

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ACTORS IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

The local, within its dialectical interaction with the global, often constitutes the ‘victim’ of the global. In the globalisation era, schematically, business becomes global and reactions arise at the local level. Such reactions, despite being highly heterogeneous and fragmented, have a common dimension: the search for alternatives. Consequently, new actors emerge while others are re-defined. The present paper brings together two case studies concerning manifestations of the emergence and agency of ‘new actors’. On the one hand, the case of farmers in the Upper Valley of Río Negro, Argentina, who questioned the productivist mode of farming, turned into organic farming, organised themselves and put pressure on the provincial authorities for support is presented. On the other hand, the case of the LEADER II project in Karditsa, Central Greece, and esp. developments related to agrotourism, taken as an opportunity to promote the emergence of new actors at local level in order to catalyse/assist the endogenous development processes is discussed. Understanding rural development as a new paradigm (an alternative to the modernisation trajectory) and given the specificity of the case studies, the implied redefinition of identities, strategies, practices, and networks is examined.

Key-words: sustainable rural development, social actors, social movements.

Introduction

For a long time the nowadays characterised as ‘exogenous model’ of rural development has been dominant. Indeed, until the early 1990s, scale-enlargement, intensification and specialisation were the key ideas concerning development in agriculture that, in turn, was considered as of paramount importance in rural areas. Such a model has been severely criticised as promoting a logic of dependent, distorted, destructed and dictated development for the rural areas (Lowe, 2001). The broader results though were adverse: declining farm numbers and a sharp drop in employment opportunities, widening regional disparities; increased and growing tensions between farming vis-a-vis landscape, nature, environment and product quality (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000).

In order to address such issues a strategy of sustainable (or integrated or endogenous) rural/local development has been launched. This strategy has a number of distinguishing characteristics: the local determination of development options, the local control over the development process, and the retention of the benefits of development within the locale (Slee, 1993). It follows that the specific resources of an area (natural, human and cultural) hold the key to its development with the local initiative and enterprise being its dynamic force; thus, capacity-building and the fight against social exclusion become of central importance (Lowe, 2001). Therefore, instead of the ongoing specialisation in agricultural production and a segregation of agriculture from other rural activities, rural development implies the development of new activities¹. Hence, “the multi-level, multi-actor and multi-faceted nature

¹ Such activities include, among others, the creation of new products and services and the associated development of new markets, landscape management, the conservation of new nature values, agrotourism, organic farming and the production of high quality and region-specific products, direct marketing and new services for the rural population.

of rural development implies that it relates to modernisation as a paradigm shift” (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Moreover, rural development implies a redefinition of identities, strategies, practices, interrelations and networks; new forms of articulation are developed at the countryside.

Now, it is important to point out that people do make history but under circumstances not of their own making. This means that the past is in some sense closed, fixed and it also fixes the future. In the present, parts of the future are determined but the future is to a large degree unknown and unknowable. However, such an understanding does not deny either the possibilities of intentional change and collective design or the possibilities for transition and translation. People are not merely shaped by structural constraints; they make sense of these constraints, adapt themselves, create meaning. People have different ways of interacting with the powerful constraining conditions in which their action takes place. Even in relatively stable and crystallised sets of relationships people still continue to act, to interact, to make sense of what they are doing; behind a ‘stable system’ there are continuous workings of interaction, negotiations, and the creation of what is seen and perceived as a ‘system’. After all, nothing comes about without intentional efforts; sometimes ‘windows of opportunity’ for collective action suddenly open (Avritzer and Lyyra, 1997; Peters, 1994).

People (as social actors) are not always determined by structures, but can manipulate or change them in order to meet their own objectives, needs and desires². The notion of agency attributes to the actor capabilities to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state or course of affairs; the idea is that people both act and are acted upon. Agency, besides other features, requires organising capacities. Agency depends on the emergence of networks of actors who become enrolled in the projects and practices of other actors; it also calls for the effective channelling of specific items through certain networks (Long and Van der Ploeg, 1994). Overall, people can effect change, but not always in conditions of their choosing. The amounts and types of power actors possess and how they are exerted are of crucial importance³. Following such a line of thinking, it becomes possible to conceptualise local/rural development as a dynamic and on-going, socially constructed and negotiated process. Within this process social actors search for space for manoeuvre, negotiate and struggle. This means that actors try to form alliances with different local (and external) actors to pursue their own social ‘projects’.

