



Co-constructive approach and evolution of the advisory

WP3 – Improve the methodology
Outcome n°16 b

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IMPORTANT MENTION

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SUMMARY OF THE DOCUMENT

English

If an attitude for adaptation helps to cope more effectively with problems, unforeseen difficulties, crises, the co-constructive approach using a resource group is a way to move away from one's own habits of thought and action,

Within this changing context, knowledge and regulations are not the only ones 'at work', the farmers' expectations and the advisors' objectives (tasks) also change over the years. The development of co-construction methods are help to reduce the cost of change and adaptation, to produce reconceptualisation where change can be conceived and led at the system level.

French

Si une posture d'adaptation permet d'affronter plus efficacement des perturbations, des difficultés imprévues, des crises, la co-construction est une façon de se dégager de ses propres habitudes de pensée et d'action, en s'appuyant sur la ressource du collectif.

Dans le changement en cours, connaissances et réglementations ne sont pas seules 'en travail', les attentes mêmes des agriculteurs et les objections d'actions des conseillers (les missions) évoluent aussi au fil des ans. Le développement des dispositifs de co-construction sont facilitants pour réduire le coût d'évolution et d'adaptation, pour produire de la reconceptualisation où le changement peut-être pensé et conduit plus globalement, au niveau du système.

German

Wenn eine adaptive Haltung dazu beiträgt, Störungen, unvorhergesehene Schwierigkeiten, Krisen effektiv zu bewältigen, ist Ko-Konstruktion ein auf Gruppenressourcen basierender Weg, um aus den eigenen Gewohnheiten des Denkens und der Handlungen auszubrechen.

Im Laufe des sich derzeit vollziehenden Wandel müssen sich nicht nur Fachwissen und Richtlinienkenntnis ständig fortentwickeln, es ändern im Laufe der Jahre selbst die Erwartungen der Landwirte und die Aufgaben der Berater. Die Entwicklung von Ko-Konstruktion vereinfacht es, die Kosten für Veränderungen und Anpassungen gering zu halten, und stößt Neukonzipierungsprozesse dort an, wo Veränderungen wirksam werden und auf allgemeinere Ebenen transportiert werden können.

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INTRODUCTION

In the different European countries and for several decades, agriculture is regarded as in “crisis”. The necessary reduction in pesticide use is only part of the problem. We could also mention the occupational health problems linked to using pesticides, bees which are essential to pollination which are disappearing, water which sometimes becomes unfit for consumption by babies because of its nitrate content, the rapid decrease in the number of farmers in certain areas ... and we could mention many more since nobody has the magic solution. The co-construction approach does seem to allow those who accept it to move forward in spite of these difficulties. It seems appropriate therefore to consider the question of the co-construction approach from a wider perspective, one of the organisations of initial and continuous vocational training for advisers and trainers.

1. CRISIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROFESSION

What do we mean by “crisis”?

How do people interpret the evolution of a crisis? How do they deal with the worsening tensions associated to it? A “crisis” does not mean the same thing for everyone. As a first way to describe a “crisis”, the different elements (which may or not be problems) are reorganised and returned to something which seems like its initial state, to a state of natural homeostasis. The image is like springtime, even if there are late frosts; it ends up coming back every year. How can one deal with things from this perspective? The feeling of helplessness leads us to endure a situation, perhaps trying to limit the damage and having to grin and bear it until more favourable conditions return. This same feeling can also lead us to rely passively on ‘providential’ support (that of an “expert”) which is supposed to rectify the situation.

When tensions and ruptures are interpreted as signs of change, the attitude associated to them is more active. We have to test, experiment, as new forms of organisation will inevitably appear to the transition which is also considered as inevitable. But the long term changes seem to be left out of the predictions. It seems therefore necessary to constantly make sure that no detail is overlooked; any event that seems insignificant at one moment could at another moment lead to a complete turnaround of the situation, with dangerous consequences. We should move forward step by step, taking into account the multiplicity of possible perspectives. The co-construction approach is well suited to situations considered in this way. This approach is also supported by the fact that it has been used informally, without anyone really noticing throughout the development of agriculture in recent decades and throughout the successive changes which have led to what it is today.

