

Implementation of the ‘European Innovation Partnership - Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP)’ on the regional level – an example from North-Eastern Germany

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Abstract

The success of the concept ‘European Innovation Partnership – Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability’ (EIP) depends on the effective bridge-building between research, technology and stakeholders, including farmers, businesses, advisory services and NGOs. The Federal State of Brandenburg aims to introduce the new policy instrument which can, in principle, lead to a faster transfer of innovation to practice. If implemented successfully, EIP enable a systematic feedback from practice to science and learning more about research needs. However, there are several challenges related to the national and regional implementation of the new concept. The paper accompanies the on-going process of the EIP implementation based on a critical scientific analysis. The recommendations are based on the experiences from the well-established Innovation Network for Organic Farming of Eberswalde University and the related innovation groups and projects which already operate similarly to the envisaged Operational Groups as a core EIP element. The paper shows the lessons learned so far, aiming to support regions and institutions with similar objectives related to the EIP concept.

Introduction

The European Commission (EC) aims to foster a competitive and sustainable agriculture and forestry by establishing the concept ‘European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability’ or EIP. In this concept, developed by European Commission's Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG-Agri), innovation is considered the primary instrument for addressing the future challenges for the agricultural and forestry sector posed by food security, bio-material production and the conservation of natural resources (EC 2/2012 and 11/2012). These goals shall be achieved by fostering the interaction between all relevant actors (from primary production up to the consumer) and by enhancing the development, diffusion and use of innovations, as new ideas emerge from interactive learning processes (Edquist 1997; Lundvall *et al.* 2009; SCAR 2013). Apart from the agricultural EIP, the EC is promoting the European Innovation Partnerships ‘Active and Healthy Aging’, ‘Raw Material’ and ‘Water efficient Europe’. All European Innovation Partnerships “pursue the mission of building a bridge between science and the application of innovative approaches in practice. The European Council underlined the need for EIPs to have a clear focus, as well as the importance of Member State involvement and effective streamlining of existing instruments” (EC 2/2012). This paper, however, only focuses on the European innovative partnership concept related to agricultural and forestry productivity and sustainability, in short EIP.

EIP implementation requires the engagement of national and - in some European Member States like Germany - federal administrative bodies. As the EIP instrument aims at bridging the gap in the cooperation between researchers, farmers, advisors and other experts of the industry, the establishment of well-organized working groups is of core relevance. However, in many European countries very little experience exists on how to implement these new ideas or research results that could guide the implementing bodies.

This paper aims to provide an accompanying analysis of and a critical reflection about the present process of EIP implementing in the state of Brandenburg.

Methodology

The accompanying analysis of EIP development and implementation in the case study region of Brandenburg, located in the north-eastern part of Germany, is based on a review of the underlying policy documents combined with expert interviews with key representatives from the implementing and supporting bodies at national and regional level. This approach is challenging due to a lack of causative and subsequence links between the development of the policy and its final implementation. The analysis is of synchronical character because the subject of investigation evolves at the same time as the investigation takes place. In addition, case studies of existing approaches to innovation partnerships at the regional and national level are analyzed based on the commonly used ex-post perspective.

Results

Implementation of EIP at the European Commission, in Germany and in the State of Brandenburg

The general framework of the EIP concept was published as a communication from the commission on EIP for agriculture in the beginning of 2012 (EC 2/2012). Since then, the process of EIP implementation has been mainly documented by presentations given by DG-Agri representatives at conferences such as the EC conference on EIP held in Brussels in November 2012 (EC 11/2012) or at a session of the Standing Commission on Agricultural Research (SCAR 2013). Legal documents specifying programme formulation and financial frameworks are still under negotiation and are expected to be published by the EC and of the implementing administrative bodies in Germany such as the Federal Ministry of Agriculture (BMELV) or the Ministries of the Federal States by the end of 2013 (Freese 2013).

