

## Systems of local self-administration after agricultural transformation: experiences of a local resource management project in East Germany

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**Systems of Local Self-Administration  
after Agricultural Transformation –  
Experiences of a local resource  
management project in East Germany**

**Lutz Laschewski**

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**Abstract**

This article raises the question of the constitution of rural society in postsocialist countries, and explores the possibilities of participatory approaches in rural development and resource management in face of given social conditions in the local context. The unifying scientific "idea" is currently associated with the concept of social capital. The ability to form social capital can be seen as a central prerequisite both for economic development and the protection of resources (that is, for sustainable development). An important element of this concept is the networking of the actors within the region and with external actors.

As a result of historical development the network relations in the rural areas of East Germany have a specific structure. What is especially remarkable is the continuing dominant role of the representatives of the big agricultural enterprises in the important local network structures despite the obvious decline in the economic importance of these enterprises. The structures uncovered in the case studies can certainly be taken to reflect the reality of many local contexts. It is argued that, as far as the creation of the beginnings of participation in rural development and resource management are concerned, that if the peculiarities are ignored there is a danger that the existing network structures will simply be strengthened through participatory development. Therefore, the important contributions of participatory approaches to the solution of concrete problems must be supplemented by the prospect of its social embedding in the context of rural development. At the same time it also became clear in the project that the success of developed attempts at problem solution can only be ensured if the higher political levels are prepared to devolve downwards.

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## 1. Introduction

Systems of local self-administration and participatory approaches in rural development and resource management are becoming increasingly popular both on the part of the scientific community and among the practitioners of development co-operation. On the one hand they promise the possibility of incorporating social and ecological complexity in management structures and, on the other hand, they appear to give legitimacy in the sense of democratising society. The views expressed by institutional economists in general assume a logic of rational action on the part of individual and collective actors, and they therefore argue that the practicability of local co-operation and self-administration is derived primarily from the nature of the problem themselves. In this case, attention is directed especially to the characteristics of technological processes or the influence of specific conjunctures of action. For example, the differentiation between private, public, club and common goods, which are assumed to have different optimal institutional arrangements, is undertaken on the basis of the criteria of excludability and rivalry<sup>1</sup>.

Such approaches take little account of the social genesis and political realisation of participation. However, empirical research in political sciences and economic research with a social-science orientation point to marked differences in social competence with regard to self-organisation and co-operation, which is referred to as social capital in current discourses. These discourses and concepts, which were developed with reference to both advanced western societies and southern countries, are now being applied to rural development in post-socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Lampland 2002). Here, the predominant findings seem to indicate very negative effects - deriving from the socialist past and/or the radical structural fracture - on the formation of social capital in rural societies. Indeed, anomic social conditions have been diagnosed as the specific result of structural change (Alanen 2001). However, the analysis of the constitution of rural societies in these countries as a whole and the formation of social capital is still in its early stages.

This article is intended to contribute to this debate by analysing the structure of local decision-making processes on the basis of an investigation of local agricultural and environmental policy networks in two selected regions of East Germany. The question posed is whether, and in what manner, the special social conditions in East Germany influence network relations and the possibility of creating co-operative institutions in resource management and rural development. First, a number of special features of East German agriculture and rural areas are described. This is followed by an analysis of the important groups of actors and their incorporation in local agri-environmental decision-making structures in the selected regions. Finally, a number of institutional and social implications are identified.

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<sup>1</sup> Excludability enquires whether it is possible to exclude someone from using or consuming the good, while rivalry enquires whether consumption by someone means that the good is no longer available for consumption by someone else.

## 2. Social Capital and Endogenous Development

Social capital is the term applied both to the possibilities of individuals to make use of the support of groups and networks and the competence of collectives to find co-operative solutions and so to escape from prisoners' dilemmas. There is no agreed definition of social capital (see Woolcock 1998, Dasgupta and Serageldin 2002). However, four common aspects of the scientific discussions can nevertheless be identified (Pretty and Ward 2001):

Social Capital is generally associated with trust. Trust reduces the costs of control. A lack of trust makes the realisation of co-operative solutions more difficult.

