

The implementation of a participatory approach in the interregional project of agricultural extension service in Italy

Francesca Giarè, Monica Caggiano

Istituto Nazionale Economia Agraria, Roma, Italy - caggiano@inea.it

Abstract: *The paper analyses the adoption of Participatory Approach in the process of network building and knowledge creation developed in the “Interregional Project of Agricultural Extension Service” in Italy.*

The Project, coordinated by INEA, included a broad range of actions at different scale to promote mutual learning and generate, share and use technology, knowledge and information, with the aim of improving the Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems for Rural Development (AKIS/RD). The methodology adopted was characterised by the active participation of the actors in problem formulation, project design, activities planning, assessment and monitoring, in order to improve interactive learning. According to the results of the final project evaluation, the paper discusses some lessons learnt from the implementation of a participatory approach experience. The presentation suggests relevant remarks as open questions for a future debate on the extension service system and the use of participatory approach in the learning processes.

Keywords: *Italian agricultural knowledge and extension systems, participatory approach*

The interregional project of agricultural extension service

The “Interregional Project of Agricultural Extension Service” (IP) was a complex process involving 18 Italian Regions, coordinated by INEA. The Project stretched from 2004 to 2007 and received a financing of 5 millions of Euro by the Mipaaf (Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry Policy). The IP had several objectives, focusing on the main critical issues of the Italian Agricultural Extension Systems.

The Italian system, in fact, was characterized by a huge variety of regional situations scarcely interrelated, with limited financial resources, poor coordination among institutions, a prevailing top-down approach, a lack of assessment, monitoring and evaluation, a limited -also financial- farmers participation and an inadequate integration between rural policies and agricultural extension services.

The strategy of the PI included 3 action plans:

- An analysis of the Italian Extension System with detailed Regional description;
- A set of initiatives to share experiences and successful approaches, aim at developing a conceptual framework and common language;
- A set of actions to test innovative services, tools, approaches and methodologies (Pilot Actions).

During the project, a great variety of activities was realized, such as a SWOT analysis for each Regional extension system, 37 workshops, 15 learning activities, 9 professional training, 23 pilot actions to test innovative practices, services, methods and tools.

Throughout the process, the IP adopted a Participatory Approach (PA) that was used also for the evaluation step carried out through focus groups, workshops and group interviews.

Participation was applied as a tool to make the process more effective, but also as an end in itself, with the aim to improve the ability of the Regions to involve all the actors of the system in designing and implementing their strategies and actions.

Some lessons learnt by using a PA in the IP

About the process

We experimented that the PA made the process slow and more human and financial resources intensive. Despite that, it was useful to set up important collaborative learning processes, to promote a co-production of knowledge and to achieve innovative approaches and strategies.

The use of PA could increase the gap between the actors involved in the process. The Regions adopted different attitudes with respect to the project; some participants invested a high level of human and financial resources and contributed to all the activities, some others invested less, with an occasional participation, while others showed a complete lack of interest and involvement. They put in action either a "virtuous circle" or a "vicious circle": those Regions with a better organized and successful extension system effectively involved in the project took an active role and had the best results. They promoted learning process and co-production of knowledge, adopting relevant innovations that improved even more the regional extension system. On the contrary, the Regions that had greater difficulties and organizational delays were also less active and obtained less benefits from the IP.

The communication played a key role in promoting the PA: avoid the bottleneck. The Regions showed a different ability to involve, codificate and disseminate information and achievements within their organization. The objectives and the vision of the IP were not always well communicated inside the regional structures, in addition decision making and responsibility are not appropriately shared in the system. Some institutional actors in the Regions had a critical role in managing the whole communication process and control information, they sometimes created a bottleneck that blocked the greater diffusion of knowledge and the spread of capacity building. In some cases, when the key actors were replaced, the good performance of the project was compromised.

It's important *to develop a common vision.* The complexity of the IP and the focus on individual Regional programmes, sometimes, limited the developing of a common and conscious interregional vision. It depends also on the fact that the Regions in Italy have political and administrative competences in the agricultural matter, so they are used to debate within regional boundaries with a great resistance to involve also external actors in the decision making processes.

About the learning network

In a complex process, the *PA is an useful tool to develop a network between the actors* to share, generate and use knowledge and innovation. The best structure to be given to the network depends on the context.

The IP activated and consolidated an extension network that have an essential role in exchanging information, developing new partnerships and collaborative mechanisms. The network assumed a substantial political role, supporting the definition of a common vision and political strategies. The Regions, thanks to the network, are achieving a "critical mass" to support in a stronger way their position in the National and European framework. The network created in the IP assumed a great relevance especially in helping Regions to define the measure regarding the farm advisory and extension services in the regional rural development program of new EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

The network structure is not homogeneous: we can differentiate between weak and strong ties and links. Some Regions, in fact, represent active nodes with strong links to the network and other agents, that still develop common strategies and partnership also beyond the IP. Instead, some agents have weak or irrelevant connections with the network, assuming progressively a more marginal position. The extension network actually works as an informal structure. Although some Regions ask to establish a formal structure, this is still a controversial issue, because the balance between advantage and disadvantages is not completely clear. The present configuration comparing to a formal structure is weaker in external communication and in long term planning, but on the other side an informal network is more flexible and able to reflect innovation and real needs. This is a trouble especially in the Italian system, suffering an excess of bureaucracy and a high resistance to the innovation.

About the evaluation

The IP, through methodologies adopting a PA, contributed to disseminate the procedures and to improve the quality of evaluation process. This is a relevant achievement, because in the Italian extension system evaluation practices are not used in a coherent and continuous way. Nevertheless, only some Regions actually built upon this input, while the others were reluctant to implement it in a resolute way. Finally *the PA alone is not enough, more effort and innovative instruments are needed to motivate the actors to implement and promote a stronger evaluation process.*

About improving the AKIS/RD in Italy

The use of PA in the IP gave a positive contribution in generate, share and use knowledge and innovation in the Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems for Rural Development in Italy. Nevertheless, the institutions involved show a high resistance in adopting innovations with a strong impact on the structure, especially concerning human resources.

In addition, sometimes they were reluctant to put into practice a bottom-up approach in the decision making process and to share responsibilities, therefore it's necessary to stimulate in a stronger way the passage from a top-down to a bottom up approach and vision, especially involving those who are not interested in a participatory processes. The IP was a very complex and ambitious project, maybe it made difficult to focus attention and activities on the central questions and core problems, in order to avoid a dispersion of resources. In that context, characterised by a strong regionalism and top-down vision, the use of PA was not enough supported to give useful answers to some critical cross-cutting issues.

References

- Caggiano M., Giarè F., 2007. *Un laboratorio per apprendere a valutare. L'esperienza dei servizi di sviluppo agricolo*, in *Proceedings X Congresso Nazionale Associazione Italiana di Valutazione: Guardare dentro e guardare oltre*, Rome, Italy, April 19-21.
- Leeuwis, C., Ban, A., 2004. *Communication for rural innovation: rethinking agricultural extension*. London, Blackwell Science Ltd.
- Rivera, W.M., Qamar, M.K., Mwandemere, H.K., 2005. *Enhancing Coordination among AKIS/RD Actors: An analytical and comparative review of country studies on agricultural knowledge and information systems for rural development (AKIS/RD)*. Rome, FAO.