The general objective of EIP is to support the European strategy of the “Innovation Union” (EC 2012). EIP provides “helpdesk functions” and “innovation brokerage services” aiming to a) interlink existing policy tools for synergy, b) connect different level research activities (local-, national-, EU-level knowledge and scientific results and c) facilitate a close cooperation of scientists, farmers, advisory services and other agricultural and forestry stakeholders on the project-level. EIP aims to foster the development and dissemination of innovative approaches which drive agricultural productivity and sustainability (Van Oost 2013). EIP is a multi-level policy concept based on a variety of measures such as project group facilitation, the establishment of steering committees, realisation of research & development projects, pilot plants/technology and other innovative projects. The Commission intends that the objectives of the EIP will be specified during the implementation in a kind of continuous ‘learning by doing’ process (EC 2/2012) of all administrative levels (the European, the national, the regional). In Germany, EIP will be implemented by the federal states in accordance with their rural development policies. The EIP network as a whole is expected to become a mediator, enhancing communication and cooperation between scientists and practice partners, enabling development processes or research projects that focus on agricultural and forestry innovations (EC 11/2012).

At the European level, a High Level Steering Board was appointed in January 2013. It will cooperatively elaborate a strategic plan serving as the umbrella concept of EIP implementation in the European Member States (EC 2/2013). In May 2013, DG-Agri established the European Innovation Partnership Service Point in order to facilitate the mission of the EIP (EC 5/2013). The EIP Service Point will be responsible inter alia for the set-up of topic driven Focus Groups which will a) aim at exploring practical innovative solutions and b) document research results and implications for further research activities. In total six Focus Groups will work on the European level around the topics ‘organic farming’ (optimising arable yields), ‘protein crops’, ‘animal husbandry’ (reduction of antibiotic use in the pig sector), ‘genetic resources’, ‘organic matter content of soils’ and ‘integrated pest management (IPM)’ (EC 5/2013). A topic-driven vertical integration of all levels’ activities will be one of the key factors of success of the EIP.

Particular challenges related to the implementation of the EIP concept on the national and regional level are:

- The topics have been identified as urgently requiring innovative solutions for the improvement of productivity and sustainability in European agriculture (EC 6/2013). At present, a focus on technical innovations predominates. In fact, organisational and/or social innovative approaches are just another form of innovations which are as relevant as the technical innovations. Neumeier (2012) argues that social innovations matter substantially and therefore, they should be considered more seriously in research. The risk is that the EIP might turn into an industry promotion instrument instead of strengthening innovation processes at grassroots level. The finalisation of the Strategic Plan will indicate the course that should be followed in the future. However, the member states will have – as always with European frameworks – a certain flexibility transferring the concept into the national context. The German Networking Agency for Rural Areas (DVS) coordinates the EIP planning process nationally and emphasizes the need to enable mainly the innovation processes rather than technological innovations. The DVS team considers a large variety of technological solutions to be available. However, the dissemination into daily farm routines has been delayed and therefore requires acceleration (Rocha 2013).
- In spring 2013, Commissioner Daçian Ciolos asked the member states to propose roadmaps for EIP implementation. The Ministries of the German Federal States requested the integration of the concepts into the states’ programmes of the Rural Development Fund (EARFD) which are currently underway. The next European funding period starts in 2014 and there will be no additional funding for the EIP concept (Freese 2013). Therefore, its realisation will revert to non-specific rural development schemes such as the future Cooperation Measure or the Agricultural Investment Promotion Programme (AFP), supplemented in Germany by the so-called Joint Task for the Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection (GAK) (Freese 2013). Although the European Member States agreed on the 2014-2020 Multi-Annual Financial Framework (EU Presidency 2013), decisions on German federal and national budgets are still to be made in 2013. The process was on hold in the German Federal States like Brandenburg as a result of the elections for the German Bundestag in September 2013. Federal ministries are waiting for the national financial framework to be finalized before they continue the process. Overall, available funds for the second pillar of Common Agriculture Policy will be less than in the period 2007-2013 (EU Parliament 2013) and will need to be split between existing and new policy measures such as EIP.
- In the Federal State of Brandenburg, two ministries are responsible for defining and implementing the EIP process on a regional level – the Ministry of Infrastructure and Agriculture (MIL) and the Ministry of Science, Research and Cultural Affairs (MWFK). Detailed programming for EIP implementation will clearly depend on funding available (Roffeis 2013). The MIL is elaborating the new rural development measures and is planning to introduce the EIP concept in Brandenburg with the intention of fostering region-specific, applied research projects for the farming industry. This emphasis in EIP is particularly strong in Brandenburg, because the ministry team recognized that the dissemination of innovative approaches has been hampered by the continuous reduction of regionally based public funding in agricultural research activities in the last decade (Roffeis 2013). MWFK is responsible for the funding of science and innovative regionally based research projects. Therefore, two ministries will be involved in the implementation of EIP on the regional level. The separation

