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K. Prager und U.J. Nagel

**Communication processes in agro-  
environmental policy development  
and decision-making**

**Case study Sachsen-Anhalt**

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# SUTRA-Working Paper

Die Reihe SUTRA-Working Paper wird herausgegeben von der DFG-Forschergruppe 497 „Strukturwandel und Transformation im Agrarbereich“. Sie enthält Beiträge von den Mitgliedern der Forschergruppe oder von externen Autoren zu Themen des Strukturwandels und der Transformation im Agrarbereich. Die Aufsätze wurden im Rahmen der Forschergruppe begutachtet; die dargestellten Ansichten sind jedoch die der Autoren und nicht notwendigerweise die der Herausgeber.

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## Abstract

The development of a decision support approach with regard to agro-environmental programmes is part of a larger research project on agricultural transformation and structural change processes. Research objective are improved communication processes and an enhanced quality of political decision-making. The investigation is based on the assumption that the success of agro-environmental programmes depends largely on their acceptance by all major stakeholders. This implies an early integration of varying interests in the decision-making process. Introducing participatory approaches into a bureaucratic setting poses particular problems. In order to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness, the introduction of interactive modelling approaches has to be coupled with communication processes which increase transparency and allow for consensual decision-making.

**Key words:** communication processes, agro-environmental programmes, decision-making support, conflict resolution, participation and acceptance, rural areas, agricultural extension, sustainable agriculture, structural change, transformation processes

## Zusammenfassung

Die Entwicklung eines Ansatzes zur Entscheidungsunterstützung bei der Gestaltung von Agrarumweltprogrammen ist Teil einer Forschergruppe zu Strukturwandel und Transformation im Agrarbereich. Ziel ist die Verbesserung von Effizienz und Effektivität von Kommunikationsprozessen bei der politischen Entscheidungsfindung. Grundhypothese ist, dass der Erfolg von Agrarumweltprogrammen wesentlich von ihrer Akzeptanz bei unterschiedlichen Akteursgruppen abhängt. Akzeptanz wiederum setzt voraus, dass schon bei der Planung die Interessen der Nutzer bzw. Teilnehmer artikuliert und sinnvoll in die Entscheidungsfindung einbezogen werden. Der Einführung von partizipativen Ansätzen stehen allerdings die bekannten Hindernisse traditioneller, bürokratischer Organisationen entgegen. Um die Effizienz und Effektivität zu erhöhen, muss der interaktive Programmierungsansatz durch Instrumente begleitet werden, die die Transparenz erhöhen und Konsensfindung ermöglichen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Kommunikationsprozesse, Agrarumweltprogramme, Entscheidungsunterstützung, Konfliktlösung, Zielgruppenanalyse, Partizipation und Akzeptanz, ländlicher Raum, Landwirtschaftliche Beratung, nachhaltige Landwirtschaft, Strukturwandel, Transformationsprozess



## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the theoretical background of research project No.7 and first empirical evidence from a case study in Sachsen-Anhalt. The authors collaborate closely with a second team who is developing and testing a mathematical programming approach for structuring complex priority setting and decision-making processes (see KIRSCHKE et al. 2004, SUTRA-Working Paper No 1). Overall objective is enhancing the quality of political decision-making through an interactive approach using formal and informal instruments and combining quantitative and qualitative elements. The case study consists of a test run of the PC-model<sup>1</sup> as well as a qualitative stakeholder and problem analysis<sup>2</sup>. The study was undertaken in collaboration with the *Ministerium für Landwirtschaft und Umwelt* of Sachsen-Anhalt state (Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment), particularly its Department 5: “*Agrarpolitik und Förderung*“ (Agricultural politics and subsidies).

Initially it was planned to have conducted interviews with relevant stakeholders and analysed the specific problem setting *before* the test run. Due to specific requirements of the ministry, this could not be realised. This first run of the module (two workshops with the ministry) was characterised by the fact that results had to be reached within a short time period: a decision – consensual if possible – had to be reached on the re-distribution of funds for agro-environmental programmes for the next planning period. The stakeholder and problem analyses were thus not started until *after* the test run. However, the situation given not only permitted interviews eliciting the participants’ assessment of the test run, it made it possible to attend several hearings in the ministry and to make the acquaintance of further stakeholders.

## 2. Problem background

“There is no ideal solution to the conflict among the legitimate demand for public participation, the need for technical and economic rationality, and the necessity for assuring accountability and responsibility of decision making bodies.” (RENN et al. 1993, 189) Though more than a decade old this statement is still valid today, with the three demands highlighting the complexity of the problem.

