Research problem
Reacting to the BSE crisis, in 2001 the German government proclaimed a “turnaround in agriculture”. Irrespective of the policy concept of the governing parties, this expression can be taken as a metaphor for the search for new options for environmentally sound and quality-oriented, ‘multifunctional’ forms of agriculture in (post-)industrial societies with high costs of labour, a high capital ratio, high population density and a high rate of urbanisation. Against this background, and taking Germany as an example, the interdisciplinary research project „AgChange. Conflicts of the new agricultural policy“ investigates the social and political opportunity structures for different actor groups to shape and reshape the agricultural modernisation process. In a pragmatic mode, the project contributes to the development of advanced methods of evaluation and participatory modelling in the field of sustainable agriculture.

Project design
„AgChange“ consists of five disciplinary subprojects (SPs) and three inter- and transdisciplinary cross-section projects (CP). Each subproject is carried out by one scientist and is conceptualised as a PhD or habilitation thesis. The three cross-section projects form an organisational and conceptual framework for inter- and transdisciplinary co-operation which is supported by an external advisory group.

SP 1: Institutional, process and situational conditions of the „New agricultural policy“
The development of the European agricultural sector over the last five decades has been highly influenced by state intervention. Thus, agricultural crises regularly turn into political crises. In reverse, each adjustment of the sector to new challenges requires political support. Therefore, subproject one analyses how the institutional interweaving of the German agricultural policy from the local to the global level opens or forestalls political and entrepreneurial opportunities. A growing diversity of interests and actors in the field raises the question how different problem interpretations and policy approaches enter the policy arena and gain support in the actors’ constellation. Tracing the process of the 2000/2001 BSE crisis and the 2003 CAP reform and the WTO Doha round it is analysed if windows of opportunity have been decisive in the process of policy formulation. Opportunity structures and conflict potentials will be identified, the potential of alternative governance approaches will be assessed and concrete aims and strategy proposals will be developed.

SP 2: Discourse as important factor of social control
The main question of this subproject is if and to what degree discourses support or inhibit the implementation of the new agricultural policy. Using document and quantitative media analyses as well as interviews with policy-makers in the national, European and WTO arenas, discursive strands and topics influencing the opportunity structures of the new agricultural policy are identified. The aim is to reconstruct their influence on the policy formulation at the German as well as the European level.

SP 3 Gender sensitive analysis of value orientations and perceptions of nature by male and female farmers in their social milieu
This subproject focuses on farmers, embracing both organic and conventional farms. Male and female farmers’ perceptions of framework conditions and of the new agricultural policy are analysed and related to their value orientations, their attitudes towards nature and their social milieu. Including the farmers’ assessments and their knowledge will be crucial to analyse opportunity structures at the grassroots level. This subproject will also contribute to the discussion of the potentials and resources of men and women in the field to support quality-oriented forms of agriculture and to gain benefits from new market trends and new policies. Moreover, subproject three will reflect on the relationship between gender and perceptions of nature and development. As a start, the actors’ conception of their daily routines and their perception of nature are analysed with regard to the question if, where and how gender differences are perceived and what images and patterns of interpretation are transported.

As generally in agriculture different women and different men are involved in different social roles, the aim is to find a basic approach, which overcomes a simple differentiation between men and women.

SP4: Scientific evaluation concepts for a “multifunctional” agriculture
Several agri-environmental evaluation concepts for cultivation strategies and land use systems are analysed to identify conflicts over utilisation and objectives, to reconstruct scientific overall concepts and to choose an evaluation model for the following steps. The evaluation system MODAM from the Centre of Agricultural Landscape and Land Use Research (ZALF), Müncheberg, is used to determine which ecological effects different measures of the new agricultural policy and the recent CAP reform may have on an exemplary chosen region (Ostprignitz-Ruppin/Brandenburg). Furthermore, it will be estimated, how high financial allowances should be in case of conventional quality production, organic-farming or renewable resource production in order to provide effective incentives for farmers.

SP 5: Participatory modelling for the evaluation/assessment of complex agricultural functions
The common market organisation for sugar is coming under pressure from WTO and EU. To analyse this forthcoming change in advance, mental models of stakeholders are developed in a participatory process. The process of modelling imparts the participants understanding for the system and the knowledge about the implications. The main focus lies on manifoldness of interactions (ecological, economic and social dimension) and long time implications. For the construction of the models the stakeholders (farmers, environmental protectionists and consumer protectionists) are also offered scientific knowledge. The modelling method is based on the „Group Model Building“ approach in the field of system dynamics.
Cross-section projects
In CP 1, all five subprojects work together on a catalogue of cross-cutting questions. These include:
- Goal knowledge: How do the actor groups understand the concept of sustainable agriculture?
- System knowledge: Which options and restrictions for sustainable forms of agriculture do the different actors perceive?
- Transformation knowledge: Which approaches to improve opportunity structures for sustainable agriculture can be identified?
- Gender: How can different concepts of sustainable agriculture, the opportunity structures and the strategies hold of the multiple actor groups be evaluated from a gender perspective?

CP 2 includes SP 1, 2 and 3. It deals with the interactions of discursive and institutional conditions of a ‘turnaround in agriculture’ on the local, national and international level. The analysis of the German case is completed by comparative country studies in Great Britain, France, Italy and the USA.

CP 3 builds on SP 4 and 5 in order to develop a decision support tool that helps to assess options for sustainable land use. An evaluation scheme is created, based on results of all five subprojects and communication with stakeholders.

At all stages of the project, practitioners from agriculture, agricultural associations, environmental and consumer protection, politics and administration are included. Their perceptions and comments are integrated through several hundred interviews, focus groups and workshops. The final six months will be devoted to a consultation process with interested stakeholders, including a final workshop.

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