of responsibilities and the effective cooperation between the two ministries will play a significant part in the successful implementation of the EIP policy concept. Furthermore, the policy will need to be based on clear and efficient communication with the agricultural and forestry target groups of EIP.

On the regional level, the EIP concept offers several instruments, the 'National Networks' for general coordination and communication, the 'Thematic Networks' focusing on a specific topic and connecting with regional, national or European partners, and the so-called Operational Groups (OGs) (Van Oost 2013). OGs will become the core element of the bottom-up process with stakeholder participation fostering the development of various region-specific and strongly needed innovations. The groups are supposed to build on partnerships, linking farmers or forest owners, advisors, researchers, businesses, and other stakeholders. Following the EIP concept, the OGs develop around a concrete innovation project targeted towards finding a solution for a specific issue. OGs are action- and result-oriented working units. The aim is to maximise interaction between group members and to enhance the productive exchange. OGs represent a mixture of stakeholders from different areas building bridges between research, farmers, businesses, advisory services, NGOs and governmental institutions, focusing on the realisation of a particular project.

At present, the involved ministries are reflecting on ways of targeting and forming the Brandenburgian OGs. Due to financial limitations, it is likely that there will be only a few OGs with each group focussing on an innovative project related to one of the regionally identified hot-topic (Roffeis 2013; Freese 2013). These topics can, but do not have to be, set up by a ministry (Van Oost 2012). If these topics were predefined, potential members of OGs would observe an act of top-down governance that would most likely affect the motivation of participants. The question is: what criteria will be used to select successful groups and projects? (Marquardt 2013) Moreover, the start-up concept of the groups has not been published yet. The new groups could actively form themselves in response to an official call or existing groups could be re-targeted by the involved stakeholders. At present, it remains to be defined who will be responsible for the organisation of meetings and facilitation of discussions. Furthermore, the groups will need support with the formal requirements when they aim to apply for research or investment funding. Participation of the stakeholders in an early stage of the concept's implementation is important if the idea of a bottom-up process is to realise.

The Commission expects the bottom-up approach to stimulate innovation from all sides, helping to target the research agenda through the development of new ideas and insights, and the dissemination of existing, sometimes tacit knowledge into focused solutions (EC 11/2012). It is not only about the creation of new technological solutions like innovative machinery and computer software, but also about innovation processes that enable change and adjustments of the farming systems, the cooperation between farmers or between farmers and the associated value chain. Innovations are always embedded in a social process involving different groups of actors who perform different tasks in the various phases of innovation processes (Meißner 2001, p. 44; Knickel *et al.* 2009): knowledge producers, knowledge users, knowledge brokers and political decision-makers.

