms of social interactionism, focusing on communication and dialogical processes that underlie the exploration of problem formulation. In most cases, the context for the research corresponded with a situation that required interaction between heterogeneous and interdependent stakeholders who were not necessarily sharing objectives,

knowledge, values or practices. In some cases the researchers adopted an observer position, interpreting change with respect to various theories like activity theory, reflexive learning, sense making, etc. In many cases, objects played a central role in the interactions between stakeholders. This is probably an issue to be discussed further in our workshop regarding issues of scaling up: do these objects facilitate the embedding of knowledge acquired through collective action in institutional settings? Do objects participate in processes that result in the emergence of learning inside institutions and organisations? In some of the papers the researchers adopted an intervention position to foster change. For the most part interventions involved the use of practical tools and models. The posters mainly show the diversity and richness of these methods used in action. But very few papers looked at these experiences of using models and tools in theoretical terms: what were their conditions for use? How did they allow greater citizen involvement, and with what consequences on the outcomes? How did they foster a collective knowing process and overpass knowledge aggregation?

A second focus was about collaborative research seen as a process for articulating, mostly in a hierarchical manner, different methods of inquiry like: stakeholder analysis; trials with farmers; thematic focus groups; participative diagnostics and assessments, and so on. Some situations were limited to groups of farmers who were considered peers in the development process, while others involved various decision levels with stakeholders brought together by the problematic situation. In these cases, it was the research design (especially how it was conceived and managed) that seemed to offer an opportunity for purposeful organisational learning across scales.

Finally, a third focus was about networking. This notion seemed to be different from the traditional one of Communities of Practice since it considers conflicts, power relations and disagreements are part of the change equation. The concept of networks tries to bridge collective action, and other spheres of interaction, to locate learning perspectives on knowledge creation at the level of the whole organisation. Most examples of this issue related to agricultural organisations but lessons could be translated from these experiences to discuss how networking could be applied to more heterogeneous settings.

In this workshop, we plan to take on learning processes as both a theoretical and practical agenda, particularly how knowledge is built through experience and action. All presentations recognized change was occurring in the way we farm, manage our landscapes and organise our rural communities. We will explore, in the light of practical experiences and research insights, how to improve the capacity of stakeholders to understand their role and to act in an increasingly complex and unpredictable world. We will also try to explore how we as a group of researchers and practitioners, interested in the learning dimension, can pursue a research and development agenda through collaboration within and beyond the symposium. Learning across scales remains a goal which covers numerous dimensions that have to be researched and which can probably not escape a fundamental debate on the epistemological underpinnings of the 'knowing in action' claim.