Social movements

One important aspect relating to the definition, design, implementation and results of development concerns, as already mentioned, the issues of social inclusion, capacity building/empowerment and participation. However, many rural development initiatives, by adopting a territorial/community approach, tend to mask inequalities and power relations between social actors (consensus perspective); thus, pre-existing structures of inequality are usually not significantly improved. Moreover, Slee (1993) argues that the processes of capitalism generate uneven development and, thus, the potential successes of endogenous development strategies lie less in their ability to resist these processes than to work with them. Hence, many initiatives avoid any possibility of system transformation, reflexivity or a strategy for development with a focus on social and ecological renewal.

² For Giddens (1987) as well, the actions undertaken by actors have varying degrees of freedom; thus, reproduction contains the potentiality of non-reproduction. In Laclau’s (1985) terms, social relationships are placed in the contingency register and the impossibility to fix identities.

³ Such types of resources, used either to advance power or strengthen a power position, include: economic, political, social, symbolic and collective resources.

Recognising, though, the capacity of agents to invent solutions vis-a-vis the problems of their life worlds makes it possible to take on board the issue of collective action. Since social reality is created constantly by actors it concerns a continuous interaction out of which a 'reasonable world to live in' gets shaped; various forms of organisation are enacted as a usual 'tool' to overcome problems such as the shortage of resources and the strengthening of otherwise individual actions. Organisations emerge as social constructions i.e. the creations of actors themselves who become active participants in creating learning environments and processes, generating negotiation and confrontation strategies and so on. Organisations can be considered as a process of continuous creation⁴.

The case of social movements may offer further insights (and alternatives) to the issues concerning the arena of (sustainable) rural development. Social movements are that part of social life where social relationships have not yet crystallised into social structures. An important aspect of social movements is that they create a collective identity, i.e. they construct a collective reality to which they can refer⁵. But how do social movements emerge and sustain their existence? Three different strands of thought can be distinguished. According to the 'resource mobilisation' perspective, the central determining factor in the emergence and sustainability of social movements is the ability of organisations to make use of available resources. Movements, then, rely on a small membership base and gather resources from 'conscience constituents'⁶.

Such a perspective has been criticised in that it overlooks the cultural and ideological content of new movements⁷. The 'new social movement' perspective claims that movements arise in protest against increasingly technocratic and bureaucratic socio-political systems thus presenting alternative cultural and ideological norms, structures and aspirations. A characteristic of such movements is their detachment from mainstream political institutions while aiming for new life-spaces or alternative life styles. Nevertheless, not all movements follow such a line of thought and action; there are movements that have interacted and co-operated with various established political groups and institutions. Then, the 'political process' perspective argues that the political environment should be considered as a central determining factor in the emergence and trajectory of movements⁸. Therefore, the process of mobilisation requires a favourable structure of political opportunities, a pre-existing organisation and indigenous resources and, the existence of solidarity and moral commitment to the movement. It, therefore, seems that the latter model has a greater synthetic potential by reflecting the diverse contributions of the former ones and being able to better explain the dynamics behind the phenomenon of movement emergence, protest and mobilisation (Ayres, 1997)

Following two cases relating to the issues of rural development and social movements will be critically examined. First, the case of farmers in the Upper Valley of Río Negro and Neuquén, Argentina, who questioned the conventional mode of farming and turned into organic farming is presented. Second, the case of the LEADER II project in Karditsa, Central Greece, representing the EU (therefore, the national and, by extension, the local) policy of promoting

⁴ This, again, is beyond the inexorable structuralist logic, since it means that external conditions are processed and translated in different ways. Despite the fact that the majority among the actors can be thought of as carrying out actions of a, more or less, anticipated, conventional nature (as related to social reproduction and the hegemonic order), some try to and indeed achieve changes in the level of relationship asymmetries.

