

Caught Between Standardisation & Complexity: Study on the Institutional Ambiguities of Agri-environmental Policy Implementation in Finland (Acta Universitatis Tamperensis)



Finnish agri-environmental policy has not met the environmental goals it has set for itself. The agri-environmental schemes, which came into force in 1995 upon Finland's accession to the European Union, introduced a major shift in Finnish agri-environmental policy. They promised a new approach to agri-environmental governance, suggesting that farmers should be paid for providing environmental goods and practicing environmentally sound farming. They also introduced a new form of cross-sectoral and multi-level practice to policy implementation. However, despite the changes in cultivation practices, the nutrient loads have not decreased as was hoped for.

The resolution of agri-environmental problems seems to have run aground on institutional ambiguity. Currently established political institutions lack the power to deliver the required policy results on their own; new institutions, practices and systems of meaning are needed. Maarten Hajer has stressed that where policy making and politics takes place in an institutional ambiguity, we should pay attention to a double dynamic: actors not only deliberate to get to favourable solution for particular problems, but while deliberating they also negotiate new institutional rules, develop new norms of appropriate behaviour and devise new conceptions of legitimate political intervention.

If we are to understand the failures experienced within agri-environmental policy, we need a careful analysis of how doing politics as well as governing environment, are being (re)negotiated and experimented alongside policy deliberation. In this study, I take up this challenge by examining the following empirical questions 1) how actors in charge of implementation translate the agri-environmental policy objectives into practice, how these practices depend on one another and co-evolve as they interact; 2) how farmers translate

agri-environmental schemes into farming practices and how commitment to agri-environmental management emerges; and 3) how various actors are brought together during implementation, to deliberate upon agri-environmental management. In order to analyse the confronted institutional ambiguities, I bring together discussions from environmental policy analysis and Science and Technology Studies (STS). The empirical studies brought to bear on this synthesis are based on case studies carried out in South Ostrobothnia and Southwest Finland during the years 2000-2006. The empirical results of this study highlight that the implementation of the schemes has become a central site of politics. By emphasising standardised management procedures and income support, the agri-environmental schemes have questioned the values of good farming, livelihood bases, farmers experiential knowledge and care for the land. These values have become endangered attachments, which require active commitment. Something new has arisen as a result of the implementation of the agri-environmental schemes: political action, which deliberates on commitments. These commitments treat environmental management as something which builds upon the potentials available at a particular farm in a given socio-material environment. During implementation, I detected several moments and practices which were responsive to commitments. The results stress the role of local rural officials and advisors as buffers between policy and practice, and the importance of local plans and projects in bringing the various actors together to deliberate on agri-environmental management. These practices have become important to building trust among multiple actors and linking individual actions to environmentally effective collective action. Furthermore, they propose rather different scales and institutional rules of action for effective agri-environmental management, compared to existing policy measures.

They suggest that the more flexibly policy measures and technologies can move across various policy levels, and become part of various actors commitments, the more powerful they can evolve.

Empirical results gained from the implementation practice highlight that if we are to understand the institutional ambiguities posed by the resolution of agri-environmental problems, we should not only analyse how new institutional rules and commitments are deliberated upon, but also how new policy requirements become routines, and how these routines relate to past policies, practices and actor positions. The results gained from the implementation of Finnish agri-environmental policy are interesting in this respect. The results highlight how, in practice, the agricultural sector has taken ownership of the General Protection Scheme (GPS), which stresses the welfare effects on a national scale; whereas the actions of the environmental sector focus on the Special Protection Scheme implemented on a plot scale. During routinised implementation tasks, the tight association between vertical policy measures and the horizontal implementation network enacts the division between agricultural and environmental concerns in agri-environmental policy, whilst maintaining continuums with past policies, practices and actor positions. In agri-environmental policy, many policy tools and technologies are explicitly developed to maintain their form and stability as they travel from the ministry to the farms. This is seen as affirming the justness and equity of the policy instruments. The results of this study have shown how such standardisations may enact strong rigidities within the policy system as they are implemented in practice, and consequently restrain the policy from renewal.

An open and active examination of various policy phases is needed if we are to understand the institutional ambiguities posed by the resolution of agri-environmental problems.

Implementation practices may enact both rigidities and novelties within the system of governing. A constant (re)evaluation of these should be an integral part of an attentive environmental policy. I hope the methodological tools developed in this study can help social sciences in taking more active role in this major endeavour.

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