

LEARNING THROUGH ON-GOING EVALUATION OF EIP-AGRI IN SWEDEN

by

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EIP-AGRI IN BRIEF

- EIP-Agri is part of a larger investment in innovations within the Europe 2020 growth strategy known as the European Innovation Partnership
- Sweden allocated about 44 million Euro for EIP-Agri in 2016-2021 to support so-called 'innovation groups' (i.e. Operational Groups) within agriculture, horticulture and reindeer husbandry: tackling a (practical) problem or opportunity by innovation to promote the competitiveness of rural areas and contribute to national environmental protection and climate goals
- Entrepreneurs collaborate with counselors, researchers and representatives from other businesses in an innovation group to solve a problem or challenge.
- Wider networking takes place via EU-based Focus Groups on specific thematics as well as the Rural Networks' Assembly - the EIP-AGRI Network and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)



ON-GOING EVALUATION

- Our research team conducts continuous learning evaluation of the design/organisation and implementation of EIP-Agri in Sweden during the period 2016-2021
- Our research results are regularly communicated with the relevant decision-makers with the aim to improve the process along the way, and have already resulted in some adjustments regarding the organisation and implementation of EIP-Agri
- also adapting our study to emerging issues in the ongoing implementation
- We aim to strike a healthy balance between our role as independent researchers and being constructive by assisting in improving the design/organisation of the policy-making process



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This first stage of our research focuses on:

- perceived obstacles in the application process,
- the roles and assignments of different actors,
- how the actors interact,
- the need of information and support,
- potential tensions and challenges in the decision-making process,
- what can be learned from the process so far and how it might be improved



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Building upon collaborative governance theory (see e.g. Emerson et al. 2012) combined with insights from our previous evaluation research of similar government-funded programmes in nature protection and natural resource management
- Analysing the nature of participation and engagement by public and private actors in the EIP-Agri partnerships, the use of different types of knowledge, as well as the level of trust and legitimacy in the decision-making processes are central to our research
- Studying the potential for learning and catalyst impact of EIP-Agri innovations on a larger societal scale in relation to both national goals and the common EU goals



METHOD AND MATERIAL

- in-depth interviews with officials and participants,
- participant observation in decision-making meetings,
- analyses of documents (i.e. decision/meeting protocols, applications etc.),
- a planned web survey among the applicants in the winter of 2017,
- and a screening of EIP-Agri programmes in other European countries
- So far, we have studied several rounds of applications, attended several meetings with the support and decision-making staff for the programme, and interviewed eighteen key individuals from those groups through semi-structured telephone conversations



PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS (I)

- Administrative set-up of EIP-Agri took more time than was initially expected, setting up the two processes for the decision-making including funding criteria for group support and project support respectively
- So far (April 2017) some 30 projects have been proposed for funding, of which 9 already granted, and approximately 150 innovations groups have been granted
- Innovation projects are first assessed by the Advisory Committee, consisting of an independent expert group headed by the responsible officer at the Agricultural Agency, which ranks the projects and makes evaluation statements. The final decision is then made by the head officer at the Agricultural Agency based on the Advisory Committee statements, but often complemented by further enquiries to the applicants
- Decisions about innovation groups were easier since these receive only small money and the selection is made solely within the Agricultural Agency



PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS (II)

- The quality of applications has improved, but many still need complementary information before decision-making is possible – creating a heavy administrative burden
- 3 issues have frequently been in need for further clarification: the ‘innovativeness’ of the project as such, budgetary issues, and its market potential i.e. the plan on how the innovation will become spread and generally put to use
- Some concern about the relationship between the group and project support since the two processes are running in parallel
- How experts are appointed and used has been brought up by our participant observations and interviews, incl. the role of the support group



FURTHER ISSUES TO STUDY

In the planned web survey with applicants and through further interviews, documentation and participant observation:

- Whether the rather difficult application process for projects refrains less resourced applicants from engaging in EIP-Agri,
- The distributional effects across different types of innovation projects, geo-graphical scales and with regard to gender aspects
- The potential effects of the funded innovation projects and groups on mobilization for sustainability (together with a parallel evaluation)
- How the relations and division of authority between the decision-making group in the Agricultural Agency, the Advisory Committee and the support group can be improved, incl. with the the larger rural development network and international networking



COMPARISON ACROSS EUROPE?

- We would like to initiate some comparative research across countries: rules for funding and the administrative set-up for EIP-Agri vary across Europe, which could bring further insights into critical factors for implementation success
- There is some variation in the level of funding across Europe and whether joint funding is required, which could be examined as to how this affects the nature, content and sustainability of the innovation
- How EIP-Agri is set up and functioning and the nature of monitoring and evaluation systems in the various country contexts, which could result in further in-depth research on the challenges of monitoring and evaluating innovation programmes
- We have learned that Sweden applies a somewhat stricter definition of 'innovation' than other European countries, thus highlighting the difficulty in finding a coherent understanding of what innovation really means



FUTURE PLANS

- A possibility to gather researchers at the 5th Nordic Ruralities Conference on Challenged Ruralities: Welfare states under pressure 14-16 May 2018 in Vingsted, Denmark
- Sub-theme: Politics, governance, local capacities
- Which strategies are most successful in terms of building innovation capacity for sustainable rural development? What can be learnt from comparing innovation programmes in different countries and rural contexts? We welcome contributions that discuss single or multiple case studies of innovation projects and partnerships in rural areas, the decision-making, implementation and evaluation of such programmes, and comparison of innovation initiatives across different sectors and/or countries.

