



Networking Community-Engaged Scholarship: The European Experience

Anna Augustyn¹ and Gusztav Nemes²

Abstract – This paper intends to raise discussion on the concept of community-engaged scholarship with special regard to networking between rural researchers and community development actors. We present some results of an Open Discussion workshop held at the 2013 ENRD LEADER Event in Brussels, organised for representatives of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and other stakeholders to provide quality input for the current programming of the new EU rural development policy. Our particular workshop was dedicated to identification of how researchers can support the work of LEADER LAGs and how they could do this more efficiently in the future under the new era of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

INTRODUCTION

The concept of engaged scholarship is not a novelty in academic debates and can be practiced in diverse forms. Along with various disciplines and discourses, contrasted with the non-applied research, it periodically becomes an object of intensified efforts appealing to actors from academy and practice. Thus far, in the times of growing socio-economic vulnerability that affects European rural communities, it could offer promising solutions to overcome difficulties.

Boyer (1996), taking a critical view on academia, suggests to reconsider models of scholarship and promotes scholarship of engagement. In his view, the focus of scholarly activity should not be limited to an established academic merit through publishing papers and achieving academic titles, but it should also embrace a more dynamic role of researchers in certain communities and action. Thus, the scholarship of engagement is an approach linking theory to practice, that should benefit both researchers and 'real' stakeholders.

A parallel concept, the action research tradition, offers complementary assumptions (Lewin, 1964; Fals Borda, 1981; Freire, 2006). Action research advocates iterative processes in knowledge creation and learning, and greatly supports the involvement of diverse actors as co-researchers, thus turning the overall research process into a more emancipatory and participatory exercise. In our paper, we explore community-engaged scholarship (CES) through these lenses and try to outline some of its characteristics in the European rural development context.

METHODS APPLIED

This paper presents preliminary results of an initiative in progress, aimed at stimulating discussions on engaged scholarship in the European rural development arena, as well as enhancing networking and mutual learning among stakeholders from various countries. The first step towards this was a screening of LEADER-related programme documents and ENRD analyses, and based on this – a dedicated workshop carried out during the annual 'LEADER event', gathering around 500 people in Brussels. Under the title 'Research & Local Development', the workshop brought together representatives of Local Action Groups (LEADER), National Rural Networks, Rural Development Programmes' Managing Authorities and researchers. The authors of the this paper facilitated the workshop and elaborated a brief summary (Nemes & Augustyn, 2013).

Our objective was to explore narratives of participants' experience in collaborative work as researchers and rural development practitioners. Yet, we also tried to explore, in a qualitative and participatory manner, what practical examples (*Success Stories*) can be found in our topic across the EU. Through various ways of 'brainstorming' we tried to capture existing research needs, possible forms of research activities, and issues occurring. Finally, proposals were jointly elaborated on possible ways forward, including references to the future Community-Led Local Development – the new EU policy framework.

RESEARCH & LOCAL DEVELOPMENT:

SUCCESS STORIES

Participants began exchange with discussion about their experiences in actual projects or initiatives that link researchers and practitioners under the LEADER 'umbrella'. This led to the identification of 7 *Success Stories*, pointing on varied practices in the following countries: Austria, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain and United Kingdom. As it turned out, research has been employed to address specific programming concerns of LEADER, such as methodologies for elaboration of Local Development Strategies (Poland, Spain) or impact assessment (Ireland), as well as broader topics of concern (governance models in Portugal, resilience in UK, learning and innovation networks in Hungary). In one of the countries (Austria), a systemic approach was observed – an intention to 'mainstream' research in the general LAG practice in the post-2013 EU programming period.

¹ Anna Augustyn is an independent researcher, consultant and ENRD non-permanent expert (annamaria.augustyn@yahoo.com).

² Gusztav Nemes is fellow of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Institute of Economics and at the Budapest Corvinus University (nemes23@gmail.com).



