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## **URBAN AND RURAL AGRO-FOOD SYSTEMS AS A FACTOR OF LOCAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – SETTING PRIORITIES AND ISSUES OF GOVERNANCE**

### **1. Introduction**

The focus of this paper is the importance of issues of governance in the context of local sustainable development. An aim is to identify some important challenges in research on urban and rural agro-food systems. First, within this context, the importance of setting priorities in local sustainable development is discussed. Second, the relation between good governance and local sustainable development is elaborated. Third, two case studies on the importance of institutions for food quality and the relation between quality enforcement mechanisms and governance structures in the food supply system are presented. Finally, some issues of the relation between investment, economic activity and sustainable development are discussed. An important finding is that analysis of governance structures and of stakeholders' interests is of crucial importance for achieving local sustainable development in the agro-food system. This may lead to the identification of priorities in the process of sustainable development, while the identification of factors in the institutional environment and governance structures that may hamper such development makes it more likely that change will be successful.

## 2. Local sustainable development in the context of the agro-food system – setting priorities

Kistkowski [2004, 87] defines sustainable development as “a global development process which minimises the consumption of natural resources and limits the factors that harm the environment, through processes of improving the economy and raising the standard of living.” Although this definition has some weaknesses, it highlights some important aspects of local sustainable development within the context of the agro-food system. From this definition it is not clear whether minimising natural resource use or raising the standard of living has priority. It is also not clear whether the use of natural resources may increase or not, *i.e.* whether strong sustainability (leaving ecological capital intact for future generations) or weak sustainability (ecological capital may be substituted by, for example, physical capital) is advocated. However, it clearly shows the importance of setting priorities [see Lomborg, 2004]. Although it may be difficult to establish priorities, it is necessary to do so for practical reasons. Improvement of everything at the same moment is impossible. Furthermore, some aims of sustainability are easier to achieve and/or may be regarded as more important.

Why should we prioritise? Can we say that one problem is more urgent than another? As Lomborg argues, the economic reason for prioritisation is simple and crude. As scarcity exists (factors of production are limited while human wants are rather unlimited), we have to make choices. We cannot do everything at the same time. For many people such reasoning may be unacceptable, which hampers prioritisation. But “[i]f we don’t [prioritize] we end up doing less well than we otherwise could have done [2004, 2]”. The following basic economic questions appear: what to do, how to do it, when, where, for whom, by whom and how much. The problem of choice may be a cruel one. Lomborg, using data from Hahn [1996, 236], gives the example of new medical treatments that may cost several millions of dollars to save one human life a year, while in a third world country this would cost 62 dollars. However, on the local level there are also many examples. On one hand public money may be used for not always useful investments, or just be wasted, while on the other hand ill people cannot be treated in hospital. It seems to be clear that the issue of governance is essential here.

Flynn and Netherwood [2004] argue that the language we use is not the most important, but that the principles of sustainable development are integrated into local development strategies. Many people may not understand or misunderstand the term sustainable development. At such a moment the use of terms such as quality of life or well-being may

be more useful. According to the authors "[t]he terms well-being and sustainable development can be interchanged provided that the former is used to mean the simultaneous meeting of economic, social and environmental goals. Meeting one or two of these goals may not be sustainable. [2004, 9]" Thus, for local sustainable development it may be important to carry out research on perceptions of sustainable development and related words with similar meaning, as for action it is important to create a common language.

According to Flynn and Netherwood, sustainable development means meeting social, economic and environmental goals. An interesting and difficult question is whether there may be a trade-off between different goals. May one goal be achieved at the cost of another goal, or should only a kind of Pareto-improvement be allowed, where, for example, an economic goal may only be achieved without deteriorating environmental or social aspects? In order to answer this question, analysis is needed on a case-to-case basis of specific elements of all three general goals. For example, can an increase in environmental pollution be accepted for the sake of an increase in production? In fact, such a trade-off is accepted in reality, while many limits are set on pollution. A discussion on this issue is of great importance, as in many developing countries solving the poverty problem may be priority number 1, while the environment or social issues (e.g. democracy) are neglected. Establishment of goals and which trade-offs are acceptable and which are not is necessary in order to establish a proper sustainable development policy, as the reality of the market does not really take environmental issues into consideration, as well as many other important issues of which the benefits are rather indirect or long-term. When talking about urban and rural agro-food systems as a factor of local sustainable development, an important question is whether development of one part of the system may be at the cost of another part of the system. May poorer rural areas develop at the cost of developed urban areas? Which criteria should be taken into consideration? Which trade-offs are allowed? This is an issue that needs deeper research.

