

Engaging researchers with Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSAs)

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Abstract: In this paper we elaborate on the concept of engaged scholarship, focusing on relationships between researchers and Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSAs). We examine the current EU rural policy rhetoric, promoting closer linkages between scholars and practitioners to foster innovation, and the actual state of art. The study has been based on the experiences gained with the recent EU FP7-funded project SOLINSA and four workshops at major rural events. Here we suggest that alongside formal arrangements for research-practice partnerships, action research can offer promising methodological solutions to facilitate them. There is still, however, a lack of wider recognition of this methodology in the tenure process as well as capacities of researchers in working this way. Thus more effort should be undertaken to promote it, in order to foster capacity building of researchers and managing change in the academy. We conclude the following paper with some recommendations in this respect and ideas for further investigations.

Keywords: Engaged scholarship, Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture, action research, participatory research, rural policy

Introduction

Drawing on the concept of engaged scholarship, we take a closer look at relationships between researchers and practitioners within hybrid learning networks. In our view, this approach may come at hand with possible answers to some of the recent challenges, such as agricultural sustainability. Noticeably, the idea of linking research with practice is currently gaining momentum in both scientific discourse and official EU rhetoric of rural and research policies. This also gives a rise to dedicated policy networks, i.e. the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability, and Operational Groups. Likewise, reconfigurations of existing stakeholder groupings are a possible scenario of further policy developments. Transdisciplinarity, applicability of research findings and partnership between research and practice become the key preconditions for obtaining research funding. This provides also a strong, new incentive for actors to experiment with interactive methodologies and tools of inquiry, remarkably those stemming action research traditions.

Scholarship of engagement is relatively less explored in Europe than in other parts of the globe. For instance in Canada and USA it has raised significant interest in both researchers' and practitioners' circles. Numerous initiatives have followed the intention of bringing these two worlds, often very distant, a bit closer to each other. Likewise, a wealth of literature has contributed to development of the concept. According to Boyer (1990, 1996) engaged scholarship advocates a proactive and creative role of researchers in solving current problems and breakthrough in the academic life. The scholarly activity should transcend walls of universities and shift from the ivo-

ry tower towards delivering benefits for certain communities of practice. In this sense engaged scholarship is rooted in the phronetic science, one in which scientists consider issues in the light of their relevance to individuals and society. Researchers are here encouraged to build close relationships with the communities that sometimes lead to ‘going native’ – as it is in the specific case of action research (Flybjerg 2001, 2004).

The phronetic value judgment is thus involved in engaged scholarship from the beginning and drives interactions between researchers and practitioners. It defines dyadic relationships (Forthofer et al., 2010), whereby researchers reflect about values in their scientific activities and dealings with the non-academic world. In contrast to the neutral and objective positivist science, engaged scholarship manifests specific values and practices, oriented towards inducing societal changes (Barker 2004). By means of action research, as noted by Lewin (1946), Freire (1968, 1970) and Fals-Borda (1981) among others, the change can be encouraged and fostered through knowledge generation that is narrative, often ‘tacit’, community-oriented and co-created. With origins in qualitative inquiry and participant observation, action research embarks here upon the engaged phronetic science, so as to nurture some alteration in the ‘reality’ and help people to transform their lives. Moreover, it looks at the change as such: how people act, how they change and how this change can be fostered externally.

Research methodology

The main intention behind this paper is to share some experiences we have gained as engaged researchers, while working with Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSAs) in the context of EU rural policy (Brunori et al. 2013). We understand LINSAs as hybrid networks bringing together producers, customers, NGOs, researchers, experts and actors of the formal Agricultural Knowledge System (AKS). We define the AKS as the system that includes both organisations (e.g. ministries, research institutes, extension services) and institutions which govern their actions (e.g. policies, rules, procedures, laws). Within the EU rural policy LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) and National Rural Networks (NRNs) can be particularly considered as LINSAs, for their practices often involve learning and innovation for sustainable agriculture. Using action research, we demonstrate here how scholarship of engagement has been employed in these hybrid networks.

