

# Images and Realities of Rural Life. Introduction

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This book celebrates fifty years of sociology at Wageningen Agricultural University. Its contributors are all staff of the newly formed Centre for Rural Development Sociology, whose institutional origins can be traced back to the two departments of rural sociology established in the late 1940s – one specializing in the rural sociology of the Netherlands and Europe, and the other in the rural sociology and anthropology of 'developing countries.'

The 'founding fathers' of these departments – Evert Willem Hofstee and Rudie van Lier – were, each in his own distinctive and sometimes idiosyncratic ways, formidable intellectuals who shaped the contours of Wageningen sociology. Hofstee is best remembered for his fine-grained regional analyses of differential farming and cultural styles in the Netherlands; while van Lier – though skeptical of man's ability to steer the course of social change – promoted a sociology of development that took a critical and reflexive stance to understanding intervention processes.

This collection, however, is not intended primarily as an occasion to pay tribute to the founding fathers, nor does it aim to survey the history and personalities of the past fifty years that have made Wageningen rural development sociology what it is today. Such ancestral rituals have their function in strengthening the sense of identity among current staff members and students, and may also serve as an historical claim on the present and future existence of a robust sociology in Wageningen. But the ambitions of this book are different. Whatever identity or standing Wageningen sociology may have will be determined by our colleagues and audiences elsewhere. It can only be constructed by others on the basis of our research profile, thinking and academic performance. Claims to local, national and international reputations are built on achievements, and not on institutional and intellectual pedigrees.

This volume, then, offers a sample of recent work by sociology staff members and sketches out possible future trajectories. We leave it to others to judge how far Wageningen sociology constitutes a distinctive, lively and coherent set of activities with some common goals and perspectives. The contributions have been deliberately chosen for their theoretical and reflexive character. They provide theoretical and/or methodological

insights into critical areas of rural research, spanning a wide spectrum of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological contexts and phenomena.

### **Situating the Work of Wageningen Sociology**

Before outlining the themes and organization of the volume, some comments about the setting of Wageningen sociology are necessary in order to delineate the kind of social and institutional context in which it has developed.

Wageningen is often seen as the place where much emphasis is given to relating theory to practice: to policy issues, agricultural problems and development intervention. While this view has a good deal of validity, we wish also to underline the importance of situating applied and problem-oriented work within the framework of research programmes concerned with the empirical exploration and theoretical understanding of processes of a more 'foundational' character. Hence theory, empirical research, and practical and policy dimensions are all interrelated and unthinkable without each other. In the chapters that follow theoretical issues are interwoven with, and shown to be relevant to, specific political and policy debates, problems of development intervention, the implications of global/local relationships and representations, and the more general dilemmas of creating and sustaining viable rural environments and livelihoods.

It is, of course, undeniable that the formation of an academic identity is an historical process and that past events contribute to the present image of a particular group of scholars. Thus, sociologists in Wageningen had positioned themselves within Dutch academia as the 'Wageningen School' as early as the 1960s. Hofstee, who occupied the chair of rural sociology for more than thirty years, always denied the existence of such a School, but he could not change the vision of colleagues from the 'world outside.' Four decades later this label carries a more international flavour, embracing as it does both rural sociological work on the Netherlands and Europe and development sociology and anthropology of the 'Third World.' It is this reorganized and reinvigorated rural development sociology with which members of the new Centre for Rural Development Sociology now tend to identify.

Labelling by outsiders and forms of self-identification, whether based on authentic or inaccurate images or criteria, always carry some significance. Despite its multifaceted character, personal differences and interests, and a broad international orientation, Wageningen sociology does have some distinctive characteristics, moulded by the conjuncture of local, national and international influences. Although we do not wish to explore further the intricacies of academic identity, we think it may be interesting

to mention briefly the constituent factors that have shaped the formation of Wageningen rural development sociology.

The institutionalization of sociology in Wageningen – as in all universities in the Netherlands – was part of a general recognition that its knowledge was essential for understanding processes of social and politico-economic change. When the state and non-governmental organizations began to define their role as major agents in bringing about social and economic reform through intervention and extension, social research was considered an essential instrument for policy making. In the Wageningen context, social science research and teaching were very much embedded in the general role expected of the agricultural sciences. Their mandate was to produce 'expert' sociological knowledge that would be instrumental to the framing and implementation of agricultural and rural development policy.