Lomborg [2004] discusses the importance of the prioritisation of global issues. "On the national level we have well-established institutions and procedures (government and appropriate laws) that force us to make these choices more clearly". "[T]here may be strong institutional rigidity to prioritization between different agencies [2004, 1]." Thus, on the global level competencies are not clearly defined, hampering the setting of priorities. However, this issue is also important for local sustainable development priorities. It is impossible to analyse and achieve local sustainability without taking global processes into consideration, as

each region is to a greater or lesser extent part of the global economy and is influenced by processes of globalisation. Furthermore, local authorities, who should know best what should happen in order to achieve sustainability, as in general they have more information than central government agencies, have often limited competencies and have to deal with priorities set by central government agencies. The problem described by Lomborg appears when it is not clear which central government agency or ministry is responsible for what. This problem may be especially relevant to former socialist countries, as many competencies have not been clarified yet. While EU accession on the one hand may make things less clear, as EU rules have to be interpreted and applied first, this may positively influence matters, as the EU has a more stable institutional framework than the former socialist countries. Transferring competencies to local authorities and stimulating the participation of the population may be effective when they make use of their greater knowledge of the local situation. However, as Rose-Ackerman [2004, 316] writes: "more anthropologically informed work suggests limits to participatory models in hierarchical rural societies. Decentralisation can be an invitation to local corruption and self-dealing if not managed effectively." As Brown [2001, see Rose-Ackerman, 2004, 319] argues, there is a learning process in exercising responsibility, thus it takes time before people who are not used to political power can do this. Thus, good governance is of crucial importance for local sustainable development. This is elaborated in more detail in Section 3.

There is the question of who sets priorities. The argument here is similar to the argument regarding dangers when trying to introduce more efficient institutions. As there may be high transaction costs for obtaining appropriate information, strong interest groups may exist (*e.g.* lobbying for unsustainable measures which are advantageous to them, but disadvantageous to society as a whole), and increasing sustainability has features of a public good (non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption), measures may be taken that do not promote sustainability [see Platje, 2004].

With respect to improving sustainability in the agro-food system, priorities for improvement should be set. General information should be collected on stakeholders and stakeholder involvement, existing urban-rural links in the food logistic chain and information on issues such as market structures (no. of enterprises, market share), property rights structure, value-added created, employment and income, income distribution, poverty and access to decent food at reasonable prices, output, location, area covered, import / export, share in sector output, institutional environment (*e.g.* quality requirements and enforcement), infrastruc-

ture, environmental impact of production and consumption activities, awareness, etc. [see Platje and Kałasznik, 2005]. This should create the base for analysing whether "agro-food districts" can be a tool for local sustainable development, especially in former socialist countries where, generally speaking, many rural areas were negatively affected by the system transformation. The idea of "agro-food districts", developed by Barbara Despinye-Żochowska [2004], is based on the development of small and medium sized firms and farms, which traditionally create more employment than large enterprises.

Within this context, analysis of income and employment generation within agriculture itself is relevant, as this activity is based in rural areas, and shows a tendency to lag behind when the total economy grows. Agriculture contributes about 3% to the GDP of the old EU, while creating 5% of total employment, although this percentage is declining. As Kelly [2004] argues, the large subsidies (about half of the EU budget) may be too costly and bureaucracy wasteful, while global competitiveness is declining. However, although creating a small part of GDP, while the output per worker (and as a result income) is lower than in other sectors, a question remains as to whether this is bad for rural areas where unemployment is high. An important point is increasing rural income and creating jobs. In this field basic food processing and distribution and the creation of local markets may be effective, as here higher value added is created and the barriers on the international markets may be too large. Without state intervention, traditional farming has a tendency to increase in scale, while employment decreases. Thus, so-called multifunctional rural development [see Sokołowska, 2004] based on the development of food-processing and services in rural areas and "agro-food districts" and provision of logistics services may be an opportunity. For example, food products such as bread may be produced in rural areas or smaller towns, while the producer sets up a distribution chain in urban areas, where the demand is the largest.

### 3. Good governance

New Institutional Economics (NIE) looks at the influence of formal rules of the game (*e.g.* property rights), informal rules of the game (*e.g.* culture, mental models) and enforcement of the rules of the game by what Platje [2004] calls "institutional governance" (organisational structures such as the judiciary, police, tax office, government agencies, etc.) on economic activity (carried out by governance structures, where the "play of the game" takes place). The institutional environment (formal and informal institutions, "institutional governance") together with

“hardware” (e.g. infrastructure, information systems) and transaction costs (the costs of concluding, monitoring and enforcing an exchange or transaction) determine which governance structures are most effective.