We endeavour to explore factors for both failure and success to watch out for, while researchers try to assist LINSAs to be more effective in their work. The study was grounded on a wealth of recent practical experiences and a joint reflexive inquiry. Some of this is originating from SOLINSA (Support of Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture), an EU FP7-funded project. It engaged researchers with 17 hybrid learning networks in a 3-year undertaking that used action research and joint reflection, mainly amongst the researchers. The other source of learning was a series of four workshops on research-practice interfaces, hosted during wider thematic rural events in Belgium, Poland, Italy and Finland (all in 2013). They targeted LAGs, NRNs and rural research community. Participants in a facilitated workshop environment were asked to brainstorm on the following issues: Are rural researchers and practitioners indeed working together? In which ways do they collaborate? How to best facilitate their mutual engagement? In addition, we have been trying to find out whether there exist any examples of joint analysis and knowledge creation in this arena.

During the works with LINSAs and events we gained possibilities for interaction with a number of researchers and practitioners. Nevertheless, we got confronted with a challenge of bringing them together onto a single spot and in a balanced number, in order to have a joint reflection on the nature of their relationships. Hence, the results presented below are describing discussions in still slightly separate reflection groups: researchers talking about their relations with practitioners, and practitioners talking about their relations with researchers. Our analysis is thus a work in progress. Further exploratory research is needed and is on the way.

Scholarly engagement with LINSAs

The SOLINSA experience

As a starting point for this investigation, we looked at the experiences gained through the SOLINSA project (www.solinsa.net) that was focused on understanding how LINSAs evolve and operate in practice, and how their development could be assisted externally. It specifically aimed to identify barriers to their development and explore how policy instruments, financial arrangements, research, education and advisory services might effectively support LINSAs in their work. The project implied action research methodology, where researchers collaborated with practitioners involved in the LINSAs in a series of workshops and consultations.

Beyond acquiring in-depth knowledge about the LINSAs, the aim was to find and verify ways of helping the networks to be more efficient in achieving their goals. In parallel, project partners and experts reflected together on the processes involved in the study of LINSAs to adapt and refine the collaborative learning and research methods. In the Hungarian section of SOLINSA the Institute Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was working with two NGOs. One of them was an informal network of local people in a small town near Budapest with the main objective to build a more sustainable food system for the town. The other one was a voluntary network of 11 LEADER LAGs, concerned with innovation and the co-creation of knowledge for the purposes of rural and community development. Our main findings on ways and actual results of engaged scholarship practices with these hybrid networks follow here.

For historical reasons, the culture of volunteer work, patronage and private funding is very low in Hungarian rurality. Grassroots initiatives normally have negligible own resources, thus they constantly seek external support, mainly from public sources (EU or domestic). At the same time, using public money carries political and bureaucratic burdens. Dealing with them requires special kind of knowledge and capacities that are often alien from everyday people and activities. Therefore, one of the most important functions of LINSAs is filling the gap between the ‘central bureaucratic system’ (formal AKS, policies, public money, and programs, etc.) and the ‘local heuristic system’ (people, local communities, independent inventors, etc.) (Nemes et al., 2014). To achieve this, LINSAs often perform duties without having appropriate skills, resources and practice for a successful delivery. Civil enthusiasm and energy can bring temporary solutions and success, however on the long run a professionalization is sought, if results are to be improved. In Hungary, the following ideas were raised by practitioners on how they could benefit from collaboration with researchers. They could assist LINSAs by:

1. Enhancing their capacities for the complex task of translation and local capacity building, providing expert knowledge, coaching, services, etc.;
2. Helping them to adapt to the central bureaucratic system’s requirements without losing their energy, identity and objectives; and
3. Initiating and nurturing alternative systems, where private or public resources become available for LINSAs with less political and bureaucratic burden.

However, in the SOLINSA project most of the researchers’ actual work with the LINSAs concerned networking and communication. Main activities undertaken were as follows:

1. Raising awareness on the importance of networking through discussions;
2. Creating communication spaces, where internal and external networking is possible;
3. Creating special occasions for LINSAs to meet each other;
4. Training and personalised advice on communications skills; and
5. Personal advice / coaching to LINSAs on stakeholder management, network development and maintaining voluntary work.