However, rather than opting for one or another of these directions, it seems important to be able to switch from one to another if need be. This is what happened during the project New Advisers. The partners first imagined that future events (the testing of the training tools) were predictable enough for the “expert” approach to be adopted. The roadmap that was first constructed with an aim to gain statistical type results was later on reoriented so as to highlight the more qualitative results focusing on the elements of advising and training situations which highlighted the “co-construction approach”. This was only possible because the participants who were first very committed to a sort of “expert” approach decided to move towards a co-construction one.

A collective process to move away from ones’ own habitual process of thought and action

In an advising or training situation, the facilitator as well as the recipients rely constantly on the combination of a point of view and an internal state. For each one, some information is consciously available and other information is not. In the configuration formed by the situation they have experienced, a lot of the information is never expressed verbally either because it

seems “obvious” and that there is no need to mention it, or because the information does not seem relevant, or that it does not seem possible, or wise, to mention it.

How is the “expert” position set up in these conditions? The action quickly takes the form of a standard model of operating based on routines of thought and patterns of behaviour, either so as to save energy or because the necessity to be economically viable gets involved, encouraging them to reduce any time which is not immediately productive. This approach has some good aspects of course. In fact, over time each farmer, adviser and trainer constitutes a “wealth of experience” that enables him/her to act with more confidence, with the impression that they are safe and their work is efficient ... as long as the environment remains stable. The problem is that the environment seems to be increasingly unstable.

Indeed, advisers as well as trainers feel that their activities are more and more diverse. This was shown in a study conducted in the French project “Conseillers Demain”. Concerning the reduction of pesticide use, it seems that several types of situation are affected by change:

- Knowledge and references (new products, the multiplication of experiments conducted ...)
- New frameworks, new procedures (regulations, fluctuating markets ...)
- Expectations of farmers and rural stakeholders (product quality, water quality, public health ...)
- Political objectives and responsibilities given to advisers (dissemination, communication, support to farmers ...)

For each of the advisers and trainers facing this transformation of their environment, one of the achievements of the project was recognising the importance of a co-construction approach as an intuitive and informal way of reacting which already exists. This co-construction approach therefore is part of public interest through a relational heritage which is still very much alive. We must now consciously and collectively reinvest it more widely and update it to make it part of the range of skills available in agriculture.

Everyone benefits from this, but so do those who move forward with the support of the group. The person who acts in this way can activate and use aspects of his/her potential which are often underdeveloped whenever urgency, habits or an automatic return to the use of an “expert” approach stops them from becoming really interested. Yet, as we have seen repeatedly, when internal support is developed (the capacity to be in contact with ones’ internal resources and to seek resources from elsewhere), collective and distributed intelligence arises causing various effects.

2 - BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES OF THE CO-CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

Training oneself to positively manage disagreements and conflicts

Being a catalyst for participants to build and develop their own internal support system is therefore the main role of a facilitator (adviser or trainer). This aspect of approach/attitude is particularly sensitive whenever an event, a point of view, a difference etc. upsets or affects one of the participants. What happens, for example in case of a disagreement? Do “wrong” and “right” form two distinct blocks, provoking such a sense of competition as “if he wins, I lose”? Do we really disagree on all aspects of the situation? Should the person who is not “right” have the feeling of losing face, or feeling humiliated? The reaction of a person to a particular unsettling situation is often akin to “coping”: a sometimes aggressive, unorganised reaction, its construction is not thought through because stress alters the perception of the environment and disrupts the way we usually act and operate.

When a co-construction approach is used, resistance is therefore a strength and not a hindrance. Confronting it contributes to the joint movement and it encourages creativity. One has to pay attention to what actually exists: the elements which lead to the sense of security, the link between the senses and reality. Often the quality of interpersonal relationships is instated based on the “little things”, on triggers which may seem insignificant compared to what happens afterwards. One must also respect the time it takes for things to emerge because this helps to measure the durability and tonic effect of the movement of change. However, the co-construction approach allows the ecosystem of interactions to evolve: some subconscious rules are no longer respected and the interface between a person and their physical and represented environment is “uncluttered”.

