

RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

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Abstract. În deceniile recente, o nouă abordare a politicilor publice în zonele rurale s-a făcut cunoscută. Această nouă abordare este de a sprijini transformarea economică și instituțională în procese proiectate și puse în aplicare de către actorii locali. Acest articol reflectă abordările despre organizarea dezvoltării și schimbarea în zonele rurale.

Se construiește, astfel, un cadru conceptual de la două surse complementare teoretice: punctele de vedere asupra complexității teoretice cu privire la guvernarea de reziliență și teoriile instituționale. Având în vedere imposibilitatea de a prezice planul schimbărilor sociale, se subliniază că schimbările impun actorii unui sistem social să construiască o viziune suficient de comună al unui stat viitor dorit și să concluzeze, în scopul de a obține scopul dorit.

Capacitatea pentru guvernare teritorială este, de asemenea, critică în spațiului rural. Sistemul de rezistență se referă la capacitatea actorilor de a regla riscurile ce amenință comunitatea, sau, în anumite cazuri, de a impune nevoia unei schimbări fundamentale în sistemul de abordare. Se vor prezenta, de asemenea, o serie de reflecții suplimentare despre provocările unor astfel de parteneriate, în special dificultățile emergente și puterea actorilor locali.

Introduction

Agriculture and rural development are two basic pillars in the fight against rural poverty and for the enhancement of food security. Agricultural activities determine the livelihoods of most of the poor all over the world. In Sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture provides 65% of the employment opportunities for the labour force and accounts for up to 32% of GDP. But primary sector activities are not the only source of employment and incomes for the rural population. The rural economy is shaped by multiple activities that reflect the diversity of livelihoods of the rural population, especially of the rural poor.

These rural off-farm activities can be decisive to fight rural poverty. During the last fifty years, different topics have been proposed as policy priorities for the development of rural areas. These shifting priorities also reflect how different academic disciplines have successively prevailed to inform rural policy making [1, p.47-49]. Concepts and methodologies to assess and manage rural change have shifted from technological, managerial and centralized approaches to more constructionist, participatory and decentralized perspectives of rural change. Present-day research agendas on rural areas emphasize systemic rather than analytical approaches. Social, economic and institutional issues are integrated and functional interrelations among the elements of the system as well as spatial and temporal historical considerations are highlighted. Other fields of study have started to explore similar systemic approaches, such as landscape management.

The territorial approach to rural development may help to implement sector strategies and to attain the goals of aid effectiveness. This approach to rural policy formulation and implementation promotes joint-action among rural agents, coordination between the different administrative levels of government and articulation among different sector policies addressing the problems of rural areas (agriculture, education, health, infrastructure, employment). Such a policy approach could contribute to shape a „new generation” of public policies for fighting poverty in rural areas.

Recent policy

From a geographical perspective, economic growth is often based upon economies of scale and agglomeration in certain regions and cities. Those areas that fail to aggregate enough employment and income opportunities lag behind. In this respect rural areas suffer from multiple economic and political disadvantages. Indicators of

social and economic performance in rural areas typically fall under the national averages in most countries. While in developing countries the deprived areas, especially rural areas, suffer from the most extreme poverty conditions, in developed countries these areas challenge territorial cohesion. Traditional sector policies and market mechanisms have failed to address the regional imbalances [2, p.667-678].

Today, changes in the national and international context are shaping a new scenario in which rural policies gain prominence:

- Firstly, environmental issues imply special consideration of the sustainable exploitation of natural resources. As a consequence, externalities of agriculture in terms of land and water use, biodiversity and forestry ask for much more attention.
- Secondly, the outcomes of international trade negotiations determine and usually restrict the number and nature of policy options for agriculture. In order to be able to maintain public support for agriculture activity, new perspectives are therefore called for. As highlighted in the „multifunctionality” paradigm, food security, rural employment, production of rural landscape and conservation of the rural heritage and traditions are increasingly recognized as important non-commodity outputs of agriculture in this respect.
- Finally, decentralization and deconcentration enable local actors to engage in the definition of priorities and the use of resources to tackle regional inequalities.

New rural paradigm

Rural out-migration, in particular the out-flow of jobless young people, the aging of the population, a general decline of agricultural activities and a productivity fall of rural labour force are the dominant outcomes of widely prevailing rural conditions. Facing this context, the new approach to rural development aims to generate processes of profound structural change in rural territories. At its core is the conviction of the necessity to give greater prominence to local agents in driving the social, economic and political changes in the territory.

At the centre of this new paradigm lies a comprehensive and integrated view of all those elements that constitute a rural territory. This concept of „territory” resembles, but goes beyond the idea of „community”, a locus where all members of a group of people, having some form of collective claim over a territory and recognizing some form of collective governance, can be given the opportunity to influence decisions in matters of public choice that affect their livelihood.

An essential idea of the territorial approach is the key role in rural governance for what people perceive as common limitations and opportunities for improving their livelihoods. These perceptions condition their perceived set of opportunities and feasible alternatives for change, i.e. their vision for a possible and desired future. A territory has no pre-defined boundaries, neither administrative nor physical, but stems from the aggregation of groups of people with similar problems and opportunities.