Alongside these joint activities we made some important observations concerning the relations between hybrid networks and engaged researchers. It turned out that a clear and specified invitation from a network is necessary, or at least a clarification of basic expectations and rules governing mutual engagement is certainly a pre-requisite for success. In order to be able to work effectively a social contract is needed, in which aims, success criteria, methodological framework, expectations towards each other and rules of co-operation are clearly defined.

When working with voluntary networks, it is very important to help them to reach the state of structured organisational architecture, in which they are capable of managing projects. As the dynamics of common work is greatly influenced by the developmental stage in a network life-cycle, monitoring and interpretation of group dynamics processes by supporters are inevitable. Continuous presence, coaching, asking about network's activities may be very useful. As this occupies important resources from both researchers and practitioners, it might be advantageous to set up some strategy right at the start (e.g. communication on skype between larger personal meetings). Another difficulty might arise from the side of the researchers, having limited ability to focus on more than 3 or 4 parallel projects in depth. When making preliminary agreements it is worth exploring the workload of the parties towards other occupations, because if terms of the initial agreements are not met, this may lead to tensions in co-operation.

Four workshops on engaged scholarship

The exploration started under SOLINSA was expanded during four participatory workshops, organised on the occasions of major rural events. The first one, focused on the collaboration between LEADER LAGs and researchers, concluded that scholarly engagement may take various forms (Augustyn & Nemes 2013). These may differ significantly in respect of 'real-life' application of research findings. Discussions revealed also that despite a wealth of research on LEADER across Europe, LAGs and other potential research end-users rarely receive any feedback on outcomes. Moreover, both the research process and its results normally lack practical application and use for their everyday rural development work. Exceptions were represented by those cases, when research was specifically linked to LAGs' internal demands, oriented on effective delivery of the Local Development Strategies.

Practitioners stressed that researchers normally approach LAGs with a purpose of carrying out investigations that are linked to their private (or faculty) scientific interests, rather than corresponding with the actual needs of LAGs. In such cases research results are rarely fed back into local communities. There are, however, some positive examples that LAG representatives identified as 'success stories' and that inform about applicability of research findings within rural communities (see *ibid*). In these cases research has been employed to address specific programming concerns of LEADER, namely methodologies for elaboration of Local Development Strategies (Poland and Spain), impact assessment (Ireland) or broader topics of concern (governance models in Portugal, resilience in UK, and learning in rural networks in Hungary).

LAGs portrayed also a 'wish list' of research activities and topics that could help them to advance Local Development Strategies: baseline socio-economic studies, qualitative and quantitative surveying, market research and thematic investigations focused on marketing and tourism. Of special importance would be also help with research methodologies, e.g. for elaboration of surveys or SWOT analysis. Whilst the 'success stories' pointed to both conventional and participatory research methods and tools, action research was recognised as a promising solution to overcome collaboration difficulties and a help to fulfil the 'wish list'. LAGs would particularly welcome new interactive and participatory methods that could help them not only to advance their knowledge, but also in animation of the territory, deemed as crucial for successful delivery of Local Development Strategies. An idea has also emerged, concerning the current EU Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. It is widely criticised for its methodological failures such

as the lack of timely feedback and building capacities of local communities in delivering Rural Development Programmes. If the central evaluation system would have some elements of action research built in, researchers could help to fill certain gaps in the system, and besides gathering information, release capacities and foster learning processes at the local level.

These ideas have been again backed during the workshops in Poland and Finland, where discussions were more focused on learning from best practices and the roles researchers could play in this process (National Rural Network of Finland 2013). Action research, participatory and interactive methodologies were highlighted as the key to foster greater engagement of researchers and practitioners. Since the main group of contributors were practitioners working with National Rural Networks (NRNs), their experience came under critical examination. A common feeling was that although researchers frequently participate in official bodies of NRNs, their potential has not yet been fully utilized. Still, there is a serious communication gap between research and practical policy applications in rural development.