Increasingly, pressure is exerted on governmental authorities and administrative bodies to respond to public demand for efficient and effective governance. Objectives of organisational innovation from a client point-of-view will therefore be a decrease in costs, an increase in high quality performance, as well as flexibility and adaptability of the public sector (OPPEN

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<sup>1</sup> The experimental part of the case study: one preparatory meeting and two facilitated workshops at the ministry in June and July 2003.

<sup>2</sup> This paper describes the first part of the survey from June to December 2003.

and WEGENER 1997). The general demand for accountability holds true especially for the agricultural sector in the European Union. Part of EU and national funding is spent financing environmentally friendly development. Agenda 2000 determined that member states had to prepare mid-term reviews of the programmes according to EU Rural Development Regulation 1257/99. This task was delegated to the responsible national authority, in Germany the State ministries.

Whenever a new agro-environmental programme is introduced or an existing one is altered, adjustments in the design of the programme may be necessary in order to appeal to a larger number of farmers. Governments interpret the application for funding and the mere participation in a programme as “acceptance” and assume that clients identify with the programme objectives (for a detailed discussion of the concept of acceptance and its implications see PRAGER 2002). If “acceptance” is a political aim, contents and implementation of agro-environmental programmes must meet the preferences and needs of clients and users (e.g. farmers). Consequently, these preferences and needs must not only be known to policy makers but they must be fed back into programme development. Thus, a permanent flow of information as well as practical communication support instruments are needed. Improving organisational structures would thus entail the institutionalisation of feedback mechanisms and the development of interactive forms of participation.

With this regard, the situation in Germany is far from ideal. OPPEN and WEGENER (1997) state that decisions of authorities are preferably taken by administrative experts without serious public participation. There are no feedback mechanism developed or in use. Communes, for example, must report to their supervisory bodies but are not required to report to the public. The practical distribution of funds as well as the enforcement of the corresponding regulations is done by the *Landwirtschaftsämter* (Offices of Agriculture), the lowest administrative level. In contrast, the introduction, adjustment or cancellation of agro-environmental programmes involve higher level decision-making. “Policy making” takes place at the *Landesministerium* (state ministry), *Bundesministerium* (federal ministry) or the European Commission level as the result of internal discussions and decision-making processes. Programmes are thus characterised by a lack or uneven distribution of information at various levels. In addition, decisions are commonly made under the pressure to meet deadlines.

However, the emergence of new and co-operative patterns can also be observed. The latter are characterised by the voluntary participation of individuals and associations, they are oriented towards dialogue and co-operative conflict management (BOGUMIL 2001, ZILLEBEN and BARBIAN, 1992). Concerning the success and sustainability of agro-environmental programmes an effective participation of the relevant actors and stakeholders in the sense of co-operative decision-making is seen as a *conditio sine qua non*.

Distribution and free flow of information is an essential part of decision-making, not only in administrative and political organisations. Information is exchanged to define objectives and to facilitate the decision-making process.

Some particularities and problems inherent in bureaucratic organisations must be taken into consideration:

- The poor flow and distribution of information as an omnipresent problem of administrative organisations. Differences in perception and the filtering of information as well as the hierarchical and sector-oriented structure of organisations may pose serious communication barriers. (MAUTHE 1996, PAHL-WEBER and VON SEGGERN 1996, BOSETZKY and HEINRICH 1994).
- The formal act of communication is supplemented by informal communicative behaviour, the latter enjoying a growing significance and acceptance (KIPPES 1995; TOUSSAINT, AENIS and NAGEL 2000).
- Objective and subjective factors concerning the role and position of administrative players and stakeholders predetermine their space for decision-making, e.g. standards and regulations, individual attitudes, interests, status, or commitment to the respective organisation.
- Decision-making processes are always linked to issues of power (CROZIER and FRIEDBERG 1993, BOSETZKY 1975).

We are thus concerned with three problematic areas: The demand for feedback mechanism and serious public participation in connection to barriers in communication, the necessity for assuring accountability and responsibility of decision making bodies, and the need for technical and economic rationality while facing the complexity of any political decision-making situation.

### **3. Research Objective and Hypotheses**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

The research focus is on the support and optimisation of communication processes.<sup>3</sup> “Optimal” is defined as the gathering of necessary information from relevant actors with a minimal effort as well as the smooth integration of information into decision-making by administrative bodies. A methodology will be developed which helps to increase acceptance and legitimacy of agro-environmental programmes. At the same time, efficiency and effectiveness of communication processes in complex political systems are to be improved.

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<sup>3</sup> Participation and feedback processes as well as cooperation and decision-making are seen as part of communication processes.

