

A Holistic Approach to Mountain Development Research: Experiences from the Federal Institute for Less-favoured and Mountainous Areas, Austria

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Introduction

Within the ISDEMA project a re-assessment of the basic requirements for sustainable development in mountain regions has been discussed. The case studies from a series of different mountain ranges in Europe underpin the need to relate the various sectoral topics, such as agriculture, forestry, tourism, transport, water and energy use to innovative strategies for mountain regions. This includes a particular focus on influencing development discourse, reflecting social demand with the aim to enhance participation, and institutional development.

It has been realised that not only the sectoral level but also the national level has a crucial role to play. The definition of the appropriate policy framework has to be based on the specific understanding of mountain region and their role in national development. This is a lengthy political, social and economic process that extends over decades and achieves improvements in the standard of living only step-by-step.

It turns out that such process can only be oriented towards common goals if societal consensus and institutional support provides a guiding reference. Research institutes have to play a significant part in that they analyse and draw comparisons between different regional contexts and point to exigencies of areas and people in need. Austria as one of the countries with a very high share of population living in the mountains (about 36%) has realised in the 1970s that there is a need to support the then recently established mountain policies through increased efforts by focused research work. The recognition of the rising regional disparities led to the conclusion that this could be best achieved through a new research institute focusing on the problems of mountain and less-favoured areas. From its start in 1979 the "Federal Institute for Less-Favoured and Mountainous Areas" (Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen) followed in its research concept a comprehensive analysis of the set of problems of mountain areas and thus conceived research activities on agricultural and regional policies assessment. The following paper should expand a little on the experiences achieved since then, and discuss the development of the conceptual background of the institute.

Tasks and research areas of the institute

The creation of the institute at the end of the 1970s could only take place because extensive critical discussion on the status of agricultural policy and the disparities between less-favoured and favourable agricultural production areas has proceeded. This new kind of public discourse, particularly on the role of mountain farming, has given rise to the call for a specific mountain research institute (Krammer 2000, pp. 20 ff.). As the institutional placement was highly under dispute between political parties, the institute was established as a research institute of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, thus enabling swift information exchange between administration and research. At that time, the new, very small institute was one among about 20 similar other product specific research institutes.

The original tasks laid down circumscribed the concept to address mountain development problems in a holistic way:

- *Research with respect to mountain areas and other regions with unfavourable structural*

conditions;

- *Analysis of natural, social, economic and political factors of problems in these areas;*
- *Analysis and assessment of measures and instruments; elaboration of production, social and spatially integrated alternatives for the agricultural and regional policy.*

These general items have been dealt with in different research projects which can be summarised in the following research areas:

- Basic research and analyses of policy measures
- Studies on the CAP and Regional Policy of the EU
- Research on integrated rural development, employment and pluriactivity of farm households
- Analysis of the environmental aspects and effects of agriculture, assessment of agri-environmental policy and strategies for environmentally -sound agriculture
- Analysis of the income situation, living and working conditions of mountain farmers, including specific social policy measures

Shifting research priorities

The different research areas have received changing attention over time and hence we can conclude that the priorities of the institute's research work have also shifted. Changes are due to many-fold influences, from national and international development of research discussion and policy reform aspects, to the alteration of Austria's position with regard to the EU and recently the integration process of CEECs. The following themes are issues to which the institute has carried out a number of research projects, in general over a specific period (Krammer 2000, pp. 18-22):

Theme 1 disparities of agricultural income, mountain farmers - a (new) target group

Theme 2 concern on rising surplus production (quota system, price differentiation)

Theme 3 mountain areas (LFAs) require a different approach than mass production (new direct payment systems, alternative products, innovation, diversification)

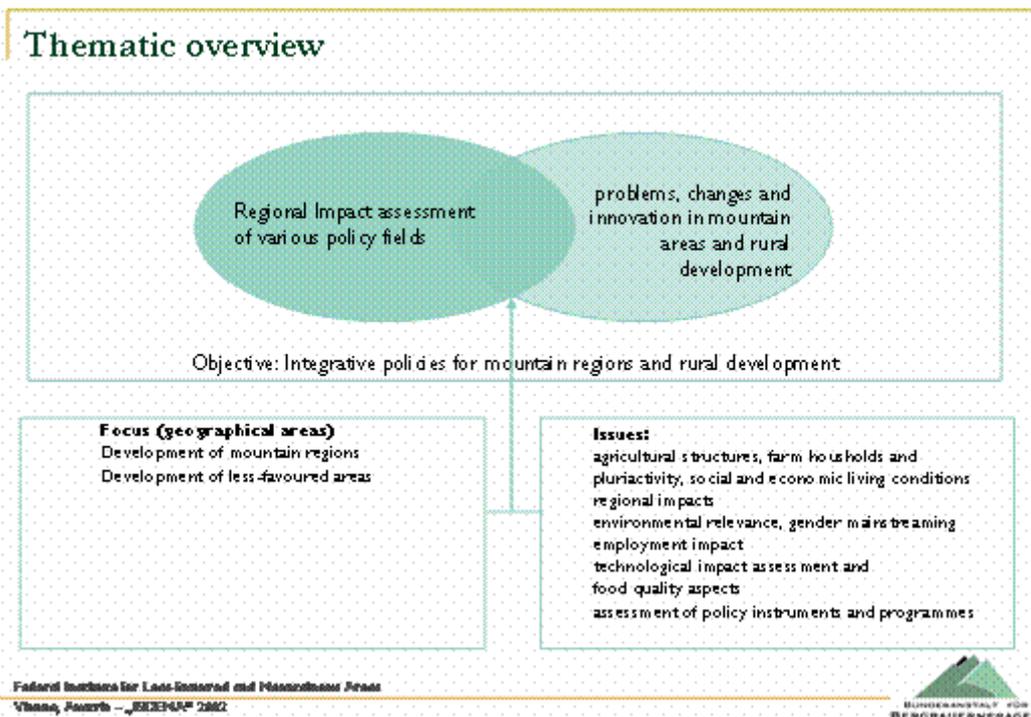
Theme 4 Austria's preparation to EU accession (concern for small scale structure, regional impacts and environmental effects)