An important question is how the institutional environment stimulates the achievement of the goals of the system. The aim of a company, in general, is short-term profit, which is often in contradiction with sustainable development, as it may be at the expense of the environment (negative external effects) and standard of living for workers (e.g. low wages, job uncertainty, unemployment). The aim of society may be an improvement in the standard of living. This is very often measured by real disposable income, access to education and health care, and so on. So income distribution is relevant, and a question is whether the “trickle down” effect of economic growth, where the benefits are distributed among society as a whole, and not among a small group, functions. However, the focus of the system is often on economic activity, while social and environmental issues receive lower priority. Priorities are set by the institutional environment. They can be written down in laws, but also be culturally determined. A question is whether the priorities set by or existing in the institutional environment stimulate sustainable development. When this is not the case, what should be done to change this? In short, to analyse this the focal point of NIE analysis should change from factors stimulating economic activity as such to factors stimulating sustainable economic activity. In order to achieve sustainable development, good governance is required, as even when new rules are set, they still have to be implemented.

Rose-Ackerman [2004, 301] defines good governance as anti-corruption campaigns, incentives to work efficiently and the lack of possibilities for small interest groups or elites “to capture the state and exert excess influence on policy”. Corruption, “the misuse of public power for private or political gains” [2004, 301], in general negatively influences economic performance, as well as sustainable development. Furthermore, corruption creates an interest in the existing status quo, and powerful groups may defend their vested interests.

“Some reforms, if well designed and implemented, would have large benefits and very low costs. Unfortunately, they also have serious distribution effects, and those who gain from the status quo are frequently powerful economic and political actors capable of blocking reforms. [Rose-Ackerman, 2004, 302]”

Thus, when aiming at changes in the agro-food system in the direction of local sustainable development, corruption on different levels of the government should be taken into account.



As Rose-Ackerman [2004, 304] argues, good governance has a two-way relationship with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. On the one hand, good governance is related to an increase in GDP per capita. Corruption tends to hamper investment, as transaction costs and uncertainty are likely to increase. Furthermore, the informal economy may expand. Due to corruption, enforcement of formal institutions such as property rights is less clear, and as a result more value finds itself in the public domain. This means that property rights are unclearly defined or delineated and that economic actors have a stronger incentive to spend resources to obtain value out of the public domain by way of obtaining such property rights. In other words, as Platje [2004, 30] argues: "In general, the higher the transaction costs, the larger the value in the public domain. Consequently, there are more opportunities for rent-seeking, stronger incentives for redistributive activity and weaker incentives for productive activity." Thus, even when the local government is not corrupt, the economic system in the country as a whole is of importance, as much depends on the functioning of *e.g.* the judiciary and central government. On the other hand, when GDP per capita increases, the demand for democracy, transparency and integrity of the government may increase. This last point may be an argument for corrupt officials to impede reforms. Generally speaking, corruption is an indication of a weak economic system, where transaction costs may be high and incentives for sustainable productive activities weak.

Rose-Ackerman [2004, 310, based on Crook and Manor, 1998, 42 and Swamy et al., 2001] gives a strong argument for the importance of female involvement in issues of sustainable development. Survey evidence suggests that when more females participate in government, the level of corruption is lower, as women in general have a more negative (or less positive) attitude to corruption than men.

The vested interest argument was related to corruption. However, any change in a system has redistributive effects. Some people gain, while other may gain less or even lose when something changes, even in the case of no corruption. Thus, an analysis of what stakeholders gain and lose from a change is important, in order to develop a path of change that tries to give as many people as possible an interest in the change (incentive-compatibility). Furthermore, people may not be aware of the advantages or disadvantages of certain changes. Making people conscious of costs and benefits is an essential element in changing a system successfully. It is rather obvious that when we make people aware of advantages, they may be more likely to support change. However, it also may be beneficial to make people aware of disadvantages. This is a complex issue. On the one hand, people may stop supporting change when

they become aware of disadvantages that touch themselves directly. But if they realise later, when the change has started, that they lose something, they may be inclined to hamper the process of change in some way, so the outcome will not be as desired. A problem that remains to be solved is not only that short-term and direct benefits or costs are more often taken into consideration than indirect and long-term costs and benefits, but also the individual assessment of costs and benefits.

