



# A Relational Approach to Rural Development

## Introduction

Founded in 1946, our chair group has a long history of research into rural development, and much has happened in the field over the past 75 years. Essentially, our research focus shifted away from agricultural modernisation and rural development in the context post WWII state-led interventionist policies – policies aimed at planning and increasing production at the national level and increasing the scale and productivity of farms – and the focus has moved towards the role of agri-business and democratisation of agriculture and food production – discussing the development of pathways towards new peasant agriculture and rural futures. In making this transition, we carved out a special interest in the lived experience of *people* (versus ‘structures’) and *the particular* (versus ‘trends’). This was marked by an inclination towards a comparative understanding of how people and social groups act on the basis of *meaning* (Hofstee 1938: 7-8). This approach was helpful for questioning development paths (critique) and making visible other pathways to choose from (alternatives). It gave us a solid position in both societal and academic debates about modernisation and its alternatives.

Looking back, one can identify two fundamental anchor points. The first was an interest in the ‘spatial’, sometimes focussing on the region, other times more on the ‘local’, or the ‘farm’. The second was the recognition and

emphasis on the geographies of rural life and farming practices as imbued with meaning. Both of these take shape at the conjunction of relations and connections. As a consequence, the dominant understandings of the rural as distinct and essentially different from the urban were increasingly contested. Instead, rurality became to be understood as a fluid characteristic, emerging dynamically and in relation to urbanity in ways that cut across geographical boundaries. Moreover, and in parallel, understandings of what constitutes development shifted from a narrow focus on economic growth to more encompassing definitions of *wellbeing* as the foundation of *thriving regions*. These two conceptions – the fluidity and dynamism, on the one hand, and the changing character of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as spatial identities together with a more encompassing definition, on the other, emerged as key concerns in several of our projects.

This chapter reflects on that history, on our past engagement with rural development and how our sociological engagement with regions, territories and local development increasingly became ‘relational’. It distinguishes between approaches and indicates their prominence in time. The main paradigmatic changes are conceived as the shift from exogenous to endogenous development and relational understandings of this. This short review thus becomes a consideration of the

development of our thinking about the rural as the making of (different) places from dynamic webs of interactions and interrelations. It concludes with a sketch for future research.

### From regional to rural and territorial development

Evert Willem Hofstee, appointed in 1946 to the first chair of rural sociology at WUR, started with research into the rural from a regional perspective. He wanted to explain difference – why do different regions have different development trajectories? Having explored various possible causes, he came to the conclusion that this was the result of changing group ideals and the determined actions of people. Conducting meticulous empirical research, Hofstee expressed his aversion to the abstract, structuralist sociology and descriptive, environmental determinist geography of his time. Instead, he developed a grounded theoretical approach with low levels of abstraction and high probabilities of practical application (Hofstee 1938, 1946, 1982; Karel 2002). Hofstee was inspired by the work of the Land Grant Universities in the United States educating the next generation of farmers. He believed that at these universities, science was put to practical use for rural society in a way then unknown in Europe (Hofstee 1968; Lowe 2010; Bock 2018). His work was driven by an interest in social and meaningful action and the situations in which these occur.

Hofstee's interest in the concrete, the lived, and the particular marked his inclination towards an 'inductive' research methodology. He combined in-depth descriptions of social groups with a comparative approach. This grounded theoretical approach yielded the concept of *farming styles* in agricultural production, defined as shared normative and strategic ideas about how farming should be done. Hofstee's concept of farming style

implied an important analytical inversion: one should not try to understand the practice of farming from the structural conditions to which farmers respond but rather move farmers as creative actors to the centre of the analysis. The structure of farm life is shaped by ideals, perceptions and ideas that consciously or unconsciously live within a social group.

