

Preface: Exploring the Rural Web

Terry Marsden and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

Just as social capital cannot be created through direct investments, as Tisenkopfs *et al.* argue in this book, rural development cannot be induced directly by either political interventions or the associated financial flows. Rather, rural development is grounded in, and driven by, what we refer to throughout this book as the *rural web*. This is a complex set of internally and externally generated interrelationships that shape the relative attractiveness of rural spaces, economically, socially, culturally and environmentally.

Rural development stems from combining a wide range of different and often refigured rural resources in new ways, as a result of which they flow into a set of new activities, interactions, transactions and networks. The effects of this become more evident when these activities, transactions, and relationships start to mutually reinforce each other. This is when synergy is created, especially when new town-countryside relations emerge that support and reproduce these newly emerging activities, relations, and internal and external networks. In this sense rural development, whilst characterized by distinctive features and processes, cannot be seen in isolation from the wider regional context in which it occurs. It is an embedded and dynamic feature of regionally differentiated development.

The contributions in this volume help expand our understanding, both conceptually and empirically, of these creative patterns which shape resources, activities, transactions and networks and which build new relationships between them. In so doing they result in a range of positive externalities which can further strengthen these patterns. Throughout the book these patterns are referred to as rural webs. It is argued that rural development processes occur as a result of the continuous unfolding of rural webs in and through different regional spaces. They are not simply a direct outcome of, or response to, policy interventions. This is not to understate the relevance of the latter - the point is that such interventions should be informed and shaped by the specificities of the web. When rural development policies aim to strengthen the rural web, their impact

in (indirectly) facilitating and supporting rural development can be considerable.

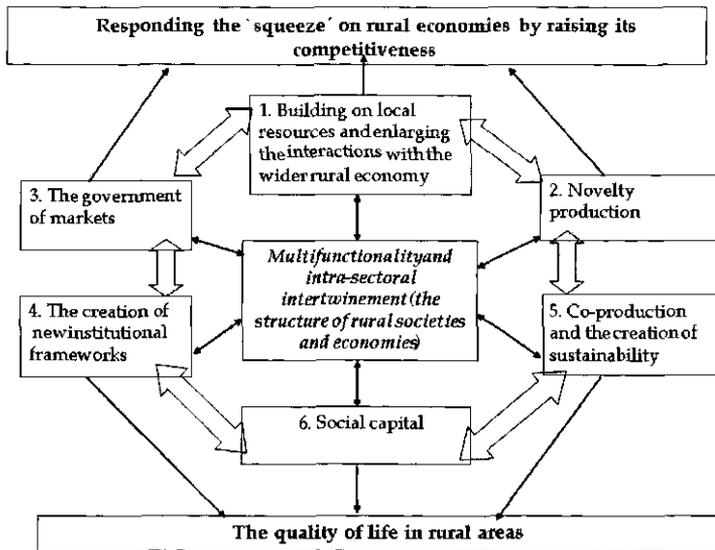
The contributions to this book have been developed in the context of the ETUDE programme, currently being conducted (in the period 2007-2009) within the 6th Framework of the European Union. This programme aims at 'Enlarging The Understanding of rural Development in Europe' (ETUDE). Scholars from six European countries, all actively involved in rural development processes, have been engaged in a series of 'études': interpreting and analyzing a wide range of rural development experiences, at different levels, in order to conceptually grasp the underlying complexities, similarities and dissimilarities which make each and every experience unique. Previous European research programmes on rural development¹ were also revisited. Thus, the common and the exceptional, the old and the new, became pathways for understanding the 'music' that is currently being composed and played out in Europe's rural regions. Often this music has fallen on deaf ears, due to conventional, sectoral, approaches to rural development. What is needed, as we outline in this volume, is a new theory of rural development that integrates social and spatial approaches; a theory that enables scholars, policy-makers and practitioners to fully appreciate the rich and manifold expressions of differentiated rural development. The researchers have sought to embed their findings within general theories of social science, thus seeking to provide a maximum of transparency and accessibility.

Chapter 1 offers a general discussion of the rural web, whilst also paying attention to changing town-countryside relations, the large heterogeneity of rural regions and to the actual and potential meaning and significance of rural and regional development processes. This chapter argues that rural webs are multidimensional, consisting of some key conceptual building blocks: of which endogeneity, novelty production, sustainability, social capital, institutional arrangements and the governance of markets are the key dimensions (see Figure). These building blocks are seen and located in the dynamic context of 'responses to the squeeze on rural economies through raising competitiveness' and attempts to generally improve the quality of life and sustainability of rural livelihoods.

The following six chapters (2 to 7) discuss each of these dimensions in turn and also pay considerable attention to how they relate to, and translate into, the others. These chapters can equally be read as a critical review of the relevant literature concerning each dimension.

¹ These are (following the normally used acronyms): DORA, RUREMPLEO, CORASON, SINER-GI, COFAMI, MULTAGRI, SUS-CHAIN, TRUC, CAMAR and IMPACT. Much use was also made of the NWO funded AGRINOVEM program and Welfare Quality program funded by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture.

An introductory outline of the rural web



Empirical examples have been included to illustrate the theoretical arguments. Chapter 8 ties together the different lines of argumentation into a new synthesis. The central keywords and concepts here are complexity, networks, coherence and territorial capital (the integrated whole of resources needed for rural development).

Chapter 9 presents the main results of the first systematic application of the rural web model to a wide range of highly divergent empirical cases, drawn from different rural regions of Europe. It shows that the rural development processes that European rural regions are currently undergoing are underpinned by a range of different rural webs, each with its own dynamics. The chapter shows, in short, that rural development occurs as the unfolding of the rural web. Chapter 10 focuses specifically on the role played by policies for rural development (at multiple levels) in the cases analyzed in the previous chapter.

In the final chapter we present a critical reflection on the different aspects and outcomes of our conceptualization of the rural web, and our understanding of rural development more generally.

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