In the case study three programmes in Sachsen-Anhalt state<sup>4</sup> have been chosen to investigate the way complex systems and decision situations are dealt with in political practice.

### 3.2 Assumptions

We assume, first, the serious desire for improving decision-making and implementation of agro-environmental programmes and, secondly, an openness towards stakeholder participation as one means to reach these objectives. In addition, a minimum of transparency to carry out a project is needed both, on the side of clients and officials within administrative units. MÜLLER et al. (2002) identified some additional preconditions for successful co-operation: The individual perception of the urgency of an issue and the obvious benefit for the people concerned.

### 3.3 Working Hypotheses

- Comprehensive and serious involvement in decision-making processes will lead to the integration of more relevant information and thus have a positive impact on the output.
- The public acceptance of agro-environmental programmes is increased through participation of stakeholders and integration of feedback.
- The mathematical model improves communication and decision-making processes. It will make information and decision-making processes transparent and more efficient, visualise assumptions as well as their impact on results.

Research results will be produced in three areas:

- Who must be involved in a particular process and in what way?
- Which are feasible ways to ensure transparency of the decision-making process?
- Does the compilation and return of feedback contribute to the improvement of decision-making quality?

In all three cases, limits of and to participation and transparency will also have to be analysed.

## 4. Methodology: Iteration as a research method

It is the very nature of communication processes to move in an iterative rather than in a linear, straight forward way. As a consequence, the research process itself can be non-linear with iterative loops. The model to be developed, tested and improved is characterised by a series of cycles consisting of data collection, information input, and decision-making. This “model”

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<sup>4</sup> Richtlinien zur Förderung einer markt- und standortangepassten Landwirtschaft, Richtlinie Umweltschonender Anbau, and Richtlinie über die Gewährung von Zuwendungen für den Vertragsnaturschutz

includes the PC-based unit of the sister project as well as our own procedure of qualitative information processing. Guiding principle will be the safeguarding of transparency – both, of decision-making as well as the research process itself - something which KNIERIM (2001) describes as a significant success factor.

Methods to be used concern two distinct aspects:

- (1) Methods to *guide* the communication process itself which may include action methods like the pre-planning of meetings, consultancy to staff members or the facilitation of workshops. Special attention is to be paid to ensuring openness, objectivity, transparency of the process, constructiveness and mutual support.
- (2) Methods to *analyse* the process of co-operative decision-making will be those of qualitative, empirical social research, particularly participatory approaches. According to KNIERIM (2001) and NAGEL et al. (1992) the latter are based on the assumption that problems and conflicts cannot be handled with a good chance of success unless those concerned can participate in the solution finding and thus responsibilised for the results.

The mathematical model works with quantitative data sets which are not readily available at the stakeholder level. In particular, there is not enough relevant information for specific policy measures and, by definition, no hard data on activities planned for the future. As long as this holds true, data lags will be bridged with the help of expert judgements collected through the Delphi method (WILHELM 1999; Group Delphi: RENN et al. 1993; traditional Delphi: DALKEY and HELMER 1963). Experts in our case are government staff, representatives of farmers' associations and of organic farming associations, environmentalists, etc. The Delphi method will be applied a number of times thus increasing accuracy and objectivity. Wherever quantitative economic data is available it will complement or replace expert judgements.

## 5. The Case Study

### 5.1 Preparatory Steps and Background Information

As a first iterative step a test run was conducted within the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment of Sachsen-Anhalt state (*Ministerium für Landwirtschaft und Umwelt*, MLU). The results obtained so far have confirmed a number of aspects mentioned above as well as revealed new questions to be considered and researched upon.

As in most other states (*Länder*), agro-environmental programmes are presently being revised in Sachsen-Anhalt in view of changing EU agricultural policy. A number of persons in the MLU hierarchy<sup>5</sup> were in favour of the project and supported the idea of co-operating with the

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<sup>5</sup> Deputy minister (*Staatssekretär*), Head of department (*Abteilungsleiter*)

research team. Although there is no formally agreed mechanism, the involvement of farmers' associations is seen as useful. Government officials recognised the potential benefits of the model (mathematical model plus facilitation of the communication process) in view of impending discussions with the farmers' associations.<sup>6</sup>

First contacts were made through the deputy minister (*Staatssekretär*), the actual research cooperation is with Department 5: "Agricultural politics and subsidies/ *Agrarpolitik und Förderung*". Involved in the project are the head of the department (*Abteilungsleiter*), the head of one division (*Referatsleiter*) as well as some staff members. Department 5 has regular but largely informal contacts to farmers' associations whose representatives (*berufsständische Vertreter*) are invited to discuss problems of adjustments or coordination. These meetings (*Verbandsgespräche, Anhörungen, Beratungen*) are generally prepared by the respective division. Government officials will inform the representatives of new developments and policy measures (*Richtlinien, Vorlagen, Maßnahmenpakete in Programmen*) are discussed. Contacts between individual stakeholders and the MLU are rare and most communication goes via the representatives.