Hofstee's adherence to applied research that aimed to support interventions aiming to transform and 'develop' the rural and its people (Hofstee 1962: 330-331) has to be placed in the post-WWII political ambition in the Netherlands to rebuild and modernise the country. In the period from around 1950 to 1970, the state took an ordering role in agriculture. It targeted an expansion of production through land reclamation and intensification, with particular attention given to 'underdeveloped' and 'less favourable' regions (Hoogeboom 2020). The focus on the expansion of production combined with land consolidation to create a more efficient landscape of production, with investments in material infrastructure (roads, housing, business locations, etc.) and (fiscal) encouragement for industries to grow in peripheral regions. The Dutch government moved public institutes to these locations, too, such as tax authorities and the Central Bureau of Statistics. Similar initiatives were taken in other countries and at the European level. These were the heydays of Keynesian economics and top-down exogenous development. The oil crisis and inflation of the 1970s heralded the end of Keynesian economic policies marked by a central role for state interventions, however. With the turn towards the Washington Consensus and 'neo-liberalism', the role of the state changed. Investments were redirected towards private actors, and regions were encouraged to compete by realising their comparative advantage. In rural development, this change was marked

by a shift from exogenous development (driven from outside) to endogenous development (driven from within) whose impetus and management moved from the level of national administration to that of local authorities and with non-governmental organisation. This was characterised as *local* or (later) *territorial* development, referring to districts or '*terroirs*' (Terluin 2003), moved away from central planning and emphasised the role of the *community*. Attention turned towards the locally present resources, determining the identity of territories and their 'niche' of development and distinction from others. The use of local knowledge was encouraged with investments in capacity-building and community 'animation'. A typical policy instrument based on this approach was LEADER, the EU's flag-ship governance program for rural development begun in 1991, which, in principle, offered local communities a degree of autonomy in mobilising EU funding for self-designed development projects.

This paradigmatic shift in policy approach was reflected in rural development research by a similar move – towards the idea of *participatory development*. Rural inhabitants were no longer seen as objects of transformation but rather subjects of their own history, endowed with interests and *agency*. Along with this humanising move, as it were, an appreciation of heterogeneity and recognition of non-economic goals of development were encouraged (Ploeg, Long & Banks 2002). However, there was also critique, pointing to the overly harmonious image of local communities overlooking the power of local elites to determine the route to follow and excluding less powerful residents, such as women, smallholders, non-entrepreneurial farmers from decision-making (Shortall 2002, 2008; Derkzen, Bock & Franklin 2008; De Rooij & Bock 2000).

In general, EU policymakers and scientists collaborated closely in the late 1980s and 90s and developed the basic ideas of endogenous rural development in interaction. The EU organised several public consultations, of which the European Conference for Rural Development in Cork organised by the European Commission in November 1996 was a prominent example. This conference resulted in the famous Cork Declaration on Rural Development that gave strong support for integrated territorial development as an overarching principle and for private and community-based initiatives (European Commission 1996). The new paradigm was later endorsed by the OECD.

Our chair group had years of plenty, with Jan Douwe van der Ploeg chairing between 1993 and 2002. As one of the pioneers and leading figures in endogenous rural development and multifunctional agriculture, van der Ploeg advised – and sometimes antagonised – policymakers while collaborating in multiple research projects on rural development across Europe and beyond. He increasingly articulated a 'peasant way', with an emphasis on creative agency and the importance of a self-governed resource base for agricultural production. He contrasted this with the entrepreneurial way, so often favoured by policymakers, which has resulted in the environmental and economic crisis that the rurality faces today. Van der Ploeg's 'peasant way' and the associated idea of re-localising production, processing and distribution ('nested markets') was also a call for a democratisation of agriculture and food production (Van der Ploeg 2008) and aligned with the agenda of food sovereignty movements.

Running from 1990 to 1994, CAMAR was the first EU-funded project to be coordinated by van der Ploeg. The prevailing modernisation paradigm had promoted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach for rural areas in which specificities

were problematised and reduced to obstacles in the way of a uniform progress – essentially, the industrialisation of agriculture. In contrast, this research project revealed how agricultural and rural development could be rooted in locally specific resources and celebrate versatility.

In the edited books *Born from Within* (Ploeg & Long 1994) and *Beyond Modernization* (Ploeg & Van Dijk 1995), development as a process of re-localisation and particularisation was promoted as a rural renewal strategy to counter exclusion and marginalisation. The new rural development paradigm was further explored, mapped out and elaborated in a range of Dutch and international projects under various conceptual headings, such as *diversification*, *pluriactivity*, and *different scales*. Novel, additional income-generating farm practices were conceptualised as potentially contributing to a rural renewal as a result of *broadening*, *deepening* and *regrounding* farm development strategies (Van der Ploeg, Long & Banks 2002; Ploeg & Roep 2003; O'Connor & Renting 2006).