⁵ While, though, in the 19th century there have been at the same time social and political actors, nowadays it seems to be a trend towards a differentiation and transition from movements as political actors to movements as media. The former ones are engaged in action for reform, inclusion, the redefinition of political rules and so on. The latter are actors addressing the issues in cultural terms, bringing the issues to the public; they bring into light the fact that there is a societal dilemma or conflict. When the issue is named it can be processed by political means; without political action nothing can be changed in society.

⁶ More developed versions of this model include resources, organisation and political space.

⁷ In short, it is claimed that the former perspective fails to give enough attention to the role of ideas, beliefs and counter-discursive language and behaviour (i.e. to ideology and praxis).

⁸ That is, social movements arise, expand and have an impact during destabilised political periods, i.e. when the political establishment is vulnerable to pressure from challengers then these movements find their opportunities for collective action and protest greatly enhanced.

the emergence of new actors at local level in order to catalyse the endogenous development processes is examined.

The Argentinean case

The Río Negro province, in the Argentinean South (Northern Patagonia), has a surface of 203,013 km² and spreads over very different and contrasting natural and human environments. Of special interest here is the fruit-and-vegetable-growing region corresponding to the irrigated Valley zone. Esp. the Upper Valley region constitutes a productive unit of 100, 000 ha. out of which about 60% is irrigated. More than 40,000 ha. are cultivated with fruit trees, producing an estimated 1,500,000 t. of pears and apples annually, destined mainly for export as fresh product and for the concentrated juice industry. Since its beginning⁹, fruit-growing was organised as an export-oriented business with British capital determining the production model¹⁰.

Nevertheless, by the 1970s the ‘golden period’ in fruit-growing came to an end. This is related, among other factors, with the emergence of new protagonists in the regional scene; the latter concern packers, traders and industrialists upon whom producers became increasingly dependent; farmers could not control the links of the established chain. Nowadays, the overall regional fruit complex has entered a profound crisis¹¹. The operation of the system is largely based on the appropriation of independent farmers entailing their virtual peasanitisation.

Half of the region’s farmers are characterised as “family/ traditional” farmers¹² with some of them being on the borders of production and social exclusion. Farmers struggle to secure their livelihoods. Submitted to the open interplay of market forces along with the State withdrawal, farmers are exposed, for the first time ever, to the acknowledgement of their vulnerability. But, while claiming that the crisis should be overcome through the realisation of productive, organisational and commercial changes, they also believe that the crisis will modify itself and everything will go back to the previous situation; they stick to demands and social practices stemming from the previous era with the objective of reversing the State’s (in)action. However, they no longer constitute the mainstream of the regional economy; their relative importance is diminished and they are subordinated to centres external to their exploitations (Lattuada, 1996). The whole agricultural and agro-industrial business has been modified, and the rural social structure is modified as well; the new mode of production tends to be based on capital intensification than on land (Murmis, 1988).

But, “globalisation has not only to do with the creation of large-scale system, but also with the transformation of the local – and even personal – contexts of social experiences” (Minsburg, 1995). This is fleshed out in the fact that organic producers appeared on stage, who started questioning the situation from two different and complementary points of view. On the one hand, they tried to think of agriculture through an approach aiming at the preservation of a ‘balanced environment’, thus, through the production of healthy food via an ‘environmental rationality’. Having acquired information about today’s consumers’

⁹ Elements which have contributed decisively to the formation of this artificial ecosystem and the setting in motion of one of the most dynamic economies in the country include: the construction of the railway line which connected the region with the Buenos Aires port (property of the English Company Southern Railway); the exploitation of water resources through the realisation of huge construction works thus making available an integrated irrigation system in the whole Upper Valley; and, the establishment of the Argentine Fruit Distributors, a subsidiary company of Southern Railway.

