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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Adaptive Management of Inter- and Transdisciplinary R&D Projects: Case Study in Southwest China

THOMAS AENIS¹, GERHARD LANGENBERGER², JUE WANG¹, GEORG CADISCH²

¹*Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Agricultural Extension and Communication Group, Germany*

²*University of Hohenheim, Inst. of Plant Production and Agroecology in the Tropics and Subtropics, Germany*

Abstract

Large R&D projects such as the Sino-German project “SURUMER: Sustainable rubber cultivation in the Mekong region” nowadays should be more and more oriented towards implementation of its results. Funding programmes such as the “Sustainable Land Management” of the German ministry of education and research (BMBF) are usually demanding a high level of interdisciplinary integration, and transdisciplinary communication and cooperation of researchers and stakeholders from praxis and policy/administration in order to jointly solve societal problems.

What seems a simple statement is in praxis coupled with fundamental challenges: paradigmatic changes are required of researchers, who usually are confronted with a need to leave the academic “ivory tower” and conduct activities towards application of results which include the communication with practitioners. Practitioners in turn are confronted with scientists who do not tell their results but want to establish “dialogues” and “discourses”. Such “strange” behaviour might cause discomfort particularly in societies which still are hierarchically structured as for example in rural China.

For project management this causes stress. It is impossible to plan a project in a linear way, from design via experiment/survey and analysis to publication. Adaptive Management is demanded which aims in general at an open problem solving process. On the basis of process monitoring and regular evaluations, strategies, structures and activities will be adjusted often in several “loops”, thus enabling co-learning processes within the group of scientists and between researchers and practitioners.

In this presentation, the authors discuss the problem situation and possible solutions with respect to the experiences made in SURUMER:

- Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary integration has been focussed on both, a concept of participatory scenario development and the LUCIA model as a focal methodology;
- The strategy to involve stakeholders has been adjusted by focussing on three main target groups, and methodologically on scenario discussions; concrete activities for stakeholder communication are planned within the discourses;
- Project organisation has been improved, too: a strategy and monitoring team and an external board of advisors have been established, internal and external communication procedures have been institutionalised such as interdisciplinary work groups, regular plenary meetings, a newsletter etc.

Keywords: Adaptive management, interdisciplinarity, stakeholder involvement, sustainable rubber cultivation, transdisciplinarity