Embedding environmental practices into farming behaviour

A Dutch study has investigated the process by which farmers incorporate environmental policy into their thinking and behaviour, a process known as ‘internalisation’. It indicates that internalisation is helpful for successful policy.

Agri-environment schemes were introduced into EU agricultural policy in the late 1980s to support farming practices that help to protect the environment and maintain the countryside. However, these schemes do not always meet their goals. This study suggests that the heart of the problem lies in the unchanging attitude and behaviour of some of the participating farmers.

Farmers may minimally endorse policies to receive financial benefit or avoid penalty, but they do not necessarily incorporate the policy’s aims into their thinking and behaviour. The study suggests that internalisation influences the success of policy, particularly if the policy requires long-term and site-specific management. It also proposes that institutions or cooperatives have an important role in encouraging internalisation.

The researchers looked for evidence of internalisation in dairy farmers in the Northern Friesian Woodlands in the Netherlands. The study involved 8 conventional farmers and 10 organic dairy farmers and investigated the motivations of farmers to participate in the Landscape Management Program (LMP), a European agri-environment scheme that aims to conserve biodiversity.

The results demonstrated that the organic farmers are internally motivated to participate in nature conservation. Their predominant reason for participating in the LMP is to contribute to conservation and they tend to join institutions to collectively maintain the landscape and share knowledge. However, the motivations of the conventional farmers were more related to financial rewards and whether landscape maintenance can help their individual farm. The conventional farmers joined institutions to receive assistance in raising income from the LMP and for self-regulation.

The study illustrates a possible framework for evaluating the potential internalisation of agri-environmental schemes. The preliminary results suggest that policy developers should tune policy instruments to the motivations of farmers. For example, the authors suggest farmers should be given more freedom to create their own solutions and that policy should be more flexible and site-specific. They also suggest that institutions could encourage the integration of landscape management into farming and help knowledge-exchange between farmers.

The authors stress this study is the first of its kind in the area of internalisation and that larger, more longitudinal studies are required for more conclusive results.

1. See http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/envir/index_en.htm#measures


Contact: derk-jan.stobbeelaar@wur.nl

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