Social Capital is also associated with reciprocal exchange relations. Simultaneous exchange on the basis of roughly equal exchange is called specific reciprocity. More important in this regard is diffuse reciprocity. Diffuse reciprocity refers to exchange within lasting relationships which does not expect an immediate service in return for the service rendered, but is only connected with the expectation of a future service in return.

Common rules, norms and sanctions are another important element of social capital and place collective interests above individual interests to the extent that this mutually recognised. By this means, individual action is on the one hand constrained but at the same time made possible because individual rights can be safeguarded and do not have to be constantly affirmed.

The fourth aspect comprises the nature, content and extent of social relations, the networks of the local actors themselves and their relations to other (external) actors and networks.

In the European rural studies context similar considerations have been discussed with the concept of endogenous development (in the German-speaking countries usually: "eigenständige Regionalentwicklung" - autonomous regional development) (see Ploeg and Long 1994, Ploeg and van Dijk 1995). Here too, the parameters of the discussion are not generally agreed but common basic positions are evident. On the one hand, the "agricultural position", which assumes an almost complete identity between agricultural and rural interests, sees itself confronted with a view which not only takes note of the economic and social diversity of rural communities in advanced societies but consciously seeks to integrate it (Baldock et al. 2001).

However, in contrast to the neo-liberal view, the relative decline in the economic importance attributed to agriculture here is not equated with social insignificance and unworthiness for support. On the contrary, it is argued that "the agricultural sector cannot be residualized and left in a state of public denial. Its social, economic and physical role is a central element in achieving a more sustainable society both for the rural and the urban society" (Marsden et al. 2001:75). It is true that agriculture can no longer play the major economic role in the rural development of advanced societies but the form which agricultural land use takes can inhibit alternative development paths. In this context the non-material aspects of land use (experience of the natural world, leisure use) are of increasing economic importance (Marsden et al. 1993).

The relationship between agriculture and rural areas thus points to a second common characteristic of the paradigm shift that is becoming apparent: integration. As a consequence of this approach rural development measures must be conceived as integrated rural development. Moreover, almost all new concepts of rural development are characterized by the emphasis placed on participation and bottom-up orientation. Consequently, the real paradigm shift lies in the transformation of people's perception from those of objects and beneficiaries of development to those of partners and protagonists in their own development (Uphoff 1998).

Studies of rural development show that the success of (economic) rural development rests to a high degree on the ability to make the fullest use of natural and cultural resources as the central development potential, also for the non-agricultural sector (Terluin 2001). This is particularly true if one examines the employment effect. In general, the internal and external interconnections between local actors have been identified as the central factor in ensuring the success of endogenous development (Lowe et al. 1995).

### **3. Agriculture and rural areas in East Germany**

Agriculture in East Germany is different. As a result of socialist collectivisation and subsequent concentration processes the number of agricultural enterprises fell, according to official statistics, from about half a million after the Second World War to just 8,668 in the year 1989. At this point about 805,000 people were employed in agriculture. In the course of the restructuring resulting from German unification the number of agricultural enterprises has increased to the present figure of about 28,400, while the number of people employed in agriculture has fallen to about 162,000 (BMVEL 2002). The greater part of this dramatic loss of employment occurred in the first three years, which would have been impossible in this form without extensive social security measures. (For a detailed analysis of these processes and their consequences for rural areas see, among others Beckmann and Hagedorn 1997, Forstner and Isermeyer 2001, Siebert and Laschewski 2001, Laschewski et al. 2002, Wilson, O. and Klages, B. (2001).