Theme 5 Rural development - an integrated, spatial oriented policy (from pluriactivity to territorial impact assessment)

Theme 6 perspectives for integrating innovative issues into mountain policy strategies

Whereas the first three themes have been particularly important over the first decade of the institute's work, theme 4 has gained importance with the preparation for the EU accession which changed much of the policies concerned. The last two themes have already started to gain major relevance at that time and since then remained at the core of the research issues. It is therefore possible to synthesise research activities under the main headings of the objectives of the institute (Figure 1). This thematic overview indicates that it is the **regional dimension** which is the primary research question, i.e. in most cases a comparison of situations of mountain areas/farmers against other groups. The second dimension is reflecting the **dynamic aspect** of problems and the interest for positive examples of policies and actors in mountain areas.

Figure 1



As already mentioned, there are many single issues which are relevant in this respect, and the following selection of core research projects should give an impression on some of the main issues dealt with: "

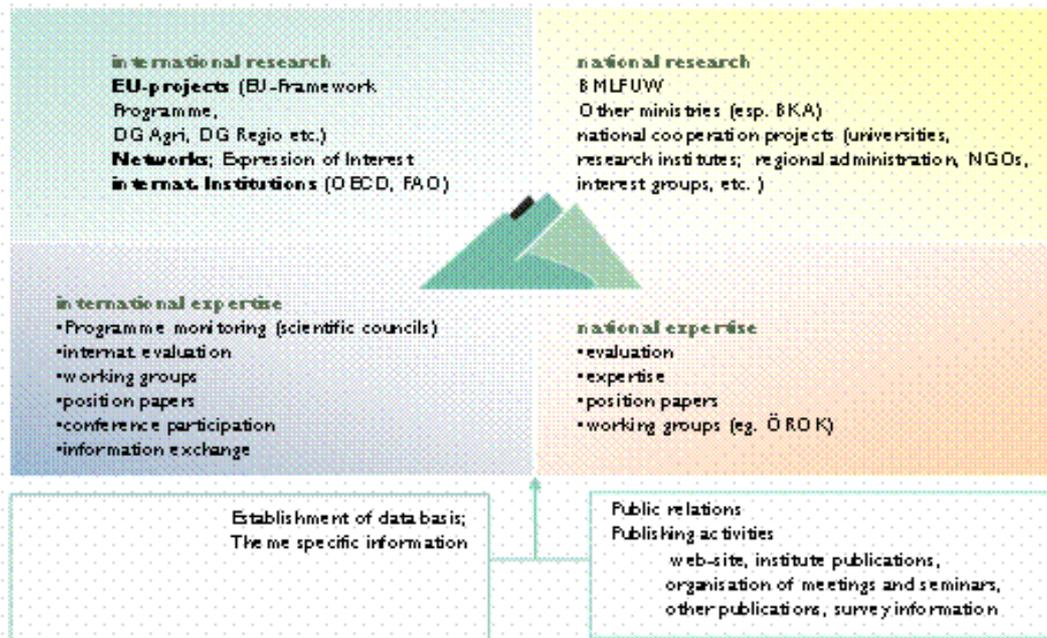
- *Rural Change in Europe: Research programme on farm structures and pluriactivity", The Arkleton Trust (1986 - 1993)*
- *OECD rural indicators project and participation in working group of the OECD-Council in rural Development (since 1991)*
- *Preparatory studies for EU-accession (1991 - 1994)*
- *Integration of environmental concerns into mountain agriculture", Euromontana (1995 - 1998)*
- *Rural Amenity in Austria, OECD case study (1996 - 1998)*
- *"Policies and Young People in Rural Development" (1999 - 2002)*
- *"The Territorial Impact of CAP and Rural Development Policy", Arkleton Centre (2002 - 2004)*
- *Strategies for sustainable land management in mountain areas (SLAMA), Expression of Interest, 6th Framework Programme (2003 -)*

Research interaction framework

The research projects mentioned are predominantly international projects. This can underline that the level of activity has also changed. With increasing integration into the European Union a greater participation in international research became necessary to discuss European policies issues and also to enhance quality. Research interaction thus takes place at very different levels (Figure 2) and with different partners (Figure 3).