In this context, diversification was further elaborated as *multifunctional agriculture* (Oostindie 2017) and as *rural household strategies* (Jongerden 2018). Additional studies revealed the key role of *women* in the diversification of farms business, in line with the growing recognition of gender in the development discourse generally. Women were seen as less caught up in the traditional logic of agricultural development and thus open to other knowledge and experiences (Bock 2004; Seuneke & Bock 2015). *Relocation* has further been explored as a strategy to develop sustainable food supply chains (Wiskerke & Roep 2006; Roep & Wiskerke 2010).

Following the ground-breaking work of CAMAR, Lowe, Murdoch and Ward (1995) argued for a *neo-endogenous* perspective.

Taking development to be neither (exclusively) exogenous nor endogenous but rather driven by relations that extend across socio-geographical and political boundaries, the neo-endogenous perspective viewed rural development in terms of *networks* (Murdoch 2000; Shucksmith 2010). This network approach was further elaborated in the ETUDE project (2007-09) as 'unfolding webs' (Ploeg and Marsden 2008) that enable rural development by interweaving human and non-human actors and resources in novel ways (Milone & Ventura 2010)

Endogenous development thus became an accepted model of development, regarded as adequate in a time when citizens gained voice and cherished their ability to engage with, inform and instruct, even, politicians and administrators. It also fit well with a more general belief in the value of *local autonomy* and *devolution* as enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of policy (Bock 2019). Similarly, because of its potential to reinforce democracy and foster inclusivity through civic engagement, the European Commission promoted *working in partnerships* as one of the pillars of 'good governance' (CEC, 2001).

Still, however, there was the critique since the policy agenda heralding local agency may serve to reinforce social and spatial inequality. Research has clearly demonstrated that it is easier for resourceful local groups and rural areas to realise bottom-up, endogenous development, and that, conversely, those groups and areas in most need of development often lack essential resources (Shortall 2008; Shucksmith 2010; Kühn 2015).

In 2009, the European Commissioner for Regional Policy prepared a reformed cohesion policy agenda that set the scene for a place-based development strategy aimed at 'tackling persistent under-utilisation of potential and

reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places through external interventions and multilevel governance' (Barca 2009: vii). On the one hand, this approach endorsed the local/territorial development and community empowerment paradigm; on the other hand, however, it underlined the responsibility of the state to intervene and to promote citizens' right of equal access to opportunities – 'irrespective of where she/he lives' (ibid.). In response, the EU mainstreamed the LEADER approach as a general regional development model underlining the importance attached to 'place' and tailor-made interventions.

### **The turn to a relational approach to place and development**

Around the 2000s, the idea of the rural as relationally constructed returned to the academic agenda as a response to approaches in which the rurality was conceptualised as the product of internalist histories. Guided by critical socio-geographical analysis (e.g. Massey 2005), the rural is no longer defined as a distinct place, defined by an opposite referred to as 'the urban', but rather as a set of practices, relations and connections (Woods & Heley 2017). As a result, its development is similarly recognised as coproduced in interaction, and a wide-angle lens with a view to interconnected places is necessary (Jones and Woods 2013). The interaction involves both material and discursive transfers, with territorial identity itself produced collectively and in negotiation (Faludi 2013; Heley and Jones 2012). Places are the product of a constellation of relations, and thus always themselves in 'development'.

This approach built on the earlier studies in which we had already explored the co-production of development through 'different configurations of the web of interrelations, interactions, exchanges and positive mutual externalities within rural societies' (ETUDE

2009: 4). The relational turn guided us to look at rural places as heterogeneous and dynamic, shaped through the intermingling of social and natural processes, and to reconsider historical accounts of how they are constructed (DERREG 2009-2012, SUSPLACE 2015-2019), ROBUST 2017-2021).

In the last decade, the political vocabulary of rural development has also changed. The focus on local development has remained, but spatial differentiation and inequality became prominent issues. Inequality between member states threatens the cohesion of the EU, but internal spatial inequality is also heavily debated. Amin, Massey and Thrift (2003) had already criticised the centralisation of investments that impoverished (rural) regions. A decade later, Rodriguez-Pose (2018) published an article on 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' in which he discussed the rising discontent in regions that were marginalized and their residents' turn to populist parties.