Characteristic elements of the current structure of agriculture in East Germany are:

1. The existence of a small number of very large agricultural enterprises that came into existence mainly as successor enterprises to agricultural production co-operatives (LPG).
2. A certain number of enterprises that by international standards are quite large, highly professionalised and of varied legal status.
3. Numerous smaller, part-time enterprises.
4. An almost complete separation of owners and farmers, which is reflected in the high proportion of tenancies among agricultural enterprises.

Despite the dramatic loss of employment, agriculture in East Germany, especially in remote rural areas, is still a significant economic activity, accounting for a high proportion of employment locally. This is to be seen against a background of what, in general, is a poorly developed density of businesses in other areas of economic activity. Tourism is an important

rural economic sector that utilises non-material land-use potential. In many regions it represents a, if not the, growth sector, but it is generally still in the phase of development and can scarcely be regarded as consolidated.

The migration from town to countryside (counter-urbanisation), which is mainly motivated by quality of life rather than employment opportunities, and is to be observed in many regions of Western Europe, is not (yet) apparent in East Germany or is at the moment limited to suburban regions. In fringe rural areas the opposite movement of population is predominant (Siebert and Laschewski 2001).

In the rural areas of East Germany as a whole a relatively successful, highly professionalised agriculture stands out against the background of a poor rural economy (Siebert and Laschewski 2001). However, it should not be forgotten that the success of agricultural enterprises has been achieved partly by means of very low wages. Paradoxically, agriculture is not necessarily interested in general economic development because this would increase both competition between forms of land use and the pressure to adapt. This does not necessarily make agriculture an impediment to development but it is clear that agriculture is faced with a dilemma, the resolution of which is an important prerequisite for sustainable land use and successful rural development.

#### **4. The methodology and context of the research**

This article is based on empirical studies carried out in the course of a part-project within the framework of a wider interdisciplinary research project GRANO - "Approaches to a sustainable, environmentally compatible, agricultural production: model area North-East Germany" (1998 - 2002) - that was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Within the framework of the part-project various institutional approaches to the solution of agri-environmental problems were devised, such as round tables, environmental co-operatives and environmental auctions, and put into practice in the form of an action research approach in two regions in the Federal State of Brandenburg, which surrounds Berlin. The institution of the round table, in particular, proved to be successful in this respect (Arzt et al. 2002). The scientific focus of this project group was on the process of the initiation and running of this institution. In the present article, however, the network relations of the actors as an important aspect of social capital are placed in the forefront of attention.

The regions under investigation were chosen on the basis of specific problems in agri-environmental policy (Müller et al. 2000, Müller et al. 2002). They lie outside the economic development area in the north-east (Uckermark) and the south-west (Schraden) of Brandenburg, which surrounds Berlin. They are thinly populated, at least by German standards. Because of their peripheral location the utilisation of natural resources for agriculture and tourism play an important role in development. In both cases the agricultural production conditions are rather mediocre, though the landscape qualities are generally perceived as being very attractive and having high ecological potential.



The observations reported here were made especially in the course of actor analysis carried out in preparation for the round tables and are also based on further interviews and surveys accompanying the investigation (among others Buchholz 2001, Schleyer 2002a, 2002b).

## **5. Networks and political representation**

The use of the voluntary sector as model for social integration is underdeveloped in East Germany in general (Seibel 1997) and in rural areas particularly (Hainz 1998). On the one hand, because of the lack of financial resources and inadequate support by society, the voluntary sector in East Germany as a whole is less developed than in West Germany. On the other hand, in contrast to West Germany, the organisations that are service providers financed mainly through public funds are regarded more strongly as quasi-governmental organisations, and often also regard themselves as such. Their independent role as structural components of civil society thus remains largely unnoticed (Priller 1998).

In the areas studied, the following pictures of the actor networks emerges:

### *5.1 Agricultural interests*

The analysis of local integration demonstrates the socially central role of a few large agricultural enterprises. They are well organised to press their interests and participate in numerous activities at the interface between the state and the private sector. For this reason they seem to be ideal type actors for the idea of public-private partnership. The big agricultural enterprises, or their management representatives, are central actors in all the relevant associations, networks and initiatives.

