# Social learning in local food networks

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Auteurs: Thomas Bleeckx, Tom Dedeurwaerdere, Charlotte de Callatay, Paula Fernandez Wulff, Jose-Luis Vivero

Auteur pour la correspondence: Tom Dedeurwaerdere

Affiliations institutionnelles : Université catholique de Louvain

Contacts et formations disciplinaires

Thomas Bleeckx, thomas.bleeckx@uclouvain.be : ingénieur agronome

Tom Dedeurwaerdere, tom.dedeurwaerdere@uclouvain.be : ingénieur civil et doctorat en philosophe

Charlotte de Callatay, cha\_decallatay@hotmail.com : droit

Paula Fernandez-Wulff, paula.fdezwulff@gmail.com : droit et sciences politiques

Jose-Luis Vivero, jose-luis.viveropol@uclouvain.be : ingénieur agronome

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## Introduction: the role of collaborative networks in the up-scaling of food transition initiatives

There are numerous examples of initiatives in the agro-food system that are organized in networks and that are effective to put in place real changes towards sustainability. For instance, the LEADER II projects in Nothern Ireland involve local peple by public–private–voluntary sector partnerships. These projects enabled to build a shared knowledge and understanding, and to develop the capacity among stakeholders to work together locally to solve common problems, involving a shift from single-sector agricultural support to a wider multi-sectoral approach for the rural economy (Scott 2004). Organic farmers networks in New York State are organized to share organic knowledge and practices between farmers and scientists. In the study of Kroma (2006), farmers indicated that networks helped them to benefit from cooperative extension services in the region or gave them tools to innovate. They also developed capacities with other farmers to manage change through new knowledge on alternative agriculture (Kroma 2006). In Canada, a highly successful governmental policy for ecological transition in farming practices is based on support to learning processes in clubs of farmers that exchange technical knowledge on a peer to peer basis (Mathe and Rivaud, 2009). Such clubs exist in many EU countries as well (cf. the CETA and COMICE, mentioned in the table 3 on the questionnaire below), but often are not focused on ecological transition processes, and, if they are, lack political and financial support (Mathe and Rivaud, 2009). A last example are the urban garden networks in Berlin. These multi-stakeholders platform (activists, scientist, local authorities, SME’s) addressed all aspects of sustainability from social aspects such as social integration to economic considerations. Scholars point to the crucial role of the openness of local public administration and the participatory governance of the network in the success of the project (Wunder 2013, Bendt 2013).

As highlighted by these illustrative examples, collaborative networks can contribute to improve the socio-ecological outcomes of the agro-food system. This is corroborated by the large literature on the contribution of collaborative networks in the field of environmental governance. In this context, collaborative networks can be defined through three distinguishing features (Pahl Wostl 2009):

1. a high level of social regulation through informal institutions, which depend on social norms for rule enforcement, in addition to formal institutions, which are controlled and monitored by the legal apparatus of the state;
2. a high degree of participation of decentralized collective actors in the governance process, in addition to the state-actors, and
3. the recourse to polycentric and interactive problem solving amongst these actors.

## 2. The theoretical framework of the research : network bridging organisations to foster technical and social learning

The role of bridging organisations in formal co-management arrangements has been extensively studied in the literature in environmental governance (cf. the overview in Berkes 2009). Less attention has been given to the possible role of bridging organisations in the case of collaborative networks. However, as discussed above, collaborative networks, in spite of being devoid of the advantages of the stronger full-fledged co-management option, can potentially play a role in addressing some of the policy integration and social learning challenges in the field of sustainable agro-food system policies. Three of the merits of bridging organisations amongst participants of collaborative networks can be detailed. The first is the better chance for actors to build common objectives and long-term strategies and cooperation that can lead to a real transformation of the agro-food system. The second is the potential for facilitating the process of social learning and co-production of knowledge amongst the stakeholders, private sector actors and governmental organisations. The third could be the emergence of new institutional rules for framing the economic transactions built on the new shared system of beliefs of the actors gathered in the bridging organisations. Indeed, the emergence of new economic institutions depends on the social learning processes by the actors and its interaction with beliefs system. Furthermore, an institutional transition depends on a cognitive disequilibrium, such as a crisis of shared beliefs that accompanies environmental changes and social learning. The redefinition of a new “activated” subset of choices, a novel action plan and a new shared system of beliefs will lead to new institutions



*Figure 2.1.: The possible role of bridging organisations in co-governance (source: Berkes, 2009: p. 1696)*

## 3. Key variables addressed in the survey of 5 local food networks in Belgium

When social norms and personal values play an important role in the decision-making over alternatives (under similar economic outcomes, and similar level of information), collaborative multi-stakeholder networks that build trust amongst the actors and foster learning on the new social norms have been shown to be more likely to lead to change in actors’ behaviour (Dedeurwaerdere, 2005; Dedeurwaerdere, 2007; Innes and Booher, 2010; Bodin and Prell, 2011). As seen above, experiments as farmers networks or urban garden strategies, based on multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanisms and social learning, have shown high outputs for the socio-ecological transition. It is therefore important to get a better understanding of the conditions under which these networks are promoting social learning.

Social learning in multi-stakeholder networks is not an automatic result of the existence of these networks, nor is it necessarily part of their core mission. The literature on social learning in the management of natural resources has highlighted a set of conditions for social learning processes leading to occur. In particular, in their review of over two decades of empirical research with collaborative processes, Innes and Booher (2010) highlight three key conditions for successful social learning processes. These conditions are: inclusiveness, interdependence and authentic dialogue. First, to lead to effective social learning on the landscape level, a collaborative rational process has to engage all those who have pertinent knowledge and a stake in the issue at hand. Indeed, the long-term adaptive capacity of complex socio-ecological systems is fostered by a dialogue amongst a broad diversity of values, interests, perspectives, skills and types and sources of knowledge. As also highlighted by other scholars of social learning, diversity allows to uncover contradictions and differences, which in turn fosters joint learning processes that take into account such social divergences. Second, to maintain the interest and energy to engage in the process, in spite of the evident costs, the participating actors need to expect higher outcomes from interdependent action within the collaborative process then from staying outside or relying on conventional command and control intervention or interest-based lobbying. Third, the social learning process needs to be considered legitimate by all the participating actors, through a mechanism that is not based on the conventional legitimacy provided by elected governmental bodies, but on the quality of the deliberative processes amongst the actors. According to Innes and Booher, such “deliberative” legitimacy will be provided if the interested parties are able to deliberate together in a “noncoercive environment” with valid information and with a view to reaching agreement on actions to undertake (p. 204).

## Materials and methods

### Research sample

There is an emergence of “network bridging organisations” of various types, which have the ambition to create the necessary organisational mechanisms to address this social learning and development of innovative practices that will be studied in the project

• Higher level network bridging organisations: such as ceinture alimentaire à Liège, Gent en Garde à Gand and Multi-actor partnership for local food networks in Leuven (partnership between boerenbond, de city and Velt), Rawad in the Wallon Region, Rabad in the Brussels Region

• Sectoral federations: RCR, Federations of the voedselteams, website of the voedselabonnementen, Gasap, Terre en Vue, Agricovert, …

The project will focus on the role of these bridging organisations in 5 selected case study area’s : around Leuven and Antwerp (Flanders Region), around Brussels (Brussels Region) and around Ottignies and Liège (Wallonia Region)

### Key variables

The questions of the empirical survey focuses on mapping the social relations for cooperation (outcome variable), in function of three key dimensions: (1) knowledge exchange networks, (2) participatory governance, (3) analysis of divergence/convergence of beliefs and dynamics of influence on change in beliefs.

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