In this way, beyond the professional activities, the co-construction approach also seems to be a prevention tool. Let us exaggerate the “unsettling” aspect of a situation with the results of S. Milgram’s experiment (1974). This was an experiment about obedience and submission to authority in which more than 60% of “normal” people, i.e. without violent tendencies, were found to be capable of committing “murder” (fictional, within the experiment) when submitted to certain environmental constraints. Without going to such extremes, the more the individual is able to express his/her point of view, preferences and concerns, the more s/he is able to feel safe and to survive when faced with an unsettling unknown. The individual does however, often need a bit of time and practice so that s/he can move away from a logical (often automatic) manner of confronting a situation and towards a co-creation built from differences.

A general professional change

The co-construction approach therefore seems to offer numerous opportunities for development. It seems to be in accordance with the demonstration (PAN Europe, 2003) of the importance of a strong and independent service for advising in the effort to reduce pesticides, that is to say by improving the internal support of the participants, the co-construction approach contributes to enabling these solid and independent services to exist. Then how can they evolve as groups in Europe’s diverse and changing landscape of political and social realities where agricultural advice and training are growing?

We imagine that the co-construction approach could be a catalyst for evolution which can adjust to both the experienced realities and representations of present and future needs. The co-construction approach through the work of an adviser or trainer is already helping farmers to change the paradigm, to conduct their own transition towards the future by reviewing the systems they use, their basic needs, their priorities, etc. It of course seems important to develop the possibility of changing the operating strategies of farms through increased access to training in the co-construction approach for those who wish it. In terms of strategy, the co-construction approach allows a group of farmers to “produce re-conceptualisation” (level of change “R” in the ESR model here below INRA 2010).

	Objectives and issues	Examples
E	Improve the effectiveness of the inputs. Reduce the consumption of expensive inputs	<i>Agriculture which respects the environment and health – Precision agriculture</i>
S	Substitute the chemical inputs with organic ones	<i>Organic farming, symbiotic fixation, minimum tillage</i>
R	Redefine the system as an ecosystem supporting its fertility, natural pest control and regulate agricultural productivity	<i>Organic farming - integrated farming – biological pest control through conservation</i>

In view of the relationship between advisers (or trainers) and the organisations they represent, it seems that this same co-construction approach could facilitate the evolution of advice and

training so that it takes account of the current and future needs of this profession by moving towards a collective rethinking of their strategies. With the reduction of pesticide use as an emblematic situation, the analysis model for the evaluation of advising practices and training would then be similar to:

	Objectives and issues	Examples
E	Improve the effectiveness of what exists. Reduce the consumption of expensive services	<i>Farm visits via photos and Skype. Better access to data</i>
S	Allow generalised access to training in the co-construction approach Integrate this element to discussions made about the profession itself	<i>Use European mobility funds systematically. Find ways to make advice and training independent from pesticide companies.</i>
R	Redefine the advice (or training) system as an ecosystem supporting its own 'fertility', internal regulation and productivity	<i>Organise for groups of professionals access to a permanent bottom-up reflection on the profession itself</i>

This suggestion immediately brings us back to the practical conditions allowing groups of advisers and trainers to reflect on their professional activities using the co-construction approach, especially when the regulatory changes to the Farm Advisory System (FAS) is in process.

Beyond enabling practical solutions to concrete issues on pesticide use, the co-construction approach seems to therefore be a means of development for democracy in action. It leads us all to appreciate the extent to which differences can be used to build with a common interest, the extent to which it is important to pay attention to local conditions, the extent to which the well-being of each person relies on both internal and shared elements, the extent to which it is important for everyone to feel free enough to make their own choices despite constraints ... We cannot help but notice that the co-construction approach can help to develop in practice what Amartya Sen (Nobel prize in economics in 1998) called "capability" by putting it at the heart of development: the economy at the service of people and not vice versa. This is a stimulating and solid framework to carry on in this way!

CONCLUSION

From our collaborative work on the Leonardo- Transfer of Innovation project *New Advisers* we have drawn is that some fundamental changes are emerging in different places, but at near enough the same time and are taking similar directions.

For various reasons, the search for ways to try and reduce the use of pesticides is interpreted differently from one country to another. This variation on a local, individual and collective (small groups) scale is in practice an issue for agricultural advisers and trainers. Farmers' activities (land or animal based) are shaped by the training or advice they receive.

The focus of our work in this project has been on how advisers and trainers can adopt ways to address the issue of reducing pesticides, and how solutions can be developed.

Co-constructive practices are concrete ways for vocational development at both collective and individual levels.

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