

The importance of social processes: unlocking synergies

PEGASUS, Public Ecosystem Goods And Services from land management – Unlocking the Synergies (<http://pegasus.ieep.eu/>), is a pan-European Horizon 2020 project seeking to transform approaches to rural land management to stimulate long-lasting improvements in the delivery of social, economic and environmental benefits from EU agricultural and forest land. The aim is to provide recommendations on how policy and practice should change to address environmental and social issues more successfully in the future in order to meet societal expectations.

Introduction – why do social processes matter?

Policy is only effective if people on the ground respond well to it. Most of Europe's rural land, its environmental resources and ecosystems, depend upon management by farming and forestry. So, understanding how best to help these sectors to deliver more for the environment and wider society is an essential ingredient in meeting Europe's sustainable development goals. Learning from successful initiatives spread across the EU, we can see clearly the central role of social processes and new institutional arrangements, in bringing about real change. People coming together to share knowledge and experience and gaining the confidence to do things differently, are key. In examining how these processes are initiated, develop and mature, we gain new insights into options for beneficial change.

What can policy do?

By understanding how actors and institutions have achieved better environmental and social outcomes within a territory or across a supply chain, through specific processes and with the support of particular institutions, we see how different drivers and challenges help or hinder their progress. This gives a better appreciation of where policy – regulations, incentives, advice and training, or devising and adopting new institutions of governance – can add most value. Often, successful social processes develop using a mix of policy instruments, alongside non-policy opportunities and trends, to grow and increase their impact. Using policy to enable more effective collective action, or establish new institutions to combine public, commercial and voluntary interests in more balanced and cost-effective ways, can greatly improve its impact, especially in the long-term.

More lasting benefits

PEGASUS case study research has shown how careful investment in stronger, more environmentally- and-socially ambitious social processes is not a short-term 'policy fix'. Building trust and encouraging actors to work together for shared interests takes time – often more than the 3-4 year horizon of conventional public funding approaches (e.g. for economic development or research projects). But in turn, it can generate longer-term gains with important legacy impact, fostering greater resilience among communities of shared interest, to manage future challenges and uncertainties. Actions motivated by linking to, and delivering for, different groups' long-term interests are more likely to be sustained than those motivated purely by short-term financial bargaining. These are messages emerging from the variety of local initiatives studied in PEGASUS.

How do successful initiatives work?

By applying a Social-Ecological-Systems approach¹ to analyse 34 cases across 10 countries, it was possible to understand how actions evolve at local level, by key actors using a mix of policy instruments and interacting with market mechanisms, information and knowledge and underlying motivations within communities. A common step-wise approach describes how successful initiatives help to meet wider societal demands.

¹ Maréchal et al, 2016. *Synthesis report - The PEGASUS conceptual framework*



There are four main stages:



Analysing all the case studies, their experiences in tackling these stages is used to distil key points, identifying tactics for success and particular issues that need addressing. Examples show how actors managed these processes effectively or sometimes, how a failure to recognise or resolve issues held back progress.

Stage 1 – Initiation

A successful initiative needs to start with a clear idea of its focus, scope and aims. This should cover:

- the territory or system to be tackled – e.g. a water catchment or protected landscape or peri-urban area; or the focus of a specific, unique supply chain; or a combination of these things;
- the challenge to address – in discussion with key actors, identifying language and targets which can be agreed and do not create an off-putting image; aiming for goals which can meet many hopes and needs;
- the context for action – investigating how the current system operates to identify its ‘room for manoeuvre’ or areas of most potential. This means understanding different institutions and responsibilities, motivations and trends among key actors, taking stock of local environmental and social assets and how they relate to a wider national or EU picture (e.g. using data and maps).

Stage 2 - Preparation

This stage requires firstly, a focus upon people, social interaction, building trust and understanding. Effective and open communication is central to successful action: often this takes time and creativity to achieve. It is important to gain understanding of the main partners and their core interests; to identify potential partners and bring them together to share experience, concerns and ideas, ensuring neutral or balanced conditions and being sensitive to conflict, mistrust or disengagement, finding solutions by careful, respectful relations and discussions. Case studies provide many examples of how small steps make a positive contribution, here.

Secondly, this stage requires understanding how the context is changing, recognising current drivers and constraints and seeing when/where change is possible. Common drivers include economic viability for producers, local social networks or conflicts, traditions and sense of identity, shifting norms in wider society – e.g. increasing concern for environmental or animal welfare, and changing environmental conditions such as climate, water availability, or habitat fragmentation. Understanding how drivers are trending and interacting will enable more effective action. Reviewing existing institutions, e.g. organisations and their formal rules and roles, is also important; sometimes they can be harnessed to achieve beneficial change and sometimes new institutions are needed – partnerships, associations, management systems. Identifying what makes an area or situation unique is another important guide to the best ways forward. Engaging and connecting actors, recognising and sharing these understandings, creates beneficial momentum.

Stage 3 – Implementation

Once launched, initiatives require ongoing and active development. Some important principles will help to keep people happy and focused upon shared goals: these include reciprocity; sustained agreement on some fundamental principles of behaviour, ownership and communication; maintaining active and open communication throughout all phases of progress; and developing and applying appropriate partner and institutional arrangements. A clear sense of leadership – whether by an individual; or a group; whether for certain specific areas or for strategic oversight of everything, is



vital. Keeping up actors' motivation is also important and may require regular social events and communication.

Stage 4 – Monitoring and Review

Change is inevitable, as initiatives develop. This will alter the conditions in which they operate and necessitate recognition of, and adaptation to, the changes in order to ensure that the initiative continues to succeed. No initiative can afford to ignore the changing external environment – renewal and ongoing evaluation are vital.

Developing a toolkit and transferable methods report, to share good practice

From this compendium of experience in social processes and institutional adaptation, the PEGASUS team has developed an online toolkit designed to help local actors who are setting up or considering this type of initiative, which will be linked to a knowledge-sharing platform to enable different actors across Europe to learn directly from one another's experience. The toolkit emphasises the key roles of knowledge exchange and social processes, as well as the creative use of institutional change, in securing enhanced provision of environmental and social benefits. Each step is illustrated with tangible examples taken from case studies, showing how each general principle is achieved or is relevant, in different local circumstances. A transferable methods report, summarising and analysing these findings further, will also be available on the PEGASUS website.