Farmers and rural entrepreneurs need support to realize the adjustments which are necessary as a result of changing market, environmental and societal conditions of the agricultural production (Knickel *et al.* 2009). The EC encourages the member states to support the work of OGs by funding the organisation of seminars and workshops, the establishment of data bases and, on relevant research results, good practice examples, the different forms of partnerships and the provision of a help desk (EC 11/2012). However, the budget available for rural development funding will be smaller in the state of Brandenburg than in the current funding period ending in 2013. Firstly, the Rural Development Fund is likely to shrink in general. Secondly, the eastern states of Germany will lose the status of Objective 1 areas within Europe which will result in a significant change for the funding of rural industries. As a consequence, MIL will have to distribute a reduced budget to more targets and there will be a strong competition between different interest groups that aim at profiting from rural development programs, e.g. farmers' lobby, nature conservation organisations, rural tourism, forestry industry or bio-energy initiatives. The European Commission promotes the funding of group organisation through technical assistance, animation under cooperation measure and advisory services within EARFD (Van Oost 2013). Several funding options for OGs exist and the states will decide on specific requirements such as financial volume, time frame and other preconditions when defining the funding programs. (We will highlight the different funding opportunities for OGs in the final paper, to be presented in November 2013). In Brandenburg, OGs will probably - due to budgetary constraints - have to search for additional funding, not only from EARFD but also from other European or national funds (Roffeis 2013). Apart from the budget available for OG management and facilitation, it is unclear whether enterprises or organisations other than farms or other rural businesses will be able to apply for funding. The eligibility guidelines of the existing rural development funds will be *inter alia* reviewed because potential organizers of OGs such as universities, advisory services and other experts had until now been excluded from funding (MIL, 2012).

Conclusions on implementation

Although EIP is a new policy concept, the underlying instruments have been implemented and used before. For example, EIP refers strongly to the system of information brokerage, well-known in Flanders and the Netherlands, the bottom-up process of stakeholder participation as practiced in LEADER + programme or the existing knowledge and information networks for farmers. Based on the assumption that the experiences from these established instruments are transferable to the EIP concept, the papers shows some preliminary conclusions related to current process of EIP im-

plementation in Brandenburg. Taking this assumption into account, an effective implementation of EIP at the national and regional level would have to:

- Clearly communicate and promote the idea of innovation as a process, the benefits of innovation networks and the related knowledge transfer at all levels.
- Require intensive communication and a high degree of transparency between ministries and administrative bodies, as well as between enterprises and ministries.
- Specifically highlight the benefits of cooperative approaches, e.g. by presenting existing successful examples from other regions.
- Establish a transparent system of reporting to the EIP national network about their actions assuring an effective flow of information beyond the local and regional level.
- Provide for legal conditions that allow access of all relevant target groups.
- Assure a true bottom-up process in defining OG by securing interactive and cooperative communication between equal partners and by successfully including all stakeholders and disciplines.
- Specifically address technical implementation through seminars for participating organisations, responsible staff etc.

Case studies of existing approaches to innovation partnerships at the regional and national level that could serve as examples for implementation of operational groups

Several bodies in Germany have implemented agricultural innovation networks. Their lessons learned could be considered in the set-up of cooperative projects under the umbrella concept of EIP.

The Chamber of Agriculture of Lower Saxony has set up a Grassland-Center together with a wide range of stakeholders consisting of scientific institutions, farmers' organizations and other interest groups with the aim to develop and manage sustainable grassland systems and regional value chains resulting from grassland (Ellermann-Kuegler 2013). At present, the Chamber started EIP implementation in cooperation with the Grassland-Center aiming to test if the area- and topic-specific applied research centers could serve as knowledge hubs for OG formation and establishment in the future (Ellermann-Kuegler 2013).

The Ministry for Rural Areas and Consumer Protection (MLR) in Baden-Wuerttemberg highlights the INTERREG-Project Dairyman (Riedelberger 2012). Dairyman aims to strengthen dairy farming as a main economic activity in the rural communities and as a vital form of land use. It was set up as a European project with fourteen cooperating partners from different countries in North-Western Europe. Several Knowledge Transfer Centers – one of them in Baden-Wuerttemberg – evaluate the most interesting innovative dairy systems and organize seminars and training sessions. 120 commercial pilot dairy farms serve as focal points, inspiring local farmers to focus on innovative solutions related to sustainability issues. Dairyman aims at facilitating a rapid transfer of state-of-the-art knowledge to farmers in their regions (Dairyman project 2013).