Participation of researchers in NRNs is usually limited to an advisory role. They are mainly involved in analyses of legislative proposals, in working groups as thematic experts or commissioned to write reports and case studies. Hence, the delivery of external expertise is a dominating approach across LINSAs in this form. Moreover, participants of the workshop questioned whether this way of providing expertise is actually corresponding with needs of practitioners and viewed as 'too academic', in turn. Working this way may namely miss out explication of tacit knowledge and narratives of diverse stakeholders. The formal nature of scholarly engagement (membership of research institutes in networks) is thus still an insufficient precondition to successful collaborations between research and practice. Success would require additional enhancements with research methods and tools, whereby action research seems to be a possible way forward. Participants of the workshop in Finland proposed that action research methodology should be more promoted at the EU level, so as to embed it in the already existing formal frameworks, e.g. the tenure process.


Hitherto, what has been observed during all the workshops is a general enthusiasm of practitioners to engage with researchers through action research. Thus, one could think that the reason for frequent failure lies in lack of relevant knowledge and experience of scholars in practical work with LINSAs, and missing established linkages to the means to access them. On the other hand, amongst practitioners (especially local level LINSAs) there is a general lack of culture in employing external expertise. In other words, asking for advice and using it efficiently is still unexplored either on a commercial or volunteer basis. That often makes it even more difficult for researchers to enter 'the game', with whatever intentions, methodology and objectives they arrive.

There is also a significant resistance towards action research methodologies within academia. Together with scholarly engagement they are commonly treated as marginal within the mainstream academic practice of rural studies. In Europe the expansion of research in this form is seriously limited by the tenure process that does not sufficiently reward scholarship of engagement. Also, it is restrained by the lack of available research funding, often biased towards urban areas and agricultural technologies. There is thus low attention paid to experimenting with research methodologies and tools, building upon interactions and social learning processes, and which are principally domains of social sciences rather than agricultural ones. On the other hand, representatives of the research sector are not usual participants in practitioners' platforms and rarely follow their real-time developments. There are of course exemptions, but still this kind of practice has remained marginal in official discourses until recently.

Since the views of practitioners advocated use of participatory research methods and tools, we decided to find out what is the capacity of scholars to apply them. One workshop was therefore organised with an intention to involve researchers in discussions on engaged scholarship and ac-

tion research, which took place at the recent congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology (1.08.2013, Florence, Italy). Using the ‘apple tree tool’ we asked participants to share their actual experiences with participatory methods in their research and corresponding learning needs. Results of the workshop proved that visual methods, such as participatory video, and Open Space are the most desired and useful for this work. The importance (and the difficulty) of learning and practicing participatory methodologies in a ‘safe learning environment’, before using them efficiently in the ‘real-life’ conditions, was also stated. In other words, researchers call for capacity building, while at the same time there is an existing knowledge-base that could be mobilised in this community of practice. Some responses revealed also a lack of basic knowledge on available participatory methods, thus raising awareness could be also beneficial. The table below illustrates briefly key findings of the workshop as participants’ narratives.

Table 1. Results of the workshop on participatory research. Source: Own documentation, XXV ESRS Congress, Florence, 1.08.2013

	
<p>What participatory methods have you been using in your research?</p> <p>Open Space; participatory video; social photo matrix; photo stories; drawing your dream city; focus groups; interview, repertory grid; longitudinal study with LEADER end users – this using mixed methods approach; participatory ranking of benefits in community meetings (in evaluation studies); collaboration between community members, LEADER development officers and researchers; writing diaries; concept building sessions (FGI + discussions); webinar</p>	<p>What participatory research methods would you like to learn about?</p> <p>Participatory video; Open Space (how to do it correctly? examples of good / successful one); informal chats about what the issues for the group are; scenario workshops; 6 Hats; Theatre of the Oppressed; environmental-contextual; place-based methods; empowerment evaluation</p>

Moving forward

Due to a growing emphasis on research-policy interfaces in the current EU policy rhetoric, it seems to be a suitable moment to have more reflection on engaged scholarship. Basing on the findings from the SOLINSA project and four workshops, with this paper we hope to be able to outline some possible directions for further research and actions.

