

AGRO-INNOVATION NETWORKS

Project co-ordinator Dr Heidrun Moschitz on SOLINSA, a research project that challenges the role of researchers, administration and practitioners for innovating sustainable agriculture

The challenges of the agro-food systems to turn towards a sustainable rural development increasingly result in innovative initiatives. The SOLINSA project (Support of Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture) explores initiatives, such as the agricultural biogas network in Latvia which has been launched to offer solutions both for farmers' economic and environmental concerns and for more sustainable bioenergy strategies.

The network is involved in various types of activities, namely production, policy formulation, research, education, and public communication. It includes multiple actors – biogas producers, researchers, advisors, administration and policy-makers – each with their specific knowledge in the field. Yet, knowledge is insufficiently shared among the involved actors. The established advisory system does not suit the network's needs and the transfer of technical knowledge from research organisations to the producers is not as smooth as it could be. The Latvian biogas network thus does not fit into the historically developed agricultural knowledge system with its long-established structures and organisational culture.

This example illustrates the need for a new understanding of innovation and learning for sustainable agriculture that addresses the complex nature of sustainable pathways for agricultural and rural development. The EU research project SOLINSA sets out for such a new approach.

Currently, farmers are locked into socio-technical systems where innovation is increasingly dependent on fossil fuels and commercial standards. The state has reduced its investment in agricultural research, which is increasingly carried out by corporations whose interest is to sell inputs. In these systems, innovation is often seen as a linear process of knowledge transfer from research (the knowledge producer) to the farmers (as knowledge users). As the above presented example shows, such a linear pathway is not suited to cope with the complex challenge of sustainable development and resilience of farming systems, which rather builds on multiple sources of knowledge to reduce input and produce public goods.

The SOLINSA project starts from the assumption that new knowledge – the key to innovation – is created through social learning processes with multiple actors. To capitalise the new knowledge, a different design of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) is needed, based on a network rather than on a hierarchical form. Such knowledge systems increase the resilience of socio-ecological systems, as they provide the necessary flexibility to keep opportunities for change open.

The SOLINSA project explores innovations in agriculture that enlarge the development opportunities of farmers, and do not lead to one-way solutions. As the Commission notes in its communication on the EIP¹, 'innovation may be technological, non-technological, or social, and may be based on new or traditional practices'. The SOLINSA project integrates this insight into a transdisciplinary research practice, and in this way sets out on a new and original path that critically puts at stake the role of researchers and practitioners for innovating sustainable agriculture.

SOLINSA looks at Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSAs) that develop at the fringes of the established system of AKIS. LINSAs are defined as networks of producers, users, experts, CSOs, local administrations, formal AKS components, SMEs that create mutual engagement around sustainability goals in agriculture and rural development, and to this purpose they co-produce new knowledge by creating conditions for communication, share resources and co-operate on common initiatives.

In eight countries, the 11 project partners explore the processes of learning and knowledge sharing in LINSAs to support the spread of innovative solutions that are being developed.

Running from 2011 to early 2014, the project will contribute to post-2013 Common Agricultural Policy by providing guidance on how to implement efficiently the ideas outlined in the proposals of the Commission, such as the support for initiating operational groups.

Furthermore, SOLINSA will contribute to the further development of the Farm Advisory System by feeding the experiences into a concept for training of advisors, who themselves are not yet trained sufficiently to meet the challenges of sustainable development of European agriculture.

¹ European Innovation Partnership, 'Agricultural productivity and sustainability'

Co-author of this profile: Gianluca Brunori



Dr Heidrun Moschitz
Project Co-ordinator
Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL

tel: +41 (0)62 865 72 14

heidrun.moschitz@fibl.org
www.solinsa.net