

An Anglo-German Foundation Report

Cultural resistance to European agri-environmental policy: A cross-cultural comparison between the UK and Germany

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Executive Summary

This study looks at the issue of farmers' cultural resistance to agri-environmental policy through a cross-country comparison between Aberdeenshire (Scotland) and Hessen (Germany). We contend that conventional everyday farming activities serve not only economic purposes, but also allow farmers to obtain cultural and social capital through displays of skill in good management such as straight ploughing, tidy farmyards, healthy-looking animals, well-grassed fields, etc. By constructing a framework to explore why conventional activities become culturally important, we were able to examine why, despite over a decade of agri-environmental policy, conventional farming cultures have yet to fully embrace environmental objectives.

One key reason for this discrepancy is that, whereas agricultural skills are clearly displayed on the landscape and are easily assessed even from considerable distances, the 'skill' in conservation work remains largely hidden from the roadsides. Many of the signs of good management (for example, species diversity, rare indicator species) require a close-up examination of the conservation work. Furthermore, to assess whether the management has been good or not requires specialist knowledge about (a) what the goal is in conservation work, and (b) what management practices are required to achieve this goal. Farmers are currently unable to judge conservation skills in the same way that they can judge farming skills.

Conventional agricultural processes become part of the culture because of the social value of expertise or of being a leader in the field – i.e. a 'good farmer'. This (and the potential economic advantages to be gained from following good management practices) provides the basis for the generation of social capital within farming communities, and promotes the establishment of local knowledge cultures. Unless agri-environmental schemes that similarly allow farmers to generate cultural and social capital from their activities can be

constructed, the process of creating a more environmentally friendly farming culture in Europe will be a slow one.

A problem with current agri-environmental schemes is that they specify (a) the management actions required to qualify for land management payments, and (b) the area of the farm to be managed under the agri-environmental agreement. While farmers retain the choice of whether to enter a scheme or not, and are sometimes able to negotiate conditions, once the scheme is established there is very little innovation required for 'producing' conservation. As a consequence, farmers are not able to use their skills to improve their conservation areas, nor is there any real incentive for learning more about conservation. The land entered in the scheme is considered to be under the management of the government and the farmers are simply following the rules.

We suggest one possible solution is to copy conventional agriculture by paying for indicator species production (building on existing small-scale schemes in a number of EU countries). This would provide farmers with a tangible measure to compare changes resulting from their management practices. It would also encourage farmers to access neighbouring farms and learn more about each other's management practices, thereby establishing environmental management knowledge as a source of cultural capital.

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Notes to the editor:

The Anglo-German Foundation contributes to the policy process in Britain and Germany by funding comparative research on economic, environmental and social issues and by organising and supporting conferences, seminars, lectures and publications which encourage the exchange of knowledge, ideas and best practice, both between the two countries and between researchers and practitioners.

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