Figure2

Overview on research interaction

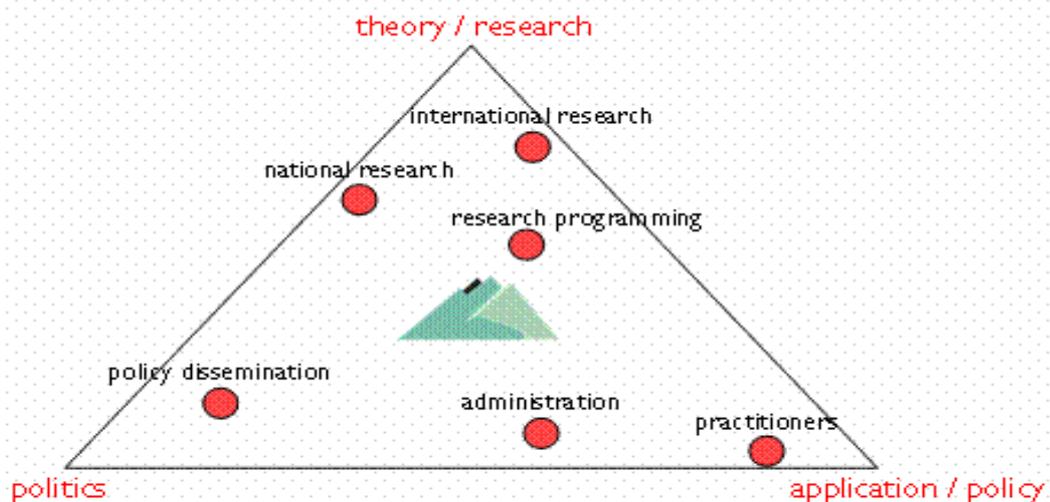


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In the research process it is important to combine national and international projects and expertise. In many cases these activities are interlinked and an exclusive orientation toward one of the fields won't be useful. This adds to the requirement to interact with different research fields according to problems investigated.

Figure3

Institutional Framework



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The presentation of the institute's location within the institutional framework (Figure 3) tries to visualise the relevant partners. It addresses also issues of closeness and distances to institutions, groups of actors and levels. The graph must not be taken as a static picture of inter-relations but should be interpreted as a basis for discussing inter-relations and shifts in research concept orientation. It has to be noted that also for different kinds of projects, co-operation structures would be varying. There might be evaluation studies oriented at policy assessment and targeted for administrative use, other projects might involve local actors and be conducted in close co-operation with practitioners, again others primarily in research consortia or other activities engaging in discussions on aspects of research programming. The spheres theory/research, application/policy, and politics are however always important as a framework to which sooner or later overall activities have to respond. It is therefore a permanent challenge not to lose sight of the balance of activities. This seems to be highly requested in the case of the institute's position between different demands, and striving to provide links between theoretical work and application. The current discussion in the International Year of the Mountains 2002 has highlighted the need for such an international mountain-specific research: "Policy-makers ... need reliable information about the populations in mountain regions and associated demographic and socio-economic trends" (Panos Ltd. 2002, p. 48).

The involvement in European cooperation on mountain development research has resulted in the preparation of the Expression of Interest on "Strategies for sustainable land management in mountain areas" (SLAMA; Dax 2002), submitted to the European Union in the preparation of the 6th Framework Programme. This will lead to continuing cooperation activities in the near future. Both national support and international cooperation will thus be the basis for the realisation of inter-disciplinary research approaches on mountain issues. In many respects this attitude is comparable to summaries on mountain development issues, prepared by the Mountain Agenda (2002) which stress the need for adequate policies and instruments. These should particularly be based on the national and regional experiences and reflect the diverse situations of mountain areas, the services rendered to surrounding areas, the social, cultural and ecological dimensions, and the role of establishing institutions for sustainable mountain development. In this regard the role such institutions can play is highly dependent on the national mountain research priorities and the effectiveness of national and international partnerships.

The research approach selected in Austria gave priority to focus on the socio-economic problems of mountain areas. This early research involvement coincided with a high commitment for the development of mountain policies, respectively the objective to decrease regional disparities. With the rise of regional policies and rural areas, regional aspects got even more influential and underlined the research questions of the institute. Also the inclusion of sustainability as a central political dimension in most policy programmes underscored the need for mountain research. The challenge for inter-disciplinary research is therefore now evident throughout Europe and a series of (national) research centres on mountain issues have been established recently. As the mountain problems very often include trans-boundary aspects, and since policies are shaped at EU-level, international co-operation will be even more essential in the future for all these research institutes.

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