We concluded that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to what research methodologies and tools can be applied in this context. They involve both qualitative and quantitative surveying, mixed methods, and – increasingly – participatory research.

COLLABORATION OF RESEARCHERS & PRACTITIONERS: KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER

According to stakeholders, research can add significant value to rural development, however, there are barriers to success.

If looking at attitudes towards collaboration as dyadic relationships (Forthofer et al., 2010), the potential success of CES is influenced by the institutional embeddedness of researchers. The practitioners may perceive researchers either as individuals or institutional representatives (e.g. from universities, formal networks), or associate with a certain project framework. The workshop revealed that researchers often approach communities to carry out their academic investigations regardless actual needs of respondents and that this networking tends to be rather informal. In such cases research results are rarely fed back to the surveyed community, thus their applicability outside scholarly environment weakens. On the other hand, a more institutionalised framework – such as a project, including enhanced communication and facilitation between networks and research needs as dyadic counterparts – can greatly enhance the practical applicability of research findings.

As our workshop revealed, participatory research has a potential to bridge the communication gap between researchers and practitioners. Organising research as a project may also increase engagement and commitment of stakeholders. Insofar, however, European experience with action oriented networking of rural development research seems to be rather weak. According to our workshop results, LAGs mostly rely on personal connections with researchers and service outsourcing (e.g. tenders), and lack organised networks to help their work.

LAGs would need help for example with baseline studies on socio-economic circumstances, methodological support (e.g. SWOT analysis in Local Development Strategies), qualitative and quantitative surveying, market research or thematic investigations focused on rural heritage and tourism. In addition, researchers with animation skills (e.g. facilitation, community development, or an ability to look 'out of the box' on local matters) are also welcome. Another possible area of support could be evaluation. Stakeholders stressed here the contrasting evaluation needs at the central (Managing Authority) and local (LAG) levels. While the first aims mainly at political legitimisation of the policy through collecting quantitative data, the latter would need a more qualitative approach, directed at and self-evaluation, learning and improvement of the delivery of Local Development Strategies.

According to our workshop results, participatory and action research methodologies are often considered as experimental and many researchers lack experi-

ence or capacity in their application. At the same time, applied research has a marginal status within academia, and its popularity is constrained by the criteria of scholarly merit, based on an established hierarchic tenure process. Also, rural development research rarely has a high priority for donors. Preference is normally given to investigations on urban-biased topics or, as in the case of public extension, simply on agriculture. Thus, both, financial and human resources are scarce for applied research in rural development.

WAYS FORWARD

Intended as 'research in the making', our workshop explored potential solutions to overcome barriers associated with collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Issues were raised concerning more capacity building efforts in academia, enhancing networking between actors and increasing rural development research funding or integrating it with other financial mechanisms (e.g. under the CLLD). The dissemination of research results should also be reconsidered. Besides academic papers, CES should embark on other forms of dissemination (videos, social media, etc.), expanding application of research results to non-academic community. The capacities could be also built by creating a European network of faculties offering a knowledge-base and regular exchange between researchers and practitioners in rural development, and training young researchers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all participants of the workshop, as well as the European Commission and the European Network for Rural Development for providing us facilities to host it in Brussels. This paper cannot be, however, interpreted as an official position of these institutions.

REFERENCES

- Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 1(1): p.11-20.
- Fals Borda, O. (1981). The Challenge of Action Research, *Development*, Vol. 23 No1. p.55-61.
- Forthofer, M., Clarkson, J., Mackelprang, A. and Roscoe, B. (2010). *Network and System Science Contributions to Advancing Community Engagement for Knowledge Translation*. Critical Junctures in Research, Practice and Policy. November 4-5. Guelph.
- Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *J Soc. Issues* 2(4): p.34-46.
- Nemes, G. and Augustyn, A. (2013). *Research and Local Development. Open Discussion Report*. LEADER event – Building Bridges for the Future. April 17-18. Brussels.