

Rural Economy and Land Use: Enabling Knowledge Exchange

18-20th January 2006

Manchester Conference Centre, University of Manchester

Conference Review by Richard Lee

Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle

The second annual RELU conference took place at the University of Manchester between 18-20th January 2006 and was themed upon the *enabling of knowledge exchange*. The conference schedule reflected this emphasis, with four parallel sessions running at various times to cover a range of knowledge exchange topics such as 'pursuing the public interface', 'mechanisms of commercialisation', 'inputting into government consultations' and 'collaborative knowledge production'. Poster sessions were held over lunch to allow conference participants to engage with the RELU teams and to discuss their projects. In addition three set-piece sessions were held: 'thematic concepts for sustainability science', 'perspectives on knowledge exchange' and 'reaching across the natural/social science divide'. Conference keynote addresses were delivered by Sir Howard Newby, Michael Bell, Bettina Bock, Henry Buller, Gareth Edwards-Jones, Clare Hinrichs, Jan Erik Petersen and Paul Watkiss.

The conference sought to deliver a complex programme in a relatively short-time and the issues raised throughout the conference were equally complex. Unsurprisingly the role, substance, production, utilisation, movement and definition of knowledge in the context of rural economies and land uses took centre stage. 'Enabling knowledge exchange' was widely understood to involve the participation of a variety of interests – research, policy, private sector and civil society. The dynamics between individuals located within particular hierarchies of these interests was deemed crucial by Michael Bell, who suggested that knowledge is cultivated within particular social relations. He argued against reducing knowledge to an exchange system and instead emphasised the importance of learning within an open and unfinalisable dialogue between all participants. Dialogue between interests was a central consideration of many discussions. The use of deliberative and citizens juries approaches was felt to hinge on a number of considerations: a democratic deficit, the making of bottom-line decisions, the quality of information and the intended outcomes of such processes. Value systems were deemed to be important in making these judgments and deliberative approaches could provide a process in which to explore and discuss the values held by individuals. The limits to participation in such processes were also mentioned, with

some groups in society experiencing participation fatigue whilst others remain largely ignored and unable to enter into a dialogue.

Within the broader debate about knowledge exchange, a large amount of time was spent discussing how knowledge is constituted between natural and social scientists through interdisciplinary research. Stuart Lane described his natural science work as surveillance, making the invisible visible through trial and error and suggested that these findings are not always the same as the visible experiences of 'non-certified' experts. Moving out of your current epistemic community, or 'comfort-zone', was seen as beneficial if critical reflection is to occur between epistemic communities. Institutions were seen as fundamental factors which determine the nature of interdisciplinary research. There are demands for research to be interdisciplinary by funding bodies but there is not necessarily the institutional capacity to meet these demands, nor are there responsive frameworks which enable interdisciplinary research to deliver impacts for research, policy, private and civil society interests. Further, conceptual approaches to interdisciplinary research need to be considered. Interdisciplinary research was seen as merging with moves towards new institutional forms not necessarily rooted in traditional academic structures. In terms of delivery, interdisciplinary research sometimes faces the problem of being asked to perform technical competencies rather than more fundamental problem redefinition.

The notion of knowledge brokerage networks for rural economies and land use were discussed in light of their potential to facilitate knowledge exchange, though their fallibility through breaks in dialogue was also deemed crucial. . A number of examples from the United States highlighted how interactions between interests and around the issue of food localisation have fostered collaborative learning processes. International perspectives emphasised the benefits of co-operatives and solidarities between local groups which are often presented in contrast to the individualistic tendency prevalent in the UK. However, in the UK iterative learning networks have been established which embed academics into local and regional rural development activities. Knowledge brokers, actors who operate between knowledge cultures, were identified as important figures in helping to address breaks in knowledge networks. Academics are well placed to do this due to their credibility as objective mediators. Academics were also identified as knowledge brokers in terms of research-government interactions at the local, regional and national level. Informal, social contacts were considered important elements of knowledge brokerage networks, emphasising the importance of the social relations of knowledge.

As an overarching description of the type of research the RELU programme is trying to produce,

'sustainability science' invited much discussion. A recurring theme was the role of interventions to influence people's behaviour, whether in terms of the food we decide to eat, farm-related hazards to the public or wildlife management. Should government or civil society intervene to bring about changes in nutritional intake, the consumption of seasonal products or in mindsets about our 'servicing' by nature? In this context knowledge is problem-driven with a forward looking perspective and social learning has an important part to play in deciding what changes in approach should be made. It was suggested that social, economic and political trends and events can significantly change the terms upon which sustainability science is undertaken, with intensifying demands upon energy resources as a potentially key determinant. Long-term and holistic views are beginning to permeate into many private sector organisations, though the responsiveness and global vision of multi-national companies can often be rooted in a need to harness technologies rather than be creative and innovative.

Communication was seen as a key element in knowledge exchange. If academics are to conduct research between disciplines and with non-academics then their use of language and terminology should be clear and not dependent upon esoteric concepts. When entering into a deliberative dialogue, academics must explain themselves in everyday language. Similarly practitioners and policy-makers need clarity and succinctness in order to work out how to implement ideas. Those in the private sector cannot be expected to invest time and money in something they can't easily understand. Sarah Mukherjee made the point in the closing remarks that whilst the research RELU is producing is interesting from an academic perspective, it is very difficult to get the points that are being made across to the general public. This perhaps points to a need to reconsider how a programme such as RELU integrates citizens to achieve ground-level knowledge exchange.