Rural development: managing knowledge for sustainability

Sustainable rural development could be improved by paying more attention to the interaction between different types of knowledge, such as local, scientific and political knowledge, according to new research. The interplay of natural, social, economic and human resources also needs to be better understood.

Knowledge interaction in rural development needs to meet two different criteria for environmental and social sustainability:

1) to maintain functioning ecosystems
2) to develop sustainable livelihoods and social systems

The researchers analysed sustainable rural development case studies from across Europe, and identified four main ways in which different types of knowledge are managed. These are:

- Resource renewal, e.g. sustainable forest management, which uses scientific knowledge as a guide
- Quality of life, e.g. improving access to utilities, welfare, or aesthetics, which uses managerial or political knowledge (such as from planners)
- Improving local sustainable livelihoods, where local knowledge is used
- Participatory resource management, whereby all stakeholders with an interest in the resource participate and no single form of knowledge dominates

According to the researchers, a review of the EU's strategy on sustainable development in 2004 found a high level of agreement among governments and NGOs, but progress at national levels differs widely. They argue that the strategy has had little influence on rural development policy, which generally does not address issues of sustainability in relation to natural resources and ecosystems, food production, transport and housing policies.

The project, CORASON², carried out case studies of a number of nature management projects and practices, including non-agricultural development projects, local sustainable development projects and use and management of natural resources. The researchers studied how the availability and interaction of different knowledge forms were managed in these projects and what the outcomes were for rural sustainability.

The research found no examples in the CORASON case studies of conscious attention to knowledge management. The researchers emphasise that relations around knowledge are part of larger processes such as network building, social capital building and social inclusion/exclusion, and actors involved in sustainable development projects must develop and reflect on these processes.

Integrating different forms of knowledge can help to reconnect problems in social and natural systems. Problems in combining local knowledge with expert knowledge arise from inequalities in power and in access to resources in the development process.

One step towards reconnecting ecosystems and social systems and maintaining the links between them over time would be to develop indicator systems to measure joint learning, between policy, scientific and local actors, as part of the transition towards sustainability in rural areas.

2. CORASON (A ‘cognitive approach to rural sustainable development; the dynamics of expert and lay knowledge’ on the dynamics of knowledge in the development of local food) was supported by the European Commission under the sixth framework programme. See: www.corason.hu

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