At the local level the representation of agricultural interests is fissured as a consequence of quarrels about land restitution at the time of the unification process. Smaller associations usually represent the interest of smaller agricultural enterprises and are in competition with the dominant Regional Farmer's Union, which lays claim to be the sole political representation of agriculture. Smaller associations do exist in the study regions but are scarcely present in local networks. This observation is also true for small full-time and part-time farmers in general. They are scarcely involved in relevant local networks. It appears that a certain social distance exists and there are problems of rapprochement between the different types of enterprises and between the other (central) network participants and the small agricultural enterprises.

### *5.2 Owners*

The "owner problem" is the historical result of agricultural collectivisation and restitution policies after German unification. Agriculture in East Germany is first and foremost tenant farming. In addition, it is in great measure confronted with various forms of absentee ownership; that is to say it is faced with owners who are (no longer) locally resident and on occasion have not yet been identified. The latter situation has been described as a central problem, in particular by the agricultural enterprises farming in the Schraden area, a problem which is said (not exclusively) to make the participation of agricultural enterprises in nature conservation measures difficult (Buchholz 2001, Schleyer 2002a, b). Irrespective of whether these arguments are valid or, as conservationists sometimes suspect, simply a cover, it is a

striking fact the the owners, that is those to whom the land belongs, are neither organised nor involved as such in decision-making processes or integrated in networks. The way that agricultural enterprises argue gives the impression that they regard themselves as the legitimate representatives of owner interests and apparently assume that the owners would prefer conventional agricultural use. The conservationists, in contrast, pay little attention to owners in their discourse. It is an open question whether the landowners can be socially organised<sup>2</sup>. In view of the fundamental social belief that places private property in a privileged position the absence of landowners from the decision-making processes and the round tables is, to say the least, problematic.

### *5.3 The environmental lobby*

It is typical of the rural areas in East Germany that the environmental movement is absent or at least only weakly developed. This is reflected in the fact that environmental and nature conservancy organisations are of only minor importance as part of rural civil society at local level. Nature conservancy organisations and environmental groups are nevertheless relevant actors but they generally play a part rather as external actors who are involved in administrative processes or are trying to implement environmental projects, for example by purchasing land. The real environmental lobby at the local level is therefore, essentially the environmental administration itself. Since it depends on local regulations and the instruments of state power (e.g. fines), it faces the general problem of law enforcement, and, therefore, problems of acceptance and the classical principal-agent problematic.

The environmental administration is therefore regularly involved in landscape conservation associations (Landschaftspflegeverbände)<sup>3</sup>, water boards and similar organisations, in the spirit of public-private partnership. This is, in part, envisaged by legislators.

### *5.4 Local authority politics and specialised agencies*

The above observation can, up to a point, be generalised. The composition of networks in the agri-environmental field demonstrates the dominance of large agricultural enterprises and also specialised agencies, such as the agricultural and the environmental agencies. The characteristic composition of the round tables, where the big agricultural enterprises and the representatives of the administration predominate together with professional scientists, is reflected in a similar way in other bodies, e.g. landscape conservation associations but also rural development initiatives.

### *5.5 The influence of other economic sectors*

As far as other economic sectors are concerned the most salient feature is the absence of their representatives, in particular in the area of tourism. The reasons for this are many and varied. The small-business sector is only weakly developed and generally in its initial stages. Many of the recently established businesses are often still unstable and therefore more concerned with themselves than with social questions. Thus, local business-interest associations can

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<sup>2</sup> On the ability of social groups to organise cf. for example (Olson 1965).

<sup>3</sup> These are voluntary organisations, partly supported by public money, which have the objective of conserving and maintaining natural and cultural landscape features.

draw on only a small membership base and, when in existence at all, are still in their early stages. There are only occasional exact studies of the co-operation behaviour of these businesses<sup>4</sup>. Since family businesses predominate especially in the tourist sector, the question arises as to the degree to which similar problems of rapprochement between the different types of actors make themselves felt as they do in the agricultural sector.