## 5.2 The test project

In June 2003, two workshops were organised with representatives of the Sachsen-Anhalt Farmers' Association, of organic farmers' groups, of part-time farmers as well as staff of the ministry and the state research station. For various reasons, a systematic selection of grass roots stakeholders had not been possible. "Citizen participation is difficult to institutionalize and the bureaucracy often finds it challenging and tiresome to cooperate with "unorganized" citizen groups without formal institutional structures and hierarchies."(KORF 2003) As the main aim of the test run was the introduction, calibration and discussion of the modelling approach, the potentially skewed membership was not seen as a serious problem:

- The model itself had not been tested in the particular political field yet, malfunctions could have occurred;
- Initial lack of information about stakeholders and their interests, positions and values due to time pressure on the side of the ministry which did not allow for detailed situation analyses;
- It seemed sensible to make use of existing structures and communication channels in order to avoid irritation and misunderstandings;
- The farmers' representatives were familiar with the procedures of hearings and meetings.

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<sup>6</sup> The role of the researcher team can be characterised as follows: The researcher might be seen as a service provider facilitating the strategic discussion about the adjustment of agro-environmental programmes in the federal state. He does not propose his own positions and opinions but aims to support the communication and decision making process of the actors themselves. The stakeholders may also suggest further steps. All this is seen as part of the action research approach. The process will then be analysed according the methods mentioned above. Thus, the research team is autonomous in their research as far as survey and analysis are concerned, but it relies on the administrative staff for cooperation and in their choice of the case study.

Though the exercise was a test run in terms of methodology, the subject matter was real: reaching a decision – consensual if possible – on the re-distribution of funds for agro-environmental programmes for the next planning period. Nine programmes<sup>7</sup> comprising a number of more detailed measures were discussed and ranked using the process sketched below. The mathematical programming approach as developed by the sister project and used in the workshop is documented in KIRSCHKE et al. 2004. The general structure of the mathematical model is roughly pictured in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Simplified schema of the PC-Model as applied in the test run in Sachsen-Anhalt**

Objectives	Political Programmes			Restrictions
	1 Compliance with extensive use of grassland	... ...	9 Maintenance of abandoned agricultural land	
Improvement of environmental quality				
Securing levels of employment in the agricultural sector				
				Budget
				Upper limit
				...

The first run of the module was specific in the sense that due to unavoidable framework conditions – the final decision had to be reached within a short time period – a number of preparatory steps were undertaken exclusively by the researchers which otherwise would have been part of the participatory process. Data was collected, processed and presented to the participants concerning the predetermined set of nine government programmes. Data source was the ministry and there was no chance for re-check. In practice, this did not pose a problem as all actors involved accepted its validity. Apart from objective quantitative data such as “present spending for each of the programmes” or “maximum available budget”, the ministry officials also provided information on restrictions from their own point-of-view: “upper and lower limits to be spent for programme x”, “area and number of farmers eligible

<sup>7</sup> They were chosen according to suggestions made by staff members of the MLU. The choice included: Einhaltung einer extensiven Grünlandnutzung (Betriebszweig); Einhaltung einer extensiven Grünlandnutzung (Schafe); Einhaltung einer extensiven Grünlandnutzung (Rinder); Ökologischer Landbau; Umweltschonender Anbau; VNS – Bewirtschaftung von Grünland; VNS – Bewirtschaftung von Streuobstwiesen; VNS – Bewirtschaftung von Ackerflächen; VNS – Bewirtschaftung aufgegebenen landwirtschaftlicher Flächen.

for grants”, as well as interdependencies between programmes and some policy considerations concerning rural development. This set of data was used for a demonstration run aimed at acquainting all participants with the module. In the following, it was opened for discussion by the whole group which led, in fact, to a number of revisions.

Workshop participants rated the respective contribution of each programme to both of these objectives. Using a simple questionnaire (figure 2), judgements were collected and results fed back to the group. Means of the individual judgements by all participants were used as coefficients (*Zielbeiträge*) and merged in the grey fields in the mathematical model (figure 1).

**Figure 2: Structure of the questionnaire**

Programme	Rating of contribution to <b>objective 1</b> : Improvement of environmental quality								
	low			moderate			high		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1									
...									
9									

At the second workshop, the procedure was repeated with additional participants. The group re-confirmed the consensus on objectives and restrictions. As an alternative and following the suggestions of one participant, the coefficients were not judged by each of the participants separately but discussed in plenary by the whole group. The group did reach an agreement and on this basis several runs of the mathematical model were undertaken with some variations in framework conditions.

