

Evaluating the contribution of innovation networks to resilient farming systems

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Agricultural innovation networks can play a major role in enhancing a productive cooperation between farmers, processors, scientists and other stakeholders in the food producing sector. A close cooperation within the sector is seen as a precondition for the development and uptake of more efficient processes and technologies which are needed for securing the expected increase in production and consumption within planetary boundaries. Innovation networks already exist. Supported by innovation policy schemes in the upcoming funding period 2014-2020 of the European Commission, new networks will emerge and the existing networks are expected to become stronger and work more effectively.

Eberswalde University has been establishing an innovation network for organic farming and processing in the Federal State of Brandenburg and the city of Berlin in the north-eastern part of Germany. During the last decade, the network enabled several cross-disciplinary study and research projects. Organic farmers, small and medium-sized organic food processors and trade businesses, research institutes, advisory services as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations contributed to the development of this network. The projects that are jointly implemented focus on strategic development and practical problem solving for organic food value chains.

In this paper we are asking how the effectiveness of the innovation network coordinated by Eberswalde University and its contribution to the resilience of the organic farming and food sector in the Berlin-Brandenburg region can be evaluated.

The applied methodological approach focuses on the ability of a socio-ecological system to cope with changing or threatening conditions. Central in the assessment is the adaptive capacity of individuals, groups (e.g. cooperations, societies) and organisations such as businesses or initiatives. Key criteria in the assessment are: the ability for “self-organisation”, the “capacity to support and accept changing framework conditions”, the “learning capacity”, the ability to “make connections”, to jointly agree and effectively move toward “specific goals”, to maintain a “hopeful outlook” and to take “care of own interests” while “respecting” those of others. These criteria are operationalized through parameters.

The empirical data for the paper are obtained from interviews with key actors in the network and the results of a series of multi-stakeholder workshops as well as the outcome from the network related research projects. Based on this, the organic farming and food network of Eberswalde University has been tested systematically for resilience. Results show the strengths resulting from the criteria “making connections” and “helpful outlook” while weaknesses relate mainly to “life cycle acceptance”.