The establishment of rural sociology as an applied branch of agricultural sciences was, of course, not unique to the Netherlands. However, the difference with most other countries was that rural sociology was considered relevant to the study of both so-called 'western' and 'non-western' societies. The ensemble of sociologists focusing on different parts of the world provided a potentially rich environment within which to develop cross-cultural comparisons and to cross-fertilize sociological and anthropological theories and methods. Even though the two 'worlds' – 'western' and 'non-western' – remained institutionally separate until only recently, which inhibited close collaboration, the present situation of an 'undivided sociology' facilitates the rediscovery and consolidation of networks (mostly informal) that cross-cut the two research groups. As this volume clearly shows, the prospects for such a re-unification process are high, due to the considerable overlap of interests and theoretical orientations.

Of course, the socio-political and academic environment in which rural development sociology at Wageningen came to maturity could have imposed major obstacles for creative and critical academic work. Being related to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and surrounded by predominantly 'non-human' sciences, sociology and anthropology could have been reduced to a kind of sociological empiricism marooned from mainstream social science. Several commentators have, for example, accused American rural sociologists attached to the US Land Grant Universities of uncritically producing 'hard facts' in order to define themselves as 'equals' in an academic milieu dominated by 'positivistic' disciplines commanding high public status. Theoretical reflection and critical distantiation, or strong identification with academic sociology, was seen to threaten their positions *vis-à-vis* their colleagues in the agro-technical and economic sciences.

In contrast, Wageningen sociology has largely escaped from this sort of deferential stance. Its minority position within the agrarian disciplines in

the university seems to have worked in the opposite direction. Social researchers have always strongly emphasized the fundamental role of their discipline in studying agricultural practices and rural development; and several have taken up the gauntlet to become front-stage participants in political debates about the future of the countryside in the Netherlands, the role of agricultural science in development, and Dutch aid policies for the Third World. However, their research agendas have not been primarily defined by political or policy issues, nor have they been simple responses to the demands of technological or organizational research. As several chapters in this volume illustrate, Wageningen sociologists have been more concerned with the development of a systematic critique of technological 'solutions,' intervention ideologies and organizational practice, and with the advancement of new theoretical and conceptual tools for analyzing the multiple realities and contestation of values in the processes of rural social change. In this way Wageningen sociology has turned its institutional context to advantage.

On the other hand, active cooperation with academic colleagues in the agronomic, ecological and technical sciences has enriched our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of rural development and agricultural practice, and has contributed to an increased awareness of the social dynamics that underpin material, biological and technical processes. Moreover, critical social analysis and reflection by Wageningen sociologists have directly and indirectly permeated the official arenas of policy debate, decision making and implementation, both within national and international government and non-governmental circles. We must also note the widespread interest and prominence accorded to certain developments in theory and research at Wageningen, as evidenced, for example, by the 'actor-oriented perspective' on rural development spearheaded by Norman Long, and the 'styles of farming' approach developed by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. Both have reached out to an international audience and have influenced the research and theoretical orientations of a wide circle of academics, as well as development practitioners.

Wageningen sociology, then, has managed to survive for more than half a century and is buoyed up to enter the twenty-first century as a well-respected and recognized 'School.'

### **Images and Realities of Rural Life**

The title we have chosen for this book aims to capture the main lines of research and debate that characterize present-day sociology at Wageningen. Throughout the individual chapters, rural social life is portrayed as a multi-dimensional and contested reality. This holds whether the particular focus is on contrasting interpretations of rural development policy and practice, diverse forms of rural living and experience, differentiated

institutional and power domains, or local and regional patterns of agriculture, ecology and enterprise. The various contributions raise the central issue of how different social actors conceptualize and respond to this diversity, and engage in a contestation of images and discourses on the meanings of rurality. The images evoked relate to actors' perceptions of globalization, their orientations towards commoditization, their conceptions of 'rights', 'entitlements,' and 'responsibilities,' their visions of the 'state,' 'rural society,' and 'nature,' and their representations of the history and cultural construction of 'rural' modes of living and enterprise. Such images are generated not only among different local groups but also within the administrative-cum-political domains of policy makers and field-level workers, as well as within the networks of many other actors such as traders, tourists and consumers. Many of the chapters are concerned with analyzing how these images are actively mobilized, constructed, reproduced, and reconstructed in everyday social life, and in the struggles that take place at the interface with intervening or competing parties. Some chapters also explore the ways in which ordering or regulating discourses and strategies shape the contests that arise and their outcomes, thus reinforcing existing or creating new loci of authority and/or networks of power relations.

