

RURAL SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Problem Statement

The vague definition of sustainable development (see: WCED, 1987) allows people and institutions to give substance to the concept themselves and contributed to the widespread acceptance of the term. There is little argument about the desirability of the broad goals of sustainability, but there are all the more differences in the specific interpretations of the concept.

The increased interest for the sustainability of farming and rural areas has brought the uncertainty and disagreement about the correct meaning and use of the concept of sustainability in the attention in scientific literature.

Some scholars (e.g. Douglass, 1985; Beus & Dunlap, 1992; Buttel, 1993 & 1997; James, 2006); Jordan & Constance, 2008) already made an attempt to create a typology of these approaches in scientific literature.

Objectives

This research wants to contribute to these classifications, by analyzing how “sustainable agriculture” is used and defined in rural sociological literature and proposing a typology of approaches present in the specific field of rural sociology.

Methodology

Systematic searches for peer-reviewed journal articles and books were performed in bibliographical databases. A comprehensive sample of 240 scholarly journals was obtained by combining a search in Sociological Abstracts and Web of Science, with a search query including all sociological articles containing the words ‘sustainability or sustainable’ and ‘agriculture or farming’ in their abstracts. The main journals included are Sociologia Ruralis, Rural Sociology, Journal of Rural Studies, Southern Rural Sociology and Journal of Sustainable Agriculture. All articles are being processed by means of a set of relevant categories.

Results

Based on a subsample of 40 scientific articles, four major observations were made:

The first observation is that some scholars (including: Holmes, 2006; Lobley and Potter, 2004) are referring to sustainable agriculture, but are not defining or contextualising the concept.

Secondly, the majority of the authors seem to use a 3-part definition of sustainable agriculture, including environmental, economic and social aspects

The third observation is that sustainable agriculture in some articles is approached as (a)having fixed meaning(s), while other scholars approach sustainable agriculture as mutable, negotiable.

Fourthly, different levels on which sustainable agriculture is conceptualized or in which sustainable agriculture takes shape can be distinguished. Some scholars stress that sustainable agriculture exists only in its practices, or at least on a local level, while others approach the concept on a more abstract, conceptual level.

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These latter two observations lead to four distinct approaches to sustainable agriculture that can be distinguished in rural sociology:

Table 2: approaches to sustainable agriculture in Rural Sociology

	Fixed meaning	Mutable meaning
Practice	Fixed set of practices	Contextual interpretation
abstract	Fixed frames / concepts	Discursive system

The first ideal type of approaching sustainable agriculture is characterized by the fixed nature of the claims what practices and techniques are considered as sustainable practices. In Buttels' 1993 typology this approach to sustainable agriculture would be called LISA-type agronomy, which is/used to be the dominant type of sustainable agriculture research.

The fixed frames approaches to sustainable agriculture are considered on a more abstract level. These approaches are not focussing on defining practices. They look for clear and unambiguous frames to define the concept of sustainable agriculture.

The third type of approaches is characterized by the importance they put in contextualizing the practices and meaning of sustainable agriculture. Notions of sustainable agricultural practices are conceptualized in their ecological, economic, social, cultural and political environment. Practices can be sustainable in one place at one time, but can be unsustainable in another place or time.

Approaches accessing sustainable agriculture at a more abstract level, still acknowledging the mutability of the concept are nominated as approaching sustainable agriculture as a discursive system.

Discussion

This systematic literature study adds to the existing classifications of approaches to sustainable agriculture a more in depth study in the field of rural sociology. The systematic approach enhances transparency and consistency and reduces sources of bias in the study.

The proposed classification gives more insight in how sustainable agriculture is approached in rural sociology. And can help scholars in grounding there approach to sustainable agriculture in the current literature.

Most of the literature (currently processed) in rural sociology approaches sustainable agriculture as a mutual concept, while other authors showed that in other research fields often a more fixed approach is used.