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Generating and transferring grassroots innovations in a multi-actor participatory process

I. Herzon¹, M. Puig De Morales², D. Gaki³, Y. Kazakova⁴, J. Moran⁵, T. Pinto Correia⁶, I.M Jitea⁷, G. Vlahos⁸, I. Faraslis³, M. Ljung⁹

1 Department of Agricultural Sciences, P.O. Box 27, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland; HELSUS, P. O. 20 Box 65, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland;

2 CIHEAM - IAM. Montpellier, 3191, route de Mende, 34093 Montpellier Cedex 5, France

3 Laboratory of Rural Space, Department of Planning Engineering, Planning & Regional Development, University of Thessaly, Pedion Areos Volos N. Magnesia, 38333 Greece

4 Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity, 9 Chehov Str., Sofia, Bulgaria

5 Department of Natural Sciences, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Galway H91T8NW, Ireland

6 ICAAM, Institute for Mediterranean Agrarian and Environmental Sciences, Polo da Mitra, Apartado 54, 7006-554 Évora, Portugal

7 Economic Sciences Department, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca, Romania

8 Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Agricultural University of Athens, Iera Odos 75, GR 11855, Greece

9 Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Smedjan, SE-53231 Skara, Sweden

Abstract

A thematic network called HNV-Link (High Nature Value Farming: Learning, Innovation and Knowledge) was launched under Horizon 2020 in 2016. It brought together 13 research, advisory, regional administration organisations, farmer, LEADER and other civic groups from 10 countries in an innovation brokering process. These agricultural areas are renowned for their outstanding natural and cultural values. Through a structured participatory process, multi-actor teams engaged in establishing the baseline conditions of their activities; identifying innovative solutions and innovation needs; and matched these with those of other teams. The multi-actor groups conducted cross-visits and learning trips to exchange innovations and expertise, and developed innovation transfer plans for their own regions. The network created over 100 outcomes illustrating its participatory brokering process. This includes innovations linked to identified needs in each area, and educational resources with hands-on teaching activities. Over three years, HNV-Link reached an estimated minimum of 400,000 people through about 500 activities and outputs. The marginality of High Nature Value farming areas in mainstream research and development means that their innovation needs and solutions are rarely explored in academic fora. This transnational network filled the gap by strengthening the grassroots innovations, with farmers at the core of the process.

Keywords: High Nature Value farmland, peer-learning, rural livelihoods, thematic network

Introduction

High Nature Value (HNV) farmland refers to those areas in Europe where agricultural activities support and are associated with exceptionally high biodiversity (EIP-AGRI, 2016). These areas are also important components of cultural heritage, quality agricultural products, and rural employment. Low intensity livestock farming based on extensive grazing is the most common HNV production type (*ibid*). Abandonment, intensification of production, and socio-economic decline are long-standing their threats. Despite numerous public benefits, these areas receive only limited attention in agricultural policy, research and extension.

In order to fill in the gap, the HNV-Link thematic network (High Nature Value Farming: Learning, Innovation and Knowledge, 2016-2019) was launched under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The aim was to build a multi-actor network which identifies and spreads innovations while strengthening HNV farming actors in a participatory approach. Thematic networks are a new format of work in the EU Horizon 2020 programme, which aims at encouraging coordination and support actions by bringing together actors from science and practice. This serves to create practical outputs on a specific theme within agricultural research and innovation. Here we demonstrate how the innovation brokering for multi-actor groups was implemented and reflect on key success factors.

Project approach

HNV-Link network developed a novel approach to the innovation brokering process based on a structured participatory process at local and European level. The process was initiated by mobilizing existing local multi-actor groups or developing these further if the initial group was weak and under-represented by critical stakeholders. The main stakeholders were research, advisory, local and regional administration organisations, farmers and farming organisations, LEADER and other civic groups. Each group had a coordinator to liaise with the network. The project engaged 10 such multi-actor groups called Learning Areas (LA) in Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.

The entry point for each LA group was to assess the context of their territory from its development perspective (e.g. environmental and socioeconomic character, governance, challenges and opportunities) and to co-develop a shared vision of a desirable future for each LA in a participatory grassroots process. Simultaneously, the LA groups identified the existing innovations of relevance for their HNV territories and innovation needs, i.e. persistent challenges that could be overcome with an innovative solution. The network deployed four innovation themes (EIP-AGRI, 2016): Social and Institutional, Regulatory Framework and Policy, Products and Markets, and Farm Techniques and Management.

Each LA team developed an innovation action plan which is an iterative and reflexive tool, aimed at coherent and complementary local strategies that account for the LA vision and its environmental and socio-economic context. Next the teams implemented their action plans reinforcing the local governance of the HNV farming systems. The LA teams matched their innovation needs with the innovative solutions available within the network at a HNV farming innovation fair. The network organised innovation brokering activities through 20 cross-visits (over 250 participants, mostly farmers). The role of the LA coordinators operating as “HNV Innovation Brokers” was particularly critical at this stage in engaging local stakeholders and ensuring the effectiveness of the learning processes.

Cross-visits proved beneficial for enhancing motivation, and strengthening collaboration among the teams. Intense discussions revealed to both the visiting and hosting teams that despite different locations and administrative settings, the challenges facing HNV farmers across Europe are very similar. Being exposed to innovations and the catalyzers behind them inspired and motivated the cross-visits participants to “try-it-at-home”. The multi-actor profile of the groups ensured that the necessary expertise and skills were available to formulate transferable “at-home-solutions”, and develop new ideas on adding values to HNV areas and goods. This strengthened collaboration between the LAs has out lasted the project.

At the later regional meetings the local stakeholders analysed how the most relevant innovations could be transferred and adapted to their territorial context. Over 750 stakeholders (30% farmers) participated in 17 regional meetings. In many cases, the meetings were coordinated with complementary events to enable higher impact.

Effective, continuous and diverse communication across and outside the network was vital for keeping up the network team spirit and gaining the attention of outsiders, some of which became collaborators. In three years, the HNV-Link project reached an estimated minimum of 400,000 people through its 500 activities and outputs. It produced over 100 outcomes illustrating its participatory innovation brokering process, including educational resources with hands-on teaching activities. Each output was carefully tailored to a specific user group or groups. The whole network was involved in creating these, thus ensuring their relevance across territorial cultures and contexts. Importantly, the outputs remain available post-project online through the project website and through major partner organizations.

Reflection on the process and conclusions

The network’s major achievement was strengthening the grassroots innovation process with farmers at the core of the process. Supporting HNV farmers’ empowerment and cooperation with other stakeholders in a forward vision-oriented innovative process is key to improving their working and living conditions. This needs to occur while maintaining the exceptional environmental values of HNV farming regions.

A central finding was that for practically all the innovation needs that the local teams identified, there were existing examples of relevant solutions in other locations. A challenge is to spread and apply existing innovations more widely. This requires favourable social, institutional and regulatory conditions. Farmers meeting farmers across the network was the most rewarding experience as many video-testimonies on the project website demonstrate.

The engagement of multi-actors groups at local level was crucial. In several cases, it was an outsider to the farming community who performed the role of “catalyzer”, engaging people in the visioning and peer-learning innovation process. Motivated and locally trusted catalyzers proved to be critically important for sustaining an effective innovation process. Through a network such as HNV-Link these leaders can get support and encouragement.

In the words of the external evaluators, the network has “delivered exceptional results” and was “effective in implementing participatory processes” that “supported local empowerment, effective commitment of local stakeholders to HNV innovations and ownership of the project results”.

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