In an attempt to construct meaningful and convincing analytical narratives of the complex and often disconcerting 'realities' of rural life and development, the researcher must likewise engage with various actors' images, representations and social practices. He can only achieve this, of course, if he himself also frames his investigation and analysis through the deployment of specific images, metaphors and concepts. It is at this point that one enters the epistemologically tricky terrain of precisely whose images and concepts should take precedence in the understanding of social and cultural phenomena.

The matter is further compounded by the fact that we face not only differences between 'scientific' and 'folk' perceptions and representations of 'reality' but also the co-existence and contestation of varying everyday versions of 'reality.' The same goes for political and scientific discourses developed within specific 'epistemic communities,' wherein we find disagreements over interpretations of the 'world.' In short, we are forced to acknowledge and develop ways of analyzing multiple images of reality and how they shape, and are shaped by, power relations and differential access to material and cultural resources. Indeed, the study of development intervention and the interplay between continuity and change in rural life entails a close analysis of the confrontations between contrasting configurations of knowledge, authority and claims to 'truth.' While none of the chapters of the present book can claim to fully resolve these theoretical and methodological issues, many new insights and perspectives are offered for tackling the issue of the changing meanings

and practices implicated in rural livelihoods and rural transformations more generally.

### **Organization and Themes of the Book**

Although all contributors address questions of rural development, their discussions cover a wide variety of problems and great geographical scope. The chapters include examples that range from fruit production in Chile and maize fields in Kenya, through kinship in the eastern Netherlands and social movements in the Philippines, to small enterprises in Mexico and the marketing of rural images in the Netherlands. The contributions are grouped into four parts, which broadly reflect the current interests of Wageningen sociology staff.

Part One provides an overview of some central theoretical and empirical issues currently characterizing work at the Centre of Rural Development Sociology. It opens with an account by Norman Long of the characteristics and strengths of an actor-oriented perspective on rural development. He argues that this approach goes beyond generalized theories or models of agrarian transformation based upon the centrality of market integration, institutional incorporation, and state or international intervention. In contrast, an actor-oriented approach addresses the ways in which 'rural development' is socially and discursively constructed. The chapter discusses a number of key theoretical and methodological issues, especially those relating to the interplay of global/local relationships and representations, and of how to apply actor analysis to situations of de-territorialized social life. It ends with a brief review of research on globalization currently in progress at Wageningen.

Jan den Ouden's chapter takes a retrospective view of development anthropology. He describes how Wageningen sociologists are firmly rooted in the anthropological fieldwork tradition and the analysis of culture. His chapter highlights the contribution that anthropology has made to the understanding of processes of social change and development, but stresses the in-built epistemological and personal problems involved in carrying out anthropological fieldwork. On the basis of this, he examines the usefulness and limitations of anthropological work for the purposes of the policy maker and development practitioner. He shows how Wageningen sociologists are not only involved in problem-oriented and applied research, but also in the study of the practices of development intervention itself.

The final chapter in Part One by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg provides an extensive discussion of processes of European rural development. He offers new openings into burning theoretical and political problems, while never ignoring the livelihoods of rural people and the complexities of rural

policy making. Van der Ploeg's chapter is built around his notion of 'rurality.' He does not reintroduce the urban-rural continuum, as some might think, but actually posits a rural-urban divide. Rurality – as the co-production between man and nature – is characterized by certain elements of social organization and craftsmanship, and is associated with a ruralized physical environment. From his conception of rurality, van der Ploeg is able to put the discourse on the rural, including its idealization or rejection by urbanity, into a new perspective.