### *5.6 Local decision making and political hierarchy*

The work of the project has once again demonstrated the very limited ability and willingness on the part of the higher political levels to give serious attention to the ideas and plans developed by local actors (Peters et.al. 2002). This should not be seen as a moral accusation but rather as an indication of institutional deficits. Local participation processes require docking arrangements with the political system to ensure that initiatives from below can have their effect above. The dominance of various administrations (not their participation in principal) in co-operative networks can easily lead to these networks being moulded by the executive interests of the state, i.e. they function as the extended arm of the state within society, especially where problems of acceptance are to be expected. Accusations of this kind have been made in relation to rural development in East Germany as a whole, which presents itself rhetorically as very "bottom up" though in fact functioning all too often as conventional "top down" politics (Brauer 2001, Bruckmeier 2000).

## **6. Conclusions**

This article raises the question of the constitution of rural society in postsocialist countries. While the research project on which this analysis is based views participation as a process, in this article the social prerequisites for successful participative processes are placed at the centre of attention. The unifying scientific "idea" is currently associated with the concept of social capital. The ability to form social capital can be seen as a central prerequisite both for economic development and the protection of resources (that is, for sustainable development). An important element of this concept is the networking of the actors within the region and with external actors.

As a result of historical development the network relations in the rural areas of East Germany have a specific structure. The structures uncovered in the case studies can certainly be taken to reflect the reality of many local contexts. What is especially remarkable is the continuing dominant role of the representatives of the big agricultural enterprises in the important local network structures despite the obvious decline in the economic importance of these enterprises. Their most important partner is frequently the state. The mass of the numerically significant small and very small agricultural businesses but also the non-agricultural ones which, like the tourist sector, have an interest in the public goods provided by agriculture, are scarcely integrated in these networks. It is striking that the landowners, although they formally enjoy high social status, neither put in an appearance as a group nor are greatly missed, and if they are the object of attention at all, then only as a problem.

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<sup>4</sup> Brusig et al. (1997) in a study of small enterprises in a region also in Brandenburg come to the conclusion that "conventional" forms of co-operation (service provision, marketing, further training) are predominant in rural areas while forms of "strategic" co-operation are rather the exception.

At the present moment it is an open question whether the special nature of these network structures is the result of an imbalance of power, the passivity of large parts of the social groups, or the differences in the ability of various interests to organise themselves. There is no doubt that quarrels about land restitution and assets in the agricultural sector were not helpful in this respect. As far as the creation of the beginnings of participation in rural development and resource management are concerned, one thing is clear, however. If the peculiarities described above are ignored there is a danger that the existing network structures will simply be strengthened.

The important contribution that such efforts - like the round tables in the GRANO project - can make to the development of civil society itself and the contribution that civil society can make to problem solution may come to nothing because new horizontal network relations and the bridging of "structural holes" (Burt 1982) between hitherto unlinked networks does not take place. The important contributions of participatory approaches to the solution of concrete problems must be supplemented by the prospect of its social embedding in the context of rural development. However, this does not mean that this institution itself has to involve everybody itself but that the interfaces to other social actors and networks must be defined. One such interface in the given case was, for example, the question of how far the tourism sector is prepared to invest in the preservation and shaping of the landscape.

At the same time it also became clear in the project that the success of developed attempts at problem solution can only be ensured if the higher political levels are prepared to devolve downwards. The results of the investigations show that the increase in legal regulations and administrative measures in the agri-environmental sphere inhibit the willingness to contribute to voluntary activities. If, in addition, locally developed solutions are ignored, the state becomes the stumbling block for sustainable development. This points to the necessity of a political culture that is participation - friendly, but that is something that can only be partly influenced at the local level.

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