Detailed stakeholder and problem analyses were not started until after the two workshops, due to the circumstances mentioned above. First data for these analyses were collected by attending meetings within the ministry and by interviewing representatives of the respective stakeholder associations. Purpose of this first set of interviews was a familiarisation with the persons and organisations involved. One important aspect was getting insights into the actual extent of stakeholder involvement. Based on those interviews the chances for involvement of farmers themselves can be assessed. Another set of interviews was started after a hearing of nature conservation and environment associations – organised by MLU Department 4: “Nature Conservation and Forestry”. The purpose was to elicit the willingness and capability of association representatives to join a follow up run of the mathematical model.

The research design allows for repeated interviews, visits and observation. Similar to a puzzle, the pieces of information gathered over time will be joined together and – using

feedback – will be validated<sup>8</sup>. Both, the process as well as its result are expected to give valuable insights into the management of complex decision-making.

### 5.3 Information sources

Interviews with representatives of farmers associations were open and frank. The persons concerned have been “in the business” since the early nineties. They are familiar with the structure of the ministry and know the relevant government staff. However, all of them mentioned that it is the frequent change of positions and responsibilities within the ministry which makes communication difficult. Senior posts change especially after elections and it takes considerable time for newly appointed staff to familiarise themselves with their new area of work.

Interviews with government officials were quite different and hierarchy seemed to play a major role. Loyalty towards superiors is a major influence on the type of information given. Sometimes this was explicitly mentioned and given as a reason for refraining to touch certain issues. Staff members are careful as long as they cannot judge the role played by researchers as outside observers. Not giving information or releasing only partial information may be an exercise of power. But it also shows a certain degree of uncertainty as there are no hard and fast rules regarding transparency of administrative processes.

## 6. Analysis and discussion of first results

The results presented below refer to the first run of the module with all the restrictions mentioned. They are the starting point of the iterative process envisaged and are neither complete nor fully validated.

- Both, governmental and non-governmental actors are willing to participate in the project to discuss budgetary priority setting with the support of a PC-based model.
- There is a particular interest on the part of the ministry as shown by the fact that the concerned department head acted as convenor and chairman of the workshops.
- The level of interest was due to a number of factors, some objective, others subjective. The head was familiar with the type of thinking behind the module and immediately saw the potential for increasing administrative efficiency. There was an enormous time pressure to decide on the state’s future agro-environmental programmes. The deputy minister opened the second workshop, thus demonstrating the importance the ministry attributed to the project.

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<sup>8</sup> Triangulation of methods.

- The ministry staff involved were content with the outcome of the two workshops.
- All but one of the invited non-governmental representatives attended the workshops and displayed genuine interest.
- Although non-governmental actors were at first satisfied with the outcome of the workshops they repeatedly criticised the way the ministry consequently dealt with the results. In their view, officials failed to integrate the consensus into a paper containing suggestions for revising funding programmes which was presented at a meeting about four weeks later. This led to disappointment and a loss of interest on the side of the involved stakeholders.
- Nevertheless, both governmental and non-governmental representatives expressed their willingness to continue the project at a given time.
- Regarding communication channels between the ministry and other stakeholders, both formal as well as informal channels are used. Beside regular formal hearings or meetings there are frequent informal contacts through the phone or at ad-hoc meetings. The significance of informal channels seems to be very high.
- The horizontal communication within a division of the ministry follows established bureaucratic patterns and the staff meet on a regular basis. However, communication with other divisions is less regular and not institutionalised in the same way. The split of responsibilities (departments dealing with separate sets of stakeholders) entail communication conflicts between departments, between departments and interest groups and to a lesser extend even amongst interest groups.

## 7. Outlook

The present research project is scheduled for a three years' period with the option of prolongation. Fine-tuning and adaptation of the sister project's mathematical model to different decision-making problems are well under way. It seems likely that through careful introduction and training, stakeholders will be able to understand and manage the *instrumental* side. One of the major open questions is whether or not the *process* may also be managed without outside facilitation. The planned test in an intercultural setting will pose additional specific problems, which will be tackled in collaboration with our Polish partners.

Concerning the facilitation and structuring of the accompanying communication processes, two factors stand out as decisive after the first test run. Achieving consensus, guaranteeing transparency, and keeping everyone in the boat are highly dependent on the *trust* of all stakeholders in a fair process. Secondly, this trust can not be taken for granted and has to be established step by step – a fact which emphasises the importance of the *time* factor.

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