The declining regions often include regions dependent on old industries, but rural areas are also part of this social and spatial differentiation process. Some rural areas have been swallowed by expanding urban areas; others have become part of the urban system, as a place of second residence or recreation. Similarly, cities may become part of the rural system, with people commuting to work and travelling for leisure or service provisions. Politically, the depopulated rural areas gain visibility as rural residents across Europe complain about the political abandonment of the countryside (Vulpen & Bock 2020). Insofar as conventional spatial modes of understanding (exogenous versus endogenous, centre versus periphery) have been questioned (Copus 2001), the relational mode of understanding helped us to rephrase the problem not in terms of the rural places themselves but

as one of the types of relations in which the rural became marginalized.

In our EU research project ROBUST (2017-2021), we advanced our understanding of the varieties of interactions and dependencies between rural and urban, and we identify policies, governance models and practices that foster mutually beneficial relations. In research conducted in Turkey and Kurdistan, we have shown how villagers maintain their smallholdings through multiple family-based, gendered, age (life-stage) related arrangements, in which rural and urban incomes and settlements blend into one other (Jongerden 2018). Research into the daily life of Polish labour migrants in Norway confirms the importance of long-distance relations for an individual's investment in place (Stachowski & Bock 2021). Such a relational approach can help us to rethink social innovation and revitalisation processes in Europe and elsewhere (Bock 2015; Chen, Knierim & Bock 2022).

### Looking forward

This reflection on 75 years of rural development research at the Rural Sociology group in Wageningen has highlighted the changes in approaches as well as the perpetuity of our rural engagement that have underlain our ambition throughout to make a difference in science and society and our eagerness to collaborate with stakeholders and fellow academics. Most of the studies referred to above were projects in which we collaborated with others. Our exchanges with farmers, rural residents, policymakers and fellow academics in the Netherlands, Europe and worldwide are a continuing source of joy and inspiration. Together we have formulated new questions, forged new studies, found new approaches. Together, we learn together and hope to engage in new projects. To this end, we have also identified two broad themes for our future research agenda.

### New rural, uneven development and inequality

One of the key research challenges is that of the future of the rural. This is not a question of whether or not there rural will disappear in an amorphous urban future but of what the rural of the future may look like. Historically, the rural has not been a stable category. The new rurals – and we should use the plural here – are taking shape at the intersection of multiple processes and dynamics. Functions and meanings attributed to it have been manifold (Woods 2011: 1). Taking shape at the intersection of 'man and nature' (Ploeg 1997: 41), for centuries, the rural has been identified with those places where most of our food, fibre and fuel is produced (Woods 2011: 1). Today, in many regions across the world, the rural has (also) become the provider of landscapes and scenery where visitors 'get away' and 'slow-down' or search for adventure and sensation (Buscher and Fletcher 2017) or function as a distant marker of identity and belonging (Jongerden 2018).

In addition to the extraction of resources and agricultural production and different types of transitory experiences and the consumption of a wide range of products, including landscapes and scenery, the rurality in general is the site of intersections of many patterns of movement and settlement from which some move out for education or work and others move in for recreation and entertainment. The multiple functions and meanings of the rural and the normativity of these will pose novel questions about what are to be considered legitimate rural practices – and how this will shape the farming practices and the land of our rural futures, And whose practices? Which farmers will be considered the legitimate producers of the rural of the future, who will be defined as the nuisance, whose activities should be restricted or ended? And which new actors, as producers or consumers of rural

elements, will be welcome, and which not? Discussions about environmental regulation and emissions, or the choice between separating and blending farming and nature, will have consequences for the directions in which we will shape the rural. Already we see contours of various outcomes – including the conversion of agricultural land into nature and different types of 'rewilding'; the transformation from environmentally stressful, high-productivity farming to forms of 'sustainable' and regenerative agriculture that work *with* instead of against nature; and the creation of new, multifunctional spaces for the development of pluriactive services and recreational purposes; but also the use of nature and farmland for the production of energy and for housing and warehousing. The new rurals come with challenging questions about new forms of uneven development: : some areas might experience a shrinking population and an impoverishment of services and facilities, while other rural regions will experience growth.