Part Two, on governance, intervention and social movements, represents an important line of ongoing research in Wageningen. The four chapters in this part, although very different in scope and nature, all examine forms of regulation and intervention in rural development. Jaap Frouws provides a critique of current regulation and micro-oriented theories. He argues for the use of *governance* as a concept for analyzing recent transformations in the relationship between agriculture, food consumption, the environment and non-agricultural claims on the rural landscape. Here the notion of governance refers to the complex interdependencies between the role of the market, the state and 'civil society.' A governance approach is not limited to analyzing the role of the state, focussing instead on the totality of principles regulating agriculture. Drawing upon the analytical achievements of economic, political and environmental sociology, Frouws places rural sociology at the cross-road of different sociological sub-disciplines.

Drawing upon fieldwork in the Atlantic zone of Costa Rica, Pieter de Vries offers an appraisal of the role of the state in development programmes, highlighting the intervention ideologies that policy makers and front-line workers deploy in their relationships with 'beneficiaries.' This points to the multiple and contradictory effects of intervention practice, and provides grounds for a critique of the assumption that bureaucratic activity is underpinned by a logic of state penetration or social control. His analysis centres on how development administrators and front-line bureaucrats construct views about farmers as being 'lazy,' 'unreliable,' and therefore 'undeserving.' His argument also runs counter to post-structuralist interpretations of the quasi-conspiratorial nature of the state which, de Vries argues, adds little to our understanding of the contingencies of localized struggles between bureaucrats and their 'unruly' clients.

Ad Nooij compares two contrasting paradigms of regional development (the 'modern' and the 'endogenous'), both strongly endowed with normative assumptions. Both of these paradigms are represented as complex knowledge-intervention networks, characterized by different theories, methods of research, assumptions about the aim and strategy of development, and with different relations to state and local authorities. By placing these paradigms in their socio-political contexts, Nooij provides a

model for analyzing the decline and maturing of politically-oriented research and practice.

Finally, Thea Hilhorst discusses several theories concerning so-called 'new' social movements and concludes that the most promising analytical approach is that which focuses on discourse formation as a negotiated processes. On the basis of this, she provides a fascinating account of the struggle surrounding Philippine government plans to build several dams in the Chico river. She then describes, with a sense for detail and empathy, how local villagers are able to mobilize both 'traditional' and national resources and cultural repertoires, and how the discourse slowly shifts away from local conflicts to more general issues of 'indigenous rights.' Hilhorst's contribution raises interesting questions of comparative research into regional autonomy and regional identity in general.

Part Three presents four papers on the significance of local actors and actor networks in a context of commoditization and globalization. Commoditization and globalization are at the heart of rural transformation processes in every part of the world. From different perspectives the authors of Part Three argue that it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that the lives of people in the countryside have been hijacked by global capitalist enterprise, or that the transnational movement of people and commodities is simply a function of a reorganized international division of labour. Nor are people simply swamped by global images and media, thus losing their own sense of a rural identity and the ability to appropriate and transform external messages. Indeed, as these chapters clearly show, another side of this human drama involving the flow of commodities, people and ideas, is the intricate and creative ways in which people and their families struggle to solve their own livelihood problems and give new meanings to global messages and processes.

Henk de Haan argues that globalization is a scientific construct. He introduces the concept of 'deglobalization' to clarify the concrete character of local-global encounters and how globality is integrated into existing social structure and culture. He illustrates this with the experience of rural restructuring in a Dutch and a French village. In showing how this process is mediated by pre-existing rules governing access to property he underlines the idea that actors are embedded in a locally defined and perceived field of action, which conditions their position *vis-à-vis* processes of globalization and commoditization.

From a different angle and illustrated with various fascinating examples, Alberto Arce comes to similar conclusions concerning the local deconstruction of globality. His central argument is that global processes need to be translated by local actors in order to acquire material and social significance. Using the case of fresh fruit and vegetable, he explores how global patterns of consumption interact with local production systems and are mediated, adapted or managed within the life experiences and under-

standings of local entrepreneurs. However, he stands back from a simple analysis of translation processes to demonstrate how such local actors are able to creatively engage with and to some degree retransform global consumption tastes.

