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"Uneven processes of rural change"

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Learning through on-going evaluation of EIP-Agri in Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

EIP-Agri is part of a larger investment in innovations within the Europe 2020 growth strategy known as the *European Innovation Partnership*, hence the acronym EIP. The Government in Sweden has allocated about 44 million Euro for EIP-Agri in 2016-2021 through the EU Rural Development Programme to support so-called 'innovation groups' (i.e. Operational Groups Art. 61-61) within agriculture, horticulture and reindeer husbandry. The innovations should 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. Through complementary skills and new perspectives in such partnerships the chances that an innovation can be launched are expected to increase. By close follow-up research of the process and outcome of EIP-Agri, our research team conducts ongoing evaluation of the organisation and implementation of EIP-Agri in Sweden during the period 2016-2021. Our research results are therefore to be regularly communicated with the relevant decision-makers with the aim to improve the process along the way (cf. Ahnberg et al. 2010; Svensson et al. 2009). We will also adapt our study to emerging issues in the ongoing implementation of the EIP-Agri in Sweden. Our mandate is thus to strike a healthy balance between our role as independent researchers and being constructive by assisting in improving the organisation of the policy-making process.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study builds 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. In particular, 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 the analysis. Administrative support and set-up in the EIP-Agri programme should provide a fair process for the applicants as well as relevant expertise to ensure innovative solutions with

sufficient market potential to promote competitiveness and environmental and climate goals of EIP-Agri. We will further study 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.

Different methods are applied in this evaluation, ranging from in-depth interviews with officials and participants, participant observation in decision-making meetings, analyses of documents (i.e. decision/meeting protocols, applications etc.), a web survey among the applicants in the fall 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. Our monitoring and evaluation in this first stage 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. Our observations are regularly communicated to the responsible programme officers, and have already resulted in some adjustments regarding the organisation and implementation of EIP-Agri.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The administrative set-up of EIP-Agri took more time than was initially expected, primarily in terms of getting the online application forms working properly and setting up the two processes for the decision-making including funding criteria for group support and project support respectively. Decisions about innovation groups were made somewhat quicker, mainly since these receive only small money and the selection is made solely within the Agricultural Agency compared to the innovation projects which so far have no funding limit and go through a two-stage selection process. The 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

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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. The quality of applications has improved, but many still need complementary information before decision-making is possible. In particular, three issues have frequently been in need for further clarification: the 'innovativeness' of the project as such, budgetary issues, and its market potential, raising questions about the way in which the application forms are designed. The deficiencies are especially the plan on how the innovation will become spread and generally put to use.

So far (in April 2017) some 30 projects have been proposed for funding, of which 9 already granted, and approximately 150 innovations groups have been granted. Any amendments to the funding criteria must soon be decided upon, and some changes have already been made concerning the weighting of the selection criteria by the Advisory Committee. As the remaining funding decreases, the competition will increase which might also lead to concerns about the distribution of projects between the different areas of agriculture, horticulture and reindeer husbandry. There is also some concern about the relationship between the group and project support since the two processes are running in parallel. The expectation from the group support is to enable the development of a project application at later stage, but this might become difficult if the funding is almost exhausted by that time. Whether the rather difficult application process for projects refrains less resourced applicants from engaging in EIP-Agri is an issue we will come back to later in the evaluation (in the planned web survey). We will then study the distributional effects across different types of innovation projects, geographical scales and with regard to gender aspects.

How experts are appointed and used has been brought up by our participant observations and interviews. This refers to how different kinds of knowledge contribute to the applications as such, as well as in the selection process. The role of the support group, consisting of six experts from a range of expert fields – is a case in point. In particular, the relations between the decision-making group in the Agricultural Agency, the Advisory Committee and the support group is being examined. A critical analysis is also made of the division of authority between the Advisory Committee and the Agricultural Agency – including the larger rural development network.

Information on the Swedish EIP-Agri website has been updated, but could be further improved. There is a potential in providing examples of best cases and to develop tools for learning. The support group could also more frequently be used as support to the Advisory Committee, and not only in relation to the applicants. This would advance knowledge use, strengthen the learning among actors, further legitimate the decision making process and later also improve the follow up of granted projects.

COMPARISON ACROSS EUROPE ENVISAGED

As mentioned, our research has just started, and we want to take opportunity to network with European colleagues to discuss further about the pros and cons with our methodology, as well as to hopefully initiate some comparative research across countries. For instance, 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. There is also some variation in the level of funding across Europe and whether joint funding is required, which could be further examined as to how this affects the nature, content and sustainability of the innovation. The rules for funding and the administrative set-up for EIP-Agri also vary across Europe, which could bring further insights into critical factors for implementation success. We are particularly interested to make comparisons together with colleagues across Europe in 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.

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