#### **4. Two case studies: institutions and food quality; quality enforcement mechanisms and governance structures in food supply systems**

##### **4.1. Formal rules guaranteeing food quality and safety may have adverse effects**

An article by Azevedo and Bankuti [2002] gives an example of how inefficient "institutional governance" and high transaction costs may lead to a decrease in food safety with the introduction of food quality standards (formal rules). An important issue is the costs of complying to formal rules. There are transaction costs for producers in order to fulfil quality standards. On the other hand, there are costs for an agency monitoring whether producers fulfil the standards. Added to this, when new rules are introduced, there is always uncertainty about the exact interpretation of the rules, while producers and agencies that should monitor and enforce these rules ("institutional governance") may negotiate on their interpretation. Thus, there may be high transaction costs connected with the fulfilment of quality standards, which together with a weak enforcement mechanism gives incentives for activity in informal markets. A feature of many food products is that they are rather homogeneous. This creates a problem of asymmetric information, as the product itself does not provide the consumer with information on whether he is buying in the formal or informal market. In such a situation, the market for ecological food products may completely disappear (adverse selection) and eco-labelling may be completely ineffective, as the monitoring of the labelling fails. Informal food markets negatively influence economic activity, as the difficulty to enforce property rights in court, due to the illegal nature of the business, hampers investment and creates difficulties in enforcing contracts. Furthermore, access to capital markets is limited while the time-horizon taken into consideration for investments and activities shortens. Finally, there may be a large social cost in the form of lower food quality, threatening public health.



#### 4.2. Food quality enforcement mechanisms and governance of food supply systems

Raynaud et al [2005] in their article "Alignment between Quality Enforcement Devices and Governance Structures in the Agro-food Vertical Chains" put forward the general hypothesis that the governance structure that exists in the agro-food supply chain is determined by the type of quality enforcement mechanisms which reduce quality uncertainty for consumers. Their analysis is of great importance for issues related to *e.g.* eco-labelling and its influence on the food supply chain. In Azevedo and Bankuti's [2002] analysis the focus was on adverse effects of quality control in the case of high transaction costs and inefficient "institutional governance". Here the focus is on how institutions such as reputation for a private brand name and the public certification system for the PDO (Protected Denomination of Origin) products influence opportunities for opportunistic behaviour and the level of transaction costs and determine the governance structure. The fundamental difference between private reputation and the public certification system for PDO products is the enforcement mechanism. The quality assurance system of which private reputation is the basis is self-enforcing. In fact, a good name provides a signal to the customer about the quality of the product. The public certification system for the PDO relies on a quality label/certification and third-party enforcement by a public agency. It was argued earlier that the effects of quality labelling can be negative in the case of high transaction costs of complying and inefficient "institutional governance". However, when "institutional governance" is efficient in the enforcement of quality, transaction costs decrease, as the possibilities for opportunistic behaviour (lying and cheating) [Molho, 1997] decrease, while the governance structure comes closest to a free market, putting downward pressure on prices.

Raynayd et al. argue that the choice of the governance structure depends on quality strategies by agents in the supply chain. Every food product goes through different stages of the logistic chain. For example, the supply chain of potatoes starts with seed companies. The potato is produced by farmers or agricultural companies, goes through different stages of processing, and reaches the consumer via the wholesale and retail trade or via restaurants, etc. [Yakovleva and Flynn, 2004a, 16]. The final quality of the product does not only depend on the person or firm that gives the product its brand name. Suppose that John sells his well-known brand of ecological fries. The quality of these fries depends on the seeds the farmers use, the way of growing the potatoes (in the case of cheese and milk, the feeding of cows), the way of harvesting the potatoes, the transport of the potatoes, processing, packaging, etc. Al-

though the suppliers may promise to produce and process according to certain procedures, there exists the problem of opportunistic behaviour as suppliers may lower the quality (e.g. to reduce their costs) or delay supply. At such a moment, if John wants to guarantee the quality of his product and not reduce the value of his brand name, more control is needed in the supply chain, especially of those agents who most influence the quality of the product, where specified rules for production have to be enforced and specific inputs may be used. Thus, the supplier needs to make specific investments in production especially for John (transaction-specific investment). At such a moment vertical integration may result in reducing the problem of opportunistic behaviour. Governance structures tend to become more hierarchical, reducing competition. An example is frozen fries producers contracting potato growing to farmers who contractually have to fulfil strict production conditions.

In the case of PDO this problem is less apparent. The official certificate reduces the specificity of the brand name and as a result the possibilities for opportunistic behaviour. In such a case vertical integration in the supply chain is less likely to take place. Raynaud et al. emphasise that brand name cannot realistically play the role of a guarantee of quality for small firms. PDO may, from a transaction cost point of view, be the most attractive option for the many small agricultural producers in a country such as Poland.