Paul Hebinck and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg summarize the methodological and theoretical contours of the 'styles of farming' concept. Styles of farming, they argue, are actively created forms of heterogeneity, epitomizing farmers' room for choice and interpretation. They give much emphasis to 'cultural repertoires' – the multi-coloured cognitive and symbolic universe which mediates farmers' reactions to technological change and the market. They illustrate their argument with empirical examples, focussing on the huge variety in maize yields in Kenya, and criticizing the prevailing 'iron laws' in political and scientific models of rural development. Hebinck and van der Ploeg's chapter combines, in an interesting way, the analysis of detailed field data with firm political and social critique.

In his chapter, Norman Long offers a new perspective on commoditization that focuses upon how 'social value' is constructed through the ongoing processes and social encounters of everyday life. He develops his argument by reference to the restructuring of agrarian relations under neoliberal policies, emphasizing that analysis of these transformations must centre upon an understanding of how commoditization processes are forged through contests over social values. This entails a close-up study of how values are socially defined, allocated and fixed. It also implies analysis of how actors develop organizing and discursive strategies for dealing with changing livelihood and normative conditions.

Gerard Verschoor's contribution calls for a rethinking of notions of 'globalization' in relation to small firm development. Drawing upon actor-network theory, he characterizes small firms as essentially ongoing, contingent projects involving a heterogeneous mix of social and material elements. This has implications for policies aimed at promoting small firms, which often view economic enterprises as self-contained islands of organization operating within given frameworks of constraint. Instead, small firms, he argues, should be seen as composed of materially heterogeneous networks of actors engaged in production, dissemination and consumption of specific goods and services.

Part Four presents examples of recent and current work on newly emerging claims on the meaning of rurality. The countryside is portrayed as contested territory, where different, often opposing claims struggle for recognition. Until recently, rural areas were basically considered in terms of agricultural land use and a place of residence for people who are associated with agriculture, rural industries and other sectors of the rural economy. Although there have been long-term processes of counter-urbanization, rural tourism and rural-urban relations, the physical, social and

economic transformation of the countryside was mainly patterned by economic interests, especially productionist agricultural policy and rural industrialization. Rural planning was not considered a hot political item beyond the direct interests of the rural population and agricultural interests. Although rural sociologists in Wageningen had an early interest in environmental problems, nature conservation, tourism and rural living conditions, it is only recently that these themes figure prominently on the research agenda. The papers presented in this Part not only pose and describe opposing claims on the countryside. Most attention is given to a theoretical understanding of motivations, ideologies, principles and concepts. These chapters all argue for a broad rural sociology, cross-fertilized by general social theory and informed by social processes at large.

Jaap Frouws and Arthur Mol use the theory of 'ecological modernization' – a concept borrowed from environmental sociology – to analyse the process of reembedding of ecology. This process should result in the institutionalization of 'ecology' in the social practices and institutions of production and consumption. They describe and analyse the emergence of an ecological rationality in industrial production and compare their findings with agriculture.

Kris van Koppen's chapter begins with a description of current debates in the Netherlands on the relation between agriculture and nature. Central to his argument is a critical investigation of the conservation movement's views and representations of nature. Tracing the Arcadian origins of their thinking, he concludes that these are deeply rooted in Dutch culture and practice, and cannot therefore be dismissed.

René van der Duim views tourism as a process of material and symbolic transformation of resources as a result of interventions by producers and consumers. For him these transformation processes are central to an understanding of what is implied by sustainable tourism. He provides an extensive assessment of views on sustainability and considers their usefulness for international tourism.

Jaap Lengkeek, Jan Willem te Kloeze and Renze Brouwer offer a theoretical framework for understanding the 'tourist gaze.' How are travelling and exploring the countryside related to the everyday experience of modernity, and what is the correspondence between the images produced by the tourist industry and the visions held by tourists? They introduce, from a phenomenological perspective, the concept of 'other realities,' referring to the tensions between the rationality of everyday life and 'the tourist experience.' They illustrate the relevance of their perspective with empirical examples on the 'thematization of the countryside,' agri-tourism and the issue of rural identities. This chapter clearly illustrates how the rural has acquired a significance which goes far beyond any notion of production and space. Rurality is a cultural notion with powerful capacities to transform rural realities.