First of all, our contributors often pointed out the lack of organised platforms where researchers and practitioners could regularly meet and exchange, especially on their needs and expectations from each other. A good information flow would be necessary to help this communication, next to facilitation and capacity building. For instance, LINSAs may seek sufficient information on specific topics or methodological advice, but do not know how to find a relevant expert / researcher. This can be helped by setting up brokerage services. Through support units of the National Rural Networks, European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability or science shops at universities. Sometimes individuals can also come at hand, if they possess extensive personal networks across the worlds of research and practice and communication skills that allow them to navigate in-between. Specifically, dedicated professionals or institutions in this context are innovation brokers or boundary spanners (Wenger 2000; Howells 2006, Klerxx & Leeuwis 2008; Hermans et al., 2013). The work can be supported with modern IT technologies and facilitation techniques (e.g. match-making). If working on a continuing basis, such platforms could also offer suitable conditions for a joint reflection of researchers and practitioners on the engaged scholarship, thus enhancing this approach.

The second topic concerned academic work conditions and research funding. Workshop participants pointed to the struggles that research entities are facing, caused by rapidly globalising research and expansion of corporate working approaches. This affects their capabilities for attracting motivated students, offering talented researchers competitive salaries and challenging career opportunities. Brain-drain and lack of resources have been visible especially in the former socialist EU Member States, where funding opportunities are becoming scarce. Increasingly, the predominant channels of funding become large, inflexible EU research projects. In addition, research agendas are normally set by academics, having little or nothing to do with everyday rural reality. As trans-disciplinary research is becoming more fashionable on the EU research market, practitioners also attempt on increased involvement. However, winning large projects (e.g. from FP7) is mainly possible for established institutes and researchers that possess enough resources, connections, time and know-how to apply. A joint agenda setting by academics and LINSAs' practitioners are likely to remain marginal. Below we propose a couple of possible ways to overcome this, basing on contributions from our colleagues:

1. Design trans-disciplinary research projects where LINSAs could set the agenda, commission research entities and experts, administer money, etc.;
2. Design small, flexible trans-disciplinary projects, where LINSAs can get expert help on particular issues;
3. Create binding funding opportunities with an obligation to explore more practical problems through action research;
4. Create possibilities for researchers to work in agriculture / rural development on a sabbatical;
5. Build personal connections between interested researchers and practitioners (through meetings, projects, conferences, festivals – like 'researchers' night', etc.);
6. Create an international network of faculties and research institutes that could provide a knowledge-base and serve as a 'resource centre' for trans-disciplinary projects; and
7. Pay more attention to capacity building of younger generations of researchers.

Action research can be here a specific way of engaging scholars with LINSAs. It seems to correspond with various needs of both researchers and practitioners, especially when applied in participatory and highly interactive formats. It is still, however, not commonly recognised as a valuable academic practice, accounting to scholarly merit. Thus, during the workshops it was proposed to include action research and community-engaged scholarly attitude into the tenure process. Promoting action research should be also undertaken at the EU level (e.g. by the European Commission). Some positive examples exist in the latter case already, e.g. in under the FP7 projects

SOLINSA and FarmPath, but the needs for more action-oriented research are rapidly growing. Likewise, many researchers are interested in experimenting with this methodological approach and learn about practical tools that they can use in work with LINSAs or other actors.

Finally, in order to contribute to the theoretical knowledge base of engaged-scholarship, we would suggest investigations going beyond simple analysis of relationships between researchers and practitioners. These are only the starting points for research and as their experiences grow, conditions should be taken into consideration, under which this interface works effectively or not. Further questions to nurture in our investigation: Is an official project or network format a sufficient prerequisite to a successful engaged interaction? Does funding-driven partnership truly foster mutual engagement or is it rather a crisis 'survival' strategy for organisations lacking operational resources? Are research-practice partnerships sufficient means to trigger learning and innovation for sustainable agriculture on the long run?

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