The issue of uneven development in rural demographics also returns us to the question of 'rural justice'. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated once again the fluidity of rural-urban borders and increasing tendency towards *multi-local* (*multi-place* or *hetero-local*) *living structures* (Jongerden 2018; Lehtonen, Muilo and Vihinen 2019). Yet, we also learned that such mobility may be experienced as a threat and attempt of the urban elite to colonise the rural (see ROBUST 2020). Rural gentrification – in expanding commuter belts and through second or holiday homes, or more directly through an urban flight to rented accommodation in the country – is a form of rural development in which affluent social groups move into rural areas, pushing out low(er)-income groups. While some rural areas gentrify, other areas are being abandoned. This raises new

questions about social inequalities and polarisation emerging today that take the form of spatial differentiation (Kühn 2015).

### Reshaping rural-urban relations

Rural-urban relations remain a topical subject, including in relation to the understanding and definition of rurality as a space of interconnections and order-making. In our work on the rurality, its functions, meanings and futures, we give consideration to the *lived experience*: the meaningful practices through which people shape their lives and relations. Thinking socially about the spatial also requires us to further question the urban-rural distinction. Although this distinction may very well be one of the oldest and most pervasive of social and geographical binaries (Woods 2011: 3), it also conceals a world of relatedness.

Historically, a strong network of rural settlements was regarded as supportive and thence integrated with and not antithetical to the city (Wallace-Hadrill 1991: ix, xii; Mont-Mor 2014: 263). A primary challenge of a rural sociology for the twenty-first century is to understand how the rurality, its diversity of meanings and functions are the contextual outcome of social relations and meaningful actions, past and present. This can direct our focus to the making of new geographies (Bock 2018, Axinte et al. 2019), in which city and countryside become each other's extensions, implying an investigation into how this revisioning reshapes our ideas and assumptions, not only about rural and urban per se but also about their (re)production (Wiskerke 2009, Wiskerke and Verhoeven 2017). Then we can turn to the living structures and how people are increasingly spending their time split between two or three places located in both 'rural' and 'urban' settings – for example in circular labour migrations between places of work and the place one calls 'home' – and thence how a



range of urban-rural assemblages are created by different groups of people acting in various contexts with variable opportunities.

Relatedly, imagining the rural and the urban as 'fluid' may be of interest to explore in the context of new mobility and settlement patterns. An example of this is the emergence of urbanite villages with a 'country style' inhabited by city-dwellers who temporarily slip into the category of rural (Young 2007). Others again have drawn attention to the phenomenon of 'retirement villages' and the changing characteristics of village populations and the village as a space of support for those who are not able or unwilling to compete in the urban labour market, raising the question of the dynamics and explanations of counter-urbanisation occurring next to those of urbanisation (Öztürk, Jongerden & Hilton 2017).

Focusing on rural-urban relations also underlines the fact that the urban still depends on the rural for resources and will continue to do so. In the context of climate change, as well as energy, we can think of heat refuge and flooding containment areas. Departing from the urban-rural relations perspective of interdependence underlines a relation for reciprocity that offers new perspectives for rural development investments. The ROBUST project assembled practices expressing a shared feeling of the responsibility of cities for the wellbeing of the rural regions around them (Ovaska et al. 2021). Inspired also by the ideas of a *wellbeing economy*, ROBUST identified the fundamentals of rural development and the role of rural and urban *anchor institutes* that collaboratively assure their continued existence while awarding the important role that rural areas play in the wellbeing and sustainable future of cities (O'Connell 2021). Further elaboration of these ideas should generate new research directions with rich rewards – in-

cluding literally, through discussions on how the ideas of shared wellbeing and interdependence may translate into new policy instruments and investments logics.

### Finally

Travelling back in time to reflect on the evolution of our group over the course of its 75-year history has been an interesting and inspiring journey. Our thinking has changed over time but also maintained many continuities. Among these, our engagement with rural areas as vital spaces is fundamental. We look forward to our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the coming 25 years of collaboration with citizens and farmers, practitioners and policymakers and, of course, fellow academicians across the globe.

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