## **5. Investment, economic activity and sustainable development**

One of the conditions for achieving sustainable development is investment in order to increase production and as a result income for people. An important question is how this can be done most effectively and in a sustainable way. Generally speaking, private firms have stronger incentives for economic activity than other types of ownership, because of the direct interest of the owner in profit. One way to stimulate economic activity is reducing bureaucracy and limiting the amount of rules for companies, in order to lower transaction costs and to stimulate economic activity. “[F]irms would be more productive if the government removed the rules and regulations that make entry and operation costly. [Rose-Ackerman, 2004, 333]” However, there are limits to such a policy. First of all, since economic activity should stimulate sustainable development, transaction costs for environmentally-unsound activities and other activities that lower welfare should not be reduced. Rules should exist to assure product quality and safety, worker safety, etc. Further-

more, as is argued in economic development theory, one question is whether an investment is labour-intensive or capital-intensive. Job-creation is fundamental for sustainable development, as unemployment is one of the reasons for poverty. Thus, when an investment increases efficiency by saving labour, then new jobs should be created somewhere else. A problem exists in local agro-food systems in rural areas. Many jobs exist in the service sector, but most of these jobs are created in urban areas. Thus, investment in the agro-food system should rather be labour-intensive or labour creating, as otherwise depopulation of rural areas and/or impoverishment may be the result.

In order to find a general strategy, pilot projects may be a proper strategy. As Rose-Ackerman writes:

"Unresolved empirical issues limit the estimates of the relative cost-effectiveness of different strategies and the ways in which different alternatives interact. Thus an option may be better than the status quo, but not necessarily better than another proposed reform. Furthermore, some of the options have never been tried on a large scale and have never been subject to systematic efforts to measure their effectiveness. Thus, reformers need to design experiments and pilot programmes to test the value of options that appear promising. [Rose-Ackerman, 2004, 336]"

It is important that projects which, among other things, aim at the improvement of governance, should have a research component. This is needed in order to measure "progress (or its opposite) by providing information on background conditions, tracking the design and implementation of reform and measuring outputs [Rose-Ackerman, 2004, 337-8]."

## 6. Concluding remarks

In this article the importance of setting priorities and governance in researching sustainable development in general, and urban and rural agro-food systems as a factor of local sustainable development in particular, have been discussed. Analysis of governance structures and stakeholder interests may be a very important tool in identifying priorities for sustainable development and to implement desired changes. This should be accompanied by research on perception of issues of sustainable development in order to create a common language, which may reduce the information and negotiation costs of developing and implementing sustainable changes.

A simple economic reason for setting priorities is the existence of scarcity. However, an important question to be researched is whether trade-offs between different goals are permissible, and if yes, to what extent. This is relevant, as the market system sets priorities, which are of

ten not sustainable. Within the urban-rural context, an important question is whether development of poorer rural areas may be pursued at the expense of more developed urban areas. However, within rural and urban areas there are also distributive effects of change.

When setting priorities at the local level, an important issue is what priorities exist on the national level. Furthermore, local authorities often have limited competencies, while in former socialist countries it may be unclear which government agency or administrative unit is responsible for what. This not only makes the setting of priorities more difficult, but also increases the transaction costs of change at the local level, as, in terms of property rights economics, property rights are poorly delineated, which weakens incentives for change. This is of particular importance as sustainable development possesses features of a public good (non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption) and a merit good. Society as a whole gains, as the quality of life improves, but who is willing to exert themselves if the benefits are distributed among a large group of free riders? Thus, stimulating sustainable development, which normally is already a difficult thing, may become extremely difficult, due to unclear competencies which is accompanied by high transaction costs of change.

Good governance is of crucial importance in issues of sustainability. When the rules of the game are changed, organisational structures such as local governments, organisations representing different stakeholders, etc., have to implement these rules. As the case study on food quality shows, weak enforcement and high transaction costs may lead to adverse effects of measures to improve food quality. The existence of corruption hampers sustainable development. Even when local government functions properly, a corrupt central government and/or judiciary complicates matters, increasing the transaction costs of and weakening incentives for sustainable development. Analysis of which stakeholders gain and which lose, and how much, may be helpful in order to create a path of change which provides benefits to as many stakeholders as possible, facilitating change (incentive-compatibility).

Finally, the relevance of pilot projects having a research component to finding sustainable investment opportunities has been discussed. Pilot projects are of particular relevance in explorative studies, when co-operation with stakeholders is of great importance for the success of the project.

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