¹⁰ The British encouraged and funded the organisation of irrigation, the division of land into plots and the production orientation (intensive irrigated production of fruits organised on a family farming basis).

¹¹ Moreover, a study by the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishing – SAGyP identifies further bottlenecks as far as the Argentinean agroindustrial competitiveness is concerned (Garguilo, 1993).

¹² Their main characteristics are: small farms (up to 25 ha.); involvement only in primary production; lack of capital; low degree or no incorporation of new technology; production of fruits that are not in demand by the market; and, trading of their production on an individual (and isolated) basis.

preferences farmers try to meet such a demand based on non-traditional quality criteria¹³. On the other hand, while focusing on such signals coming from the demand side, they also search for a resistance strategy that would allow them to survive through an alternative mode of production.

According to Pretty (1995), the essential elements in ensuring the formation of a new productive and social model are: the use of technology that preserves resources, participation of groups and communities on the local level and, support from public and private institutions. With regard to these dimensions the following have to be outlined. In the first place, organic farmers have adopted processes and technology within a holistic approach, thus promoting the protection of natural resources

Additionally, the way farmers have responded to the economic and political changes leads to a process of change; through a production alternative an option for development in its broader sense is generated: the formation of a new Valley social subject emerges in social and political life, on a community, regional and national level. Their demands may seem minimal and local, but as long as they are articulated to wider processes they may gradually form a wider and long-term movement. Indeed, organic farmers have self-managed a regional farmers' movement; with a domino effect taking place, they succeeded in organising the Northern-Patagonian branch of the MAPO (Argentinean Movement for Organic Production)¹⁴. These new organisational structures search for new identity and strategy through concepts like: ecoregion, energy efficiency, social solidarity, autarchy, self-management, socially appropriate technology. In other words, a more humane way of living is sought after that will allow for a harmonic and respectful relationship among humans and between humans and the environment.

Finally, a representative group of these organic farmers got the Río Negro State to back up and support their endeavour through an intermediate organisation intended to promote the Rio Negro Regional Agroindustry Foreign Trade (CREAR)¹⁵. Thanks to this, farmers were able to enter their production in an organic certification programme; this is a strategic choice enabling them to access all the available market niches. In turn, these initiatives, born by farmers themselves, have been capitalised by the political power and have become a provincial bill intending to encourage organic production, declaring it of provincial interest.

The greek case:

The Lake Plastiras Area is located on the Agrafa mountains, in the SW part of the Prefecture of Karditsa, Central Greece. The Plastiras Lake is an artificial one. It was constructed during the period 1958 - 1962 covering the previously fertile mountainous plateau of Nevropolis, an area of 24Km². The 14 communities around the lake extend to an area of 31,400 ha. which is characterised as mountainous.

In the Lake Plastiras Area in the post 1961 period a severe decline of population has been experienced. On parallel, there has been a decrease of both agricultural holdings and employment. Agricultural land is fragmented (4 parcels per holding) and small sized (average of 0.4 ha. per parcel); irrigation covers 15% of the total cultivated lands. Despite the good reputation of local products their marketing is extremely poor. The production system of the area is nowadays based on livestock production. Livestock farming in the area has always been of a, more or less, 'traditional' character. It is labour intensive with low rates of capital

¹³ Farmers have become aware that today's consumers also value variety innovation, food security, environment-friendly production methods and so on.

¹⁴ MAPO is a civil non-profit organisation, established in the early '90s by all those involved in organic production. In addition, it has developed a tight relationship with ecological/organic agriculture organisations all over the world including IFOAM.

¹⁵ Through these agreements, whose main hub is grouping farmers, the Rio Negro province will pay for the whole certification service during the first year, and 50 % during the second year, while the farmer will take on the total certifications fee during the third year.

investment and heavily dependent on both pasturelands (during the summertime and autumn) and bought foodstuffs (for around 6 months).

