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STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN ACTION PLANS AND/OR POLICIES FOR ORGANIC FOOD AND FARMING – ORGAP PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the EU project ORGAP (www.orgap.org) recommendations are made how to consider and evaluate stakeholder involvement. Different stakeholder perspectives (organic principles, market, public goods) have to bee taken into account in the different stages of an action plan/policy (design, policy formulation, decision, implementation and evaluation). Participatory methods can be useful if sufficient resources and time are available.

Introduction

The EU Commission has outlined in its white paper on European Governance (EC 2001) a set of good governance principles with the objective to "open up policy making to make it more inclusive and accountable". In June 2004 the European Commission released the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming (EU-OAP). In the 3-year EU funded research project ORGAP conducted from 2005-2008, a toolbox for the evaluation of action plans has been developed based on the analysis of national and the European Organic Action Plan. Hereby special emphasis was given to stakeholder involvement.

Material and methods

Two series of national workshops in 8 countries were conducted with stakeholders and one with the IFOAM-EU Group. Experiences and conclusions from the ORGAP Project regarding stakeholder involvement are described in ORGAPET, the ORGAP evaluation toolbox (Lampkin et al., 2008) as well as in a resource manual for the organic sector on development, implementation and evaluation of organic action plans (Schmid et al. 2008). See project website: www.orgap.org

Fig. 1: IFOAM-EU Group discussion of European Organic Action Plan (Photo: IFOAM-EU)

Results

The discussions with stakeholders in the ORGAP project showed clearly that both for the legitimacy of an action plan as well as for a successful implementation of it, the views, advice and support of the different stakeholder groups are essential in all five relevant development stages of the plan: the design (agenda setting), policy formulation, decision, practical implementation and evaluation.

The EU-OAP includes proposals that emphasize three different perspectives of organic agriculture:

- The market perspective (response to consumer demand) as a main driver of the development.
- The public goods perspective (environmental benefits) as the main reason for promoting organic food and farming by means of public support.
- The organic values perspective which implies adaptations of the definition of the basic principles of organic food and farming. When deciding on which stakeholders to involve in any stage it is necessary to identify all stakeholders considered relevant to the issue and to clarify for each of them which perspective they represent in first priority (e.g. farmers associations for value perspective).

Figure 2 may serve as a general model and instrument for selecting which stakeholders to involve at which stage of the policy processes as well as for the evaluation of their involvement. Perspectives and status as purely organic or mixed organic/non-organic are constant while centrality – i.e. the position in the core (like farmers) or periphery (like public administration dealing with framework conditions) - may shift depending on the case and on the stage in the policy process.

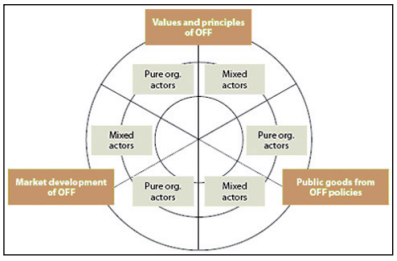

Fig. 2: Identifying relevant stakeholder interests – different perspectives of organic agriculture

The distinction between these stakeholder groups might be more difficult in reality because:

- the perspectives and activities are overlapping;
- relevant stakeholders may include even stakeholders that combine organic food and farming activities with non-organic activities;
- the emphasis given to which perspectives might depend on the aims of the policy in question. It may be relevant to involve stakeholders with access to legitimacy, information or influence relevant for each of the stages of an organic action plan/policy cycle.

Finally, the decision on which stakeholders to involve, in which way and to what degree depends much on the concrete issue at stake.
The outcome of stakeholder involvement will depend on the general political interest in organic farming and on how political conflicts between different actor groups are handled.

Conclusions: participatory approaches to involve stakeholders

Stakeholder involvement demands careful preparations and sufficient time for consultation at any stage of the policy process and of appropriate methods used to promote participation. Stakeholder involvement may be achieved through:

- workshops with representatives of all stakeholder;
- focus group discussions (useful to explore thematic areas and collect view points and ideas);
- thematic seminars with special interest groups (useful for formulating implementation strategies);
- electronic consultation or discussion forums (online) for inclusion of a wider public;
- direct interviews with stakeholders (useful to have immediate feedback with regard to specific questions). There is no one set of techniques to be mechanically applied in all contexts for all participants, but a diverse range of possible techniques which need to be flexibly adapted to.

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