The University for Sustainable Development (HNE) in the federal state of Brandenburg, has pursued the vision to foster a transdisciplinary innovation network that closes the communication gap between farming business, private advisory services, agricultural research and university studies, as well as administrative and policy bodies since the 1990s. Learning from each other, as well as efficient knowledge transfer from researcher or advisor to farmer and vice versa are main elements of this approach. More specifically, HNE has tested various formats of cooperative innovation projects in order to gain experience on how to ideally contribute to innovation processes in the state of Brandenburg. To pursue its' vision, all innovation projects are facilitated by an innovation network manager, who is independent from external, short-term funding but is a core university staff member, as only continuous reliable and high quality facilitation can assure the long term success of a regional innovation network. Part of the effort is to identify the needs for innovation by a bottom-up multi-stakeholder process on a regular basis. As a result several thematic innovation groups have already been established and might serve as models for other OGs. For example:

- An innovation group to develop **farm adaptation strategies to climate change impacts** on crop farming. This group, consisting of farmers, advisors, researchers and representatives of regional institutions and organisations, not only defines the research questions, but also develops a research design, the practical implementation of research and its evaluation. In addition, knowledge exchange is fostered by a range of in-farm demonstration activities. These demonstration activities are further supported by farmers unions which organize field days where a wide range of farmers, researchers and other agricultural experts of the region can learn about the studies' development and results so far. Thus, the innovation group invites a wider circle of stakeholders to think outside the box, to open up their mind towards the upcoming challenges driven by climate change impacts and to develop common ideas of needed innovations. The increasing number of interested farmers in this innovation group may be taken as a proxy indicator of its success so far.

- Innovation groups on **strategic development of typical cereal, beef and sheep farming, and direct marketing**: these groups - established by HNE and also consisting of the above mentioned wide range of stakeholders - develop innovation pathways to support competitiveness and resilience of the mentioned typical regional farming systems in Brandenburg. In this case, the additional role of the HNE team is to provide farm economic and policy impact analyses in cooperation with regional, national and international research institutions, which provide the basis for group discussions of farmers about strategic development pathways. These economic analyses help farmers to get a better understanding of the key factors driving costs, productivity and adaptation strategies. In addition, these innovation groups are embedded in a well-established international network of similar groups (*agri benchmark*) which supports international knowledge transfer. (Deblitz *et al.* 2005)

Lessons learned from previous innovation network efforts for OG implementation

An effective implementation of OGs at the regional level should assure true bottom-up processes securing cooperative and targeted communication between equal partners by continuous support of professional innovation network managers. Their tasks would include to:

- Secure an open-minded general attitude and sufficient flexibility for new ideas and actors enriching the group's activities.
- Foster the transparency or hamper the continuation of traditional hierarchies separating administration, practitioners and researchers which might limit knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer.
- Avoid competition with other knowledge brokerage approaches by successfully including all stakeholders and building bridges between research, farmers, businesses, advisory services, NGOs and governmental institutions.
- Help translate research results into actual innovation, quick transfer of innovation into practice and systematic feedback from practice to science concerning research needs, knowledge exchange, and raising awareness on the need for joint efforts to invest in sustainable innovation.
- Help to establish innovation groups around specific innovation projects in order to assure long-term interest of all actors' innovation groups (operational groups).
- Specifically target innovative enterprises with few resources or enterprises with little awareness of their own innovations or innovative character will enrich the operational groups.
- Support operational groups in defining their innovation needs and in writing project proposals and administrative tasks from early stage of project planning.

Conclusions

Assuming that the innovation groups of Eberswalde University currently function in a similar way as the future Operational Groups are foreseen to work, the implementation of EIP will be a promising instrument. Successfully established transdisciplinary groups – if facilitated professionally – indeed manage to bridge the gap between agricultural research, farming, forestry and the related processing businesses, advisory services and other stakeholders in the agriculture and forestry sector. However, experiences with the existing groups show that a range of challenges still need to be addressed, ideally through an intensive participatory process involving key stakeholders. The comparative analysis shows that existing groups in which farmers focus on research and innovations can serve as a starting point for the formation of EIP Operational Groups. Moreover, it is likely that region-specific experiences will be able to support group management and facilitation of transdisciplinary rural networks for innovation and can outline information gaps and research needs in the agriculture and forestry industry.

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