The secondary sector is not developed in the area. In terms of services traditional cafes and taverns are found in every village. In some cases the same places serve as small market places. Farmers claim that they are abandoned by the State Services¹⁶. Such a situation makes on the one hand young people reluctant to get established in the area. However, since the mid-90s rural tourism, as an alternative path to development, has become of major importance for the area.

In 1996, when LEADER II was introduced in the Prefecture of Karditsa, the situation in terms of businesses at the Lake Plastiras area has been as follows: 13 accommodation enterprises (hostels) with 63 employees; 58 small (mainly family run) restaurants, taverns, cafes etc. with 149 employees many of which were also small shops catering for the needs of the local population; and, another 7 small enterprises with 28 employees (such as a fish farm, a garage, a textile workshop, a construction centre etc.). Since then, quite a few new businesses were established mainly due to, on the one hand, growing tourism and, on the other, the available schemes which supported (i.e. co-financed) them. In 2001 there exist: 28 accommodation businesses with 136 employees out of which 83 concern newly established places; 57 restaurants, taverns and cafes with 164 employees out of which 30 concern newly established places; and another 18 businesses with 64 employees out of which 37 concern newly established places. An important aspect of these developments concerns the fact that the demand for employment is covered by employees coming from the Karditsa Prefecture; moreover, almost 90% of the permanent jobs are covered by employees coming from the Lake Plastiras area while around 45% of the part-time jobs are also occupied by locals.

The Development Agency of Karditsa (AN.KA) is working on Prefectural level in Karditsa, Central Greece. One feature of their work is the continuous effort to introduce innovations in the area through the provision of relevant information and the facilitation of actor's negotiation and co-ordination resulting in the construction of new organisations/structures. (Koutsouris, 1999). The same effort was undertaken in the lake area too with the overall aim being to bring the various stakeholders together (Koutsouris, 2000) while also managing the LEADER II programme. Then, the first step referred to the establishment of special-interest groups (producers, artisans, tourism enterprises etc.).

Through a series of meetings facilitated by the AN.KA staff, the professionals involved in tourism were invited to discuss their own problems; thus, they were provided with the opportunity to explicitly identify problems as well as to realise that many of the problems were in fact common. Then, participants were encouraged (and thereafter self-motivated) to express their own ideas on ways to solve such problems; the need for common action emerged. Lists of topics (problems and potential solutions) were compiled and discussed. Finally, a few ideas were dropped by the Agency on the table; on the first place these concerned the survival of the local communities via the valorisation of the local products.

Consequently, the Agency put forward the idea of a quality convention. The idea roughly meant the engagement of all the interested entrepreneurs in a scheme based on the common understanding of where they 'ought to go' (vision) and the steps to be followed in attaining it. Such an idea was widely discussed - negotiated thus giving rise to the quality convention for tourism (QCT) as adapted and adopted by the initial members of the established scheme¹⁷. The convention aims at improving the standards of living of the citizens of the area through the protection of the anthropogenic and physical environment and the upgrading of tourism

¹⁶ For example, schools have been closing down, health services are not readily available, extension and veterinary services seem not to adequately address the local needs.

¹⁷ The founding members of the scheme (QCT) in the Lake Plastiras area were 16 whose businesses employed 96 people. Nowadays, the participants in the scheme are 30 with 148 employees. An important feature of this scheme is that it is not contented to the LEADER II investors but has included all interested businesses. Moreover, AN.KA does not participate in this scheme.

services. On an intermediate level objectives include: the preservation of the local aesthetic and consumption patterns; the protection of the physical environment; the servicing of and the provision of information to tourists; the protection of tourists and the enterprises from practices of profiteering and unfair competitiveness; education and training; consultation¹⁸. Of special importance is the inclusion, in the specific objectives, of the element of the preservation and promotion of the culinary heritage of the area meaning the use of local produces and recipes; this, in turn, is expected to generate, with the Agency again on the role of animator and facilitator, similar collective activities on the part of the local producers.

Epilogue

Despite the tendency towards the mercantilisation of social relations and exclusion attributed to the new hegemonic socio- economic model (Teubal,1994), the process of global restructuring encourages changes that, in turn, account for the emergence of new actors, together with the redefinition of others (Bonanno, 1994).

Currently, at least on the EU level, rural development, implying the development of new products, services and markets, is conceived as a new developmental model for the countryside. Nevertheless, the LEADER Initiative, aiming at introducing and experimenting with a new approach to rural development, and thus characterised as the rural development 'laboratory' (Ray, 2000) has not been able to tackle the central issues of capacity-building/empowerment and social exclusion. However, despite severe criticisms, the LEADER Initiative has favoured the establishment of LAGs and funded the respective pilot rural development programmes. The Greek case shows that the Initiative gave to some LAGs (as new actors) the opportunity to animate and support the set up new, collective actors in an effort to favour a 'local development agenda'. This depends on the LAG's capability to establish a semi-autonomous status vis a vis the attempted co-optation by the existing interests as well as a vision and ability to act as an animator/facilitator of local development. It also depends on the beneficiaries (individual investors) themselves; that is, their capacity to keep an open eye to the developments in their environment and get engaged in schemes (new collective actors) that will favour not only their businesses but the local economy, society and environment as well. Nonetheless, the Greek case, despite indications of an alternative (sustainable) discursive language, does not indicate the emergence of a movement; its appearance is, in the first place, related to the intervention of AN.KA. and opportunities for external funding.

On the other hand, the Argentinean case shows the prospects of an autonomous initiative by farmers who created 'innovative territories' and capitalised on the new market demands (organic production). Based on an alternative view of production, which is then extended to incorporate broader social issues and the necessity to "think globally – act locally", farmers pursue an alternative ideology and praxis without been, in the first place, based on external resources. Thereafter farmers were able to make powerful claims on the political corps in order to get assistance and stabilise their position. Despite the small number of farmers thus far involved in the regional 'organic movement' the Argentinean case clearly shows that new actors can successfully emerge. Initiatives are the unmistakable sign of local actors; in turn, they generate a process of change in the actor's endogenous potential while simultaneously providing them with a new/different way of understanding, practising and interpreting production and society. This case is a manifestation of the intangible local development factors that enabled farmers to make claims and establish their position without being dependent on political or other forms of support. Their response to political and economic

¹⁸ The scheme was then included in the LEADER II project in order to go on with small scale investments of its members concerning traditional furniture, local cuisine and architecture.

changes leads to a process of change seen as an alternative form of identity construction, generating a new option for development framed within a resistance perspective¹⁹.

Therefore, while in the Argentinean case one can claim the emergence of a social movement (a movement in the making) by farmers themselves, in the Greek case one may claim the 'secondary' emergence of a scheme (principally not consisting of farmers) which seems capable of promoting a 'holistic' local development view. Both cases point towards the possibility to conceive of alternative livelihoods or to shape history, to defend ways of life, relate to as well as confront other identities. Identities are multi-dimensional and dynamic, thus complex and flexible. It follows that identities are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed depending on the specific situation. They are on constant move; every social change triggers a differential redefinition of identities (Cuche, 2001). Both cases reveal a deeper reality: the clash and overlap of different 'rationalities' not only as to their cognitive horizons, but also to their perceptions, expectations and behaviours along with their respective consequences. The emergence of new actors or movements may differ considerably from case to case; the cases presented show the multiple ways of the making up of resistance to globalisation and the 'local ingenuity' often neglected in theory but ever present in practice. Thus, the local is better to be seen as a 'unique reality' that despite been caught in the net of a general systemic logic cannot be reduced to it (Castanon, 1999). Even though it is true that certain structural changes are produced by the impact of external forces, external determinism does not suffice since external intervention is mediated and transformed by actors and structures (Long, 1992). From Patagonia to Greece it seems that the future of the local people will depend on their capacity to overcome the homogenising cultural perspective and thus respect diversity, as well as creating spaces for the interchange of and the understanding among different cultures.

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¹⁹ A tentative problem may be incorporation or neutralisation of this group's dynamics by the state apparatus and/or the market/TNCs.

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