In this sense, a territory might correspond to a watershed, a set of coastal communities or various municipalities from different departments sharing similar agro-ecological conditions. A territory refers to a system that integrates a diversity of endogenous resources and their interrelations. Every single element of the territory thereby becomes a potential trigger for structural change. Rural territory is no longer defined as a physical support for human activities but as an actor by itself, a living organism formed by interacting cells (individuals, households, CBOs, tangible assets). From this systemic perspective, and within the relevant structural change processes encouraged by this policy approach, two territorial processes along with a series of ‘crosscutting’ issues can be identified.

The possibilities of agrarian policies to improve the living standards in rural areas, and especially of the non-farmers, are low and even insignificant. The rural population as a whole and its economic activities, whether agriculture-related or not, are to be clearly incorporated into the rural policy. The intended productive transformation will provide employment and income opportunities not only to farms but also to other rural actors, such as female entrepreneurs. The driving forces behind this transformation include the exploitation of local resources, in its broadest sense; the promotion of demand for territorial commodities and non-commodities, and the better exploitation of linkages between rural and urban areas.

In the context of developed countries, policy proposals aim at a broad transformation, including at least four critical policy areas: development of transport and ICT infrastructure, delivery of public services, valorisation of rural amenities and promotion of rural enterprises. Among the rural economic activities, tourism has received special attention, given its potential to regenerate rural areas, to articulate investments by private-, public- and voluntary-sector altogether and to help farmers complement their incomes.

Economic diversification has been considered a fundamental step forward towards the upgrading of agriculture production systems. In off-farm activities, farmers find an alternative to complement their incomes, in spite of the difficulties to carry out such a strategic shift. The sustainable exploitation of natural resources becomes a well-known alternative for rural transformation, be it either through extraction or leisure activities or by putting a value to ecological sustainability.

Other non-agricultural activities should provide new sources of local employment. Manufacturing can offer an alternative, be it through local industries or access to new value-chains.

Institutional transformation

The second territorial process is referred to as institutional transformation. It pursues transformations at the level of the central administration, at the local level and in the vertical interplays between them. According to this multi-level shift, the local agents are expected to impel and drive any change in their territory. Three drivers help understand this institutional shift.

On the one hand, decentralization has consolidated the transfer of competences to subnational administrations (regional, local authorities) and led to an increase of territorial autonomy and the generation of new spaces for policy-making [4, p.99-126]. Yet the territorial approach should not serve as an alibi to argue the case for transferring the provision of public goods to sub-national public administration, even less to local governments. Even though outsourcing delivery has become an alternative, such as in case of the „Development Trusts” in UK or „social enterprises”, the limited taxing base and high costs for delivering public services continues to justify the financial and managerial support required from central administration.

Finally, a larger engagement of other local actors is taking place by means of participation and shared decision-making, as a way of actively engaging the rural population in the transformation of their territory. In this way, a greater interdependence and interrelation among local actors emerges. In more consolidated experiences it may even lead to cooperation with agents from other countries. Mechanisms to ensure effective coordination are thus required. An effective co-ordination among local institutions and organizations (horizontal coordination) and active involvement of population in the process of decision-making and implementation are critical. At the same time, the necessary access to external opportunities and resources (i.e. demand,

information, decision-making process that influence the territory) calls for attention on the interplays with exogenous agents (public, private, other partnerships).

Enhancing agency ability of local actors often requires coalitions and interplays with these outside agents (vertical coordination). Vertical interplays are also relevant for dealing with issues that go beyond the territorial boundaries or that happen at a larger scale before impacting on the territory. Frequently, it is assumed that these issues remain limited to environmental concerns but also the management of pan-territorial infrastructures and economic spillovers or collective action to provide public services entails such vertical interplays.

The policy instrument

This new rural policy emphasizes changes in governance, above all at the local level. As a common feature of the policy experiences, this approach encourages the generation of a common perception among the rural inhabitants of the problems, opportunities and desired futures for the territory. This cognitive synergy becomes the key issue on the „ascendant” or bottom-up social construction of the territory, far from bureaucratic and „top-down” definitions of territorial boundaries. There is thus a need for a mechanism to help local agents articulate and exchange their views and, based on their expectations, build strategies to carry out the productive and institutional transformations [5, p.399-422].

The LEADER initiative by the EU has provided one of the significant experiences in this respect. Other examples of this instrument can be found in the „Grupos de Desarrollo Rural” of the PRODER Program in Spain, the Local Strategic Partnership in the UK or the County Enterprise Boards in Ireland.

Even when no universal normative value should be attributed to particular types of arrangement, a set of conditions must be met so that the constitutional and operational rules of the partnership are both coherent with and functional to the desired rural structural transformations.

First of all, it needs to be recognised that the core of the proposed partnership is based upon a discursive creation, shaped by the sufficiently shared perceptions and aspirations of the local actors and represented by the metaphor of the territory.

This definition of the territory offers the social construction that should turn into the bedrock of joint action for structural change, in this way also guaranteeing the ever-changing reproduction of the discursive reality of the „territory”. For the discursive reality of the „territory” to be functional within this new rural planning approach, criteria in at least three critical dimensions need to be met. A territory needs to comprise a minimum threshold of agents and population in order to achieve a certain „critical mass”, a representative subset of the local human capital (quantitative dimension). It is held to be advantageous when the territory is relatively homogeneous, i.e. that it shows a considerable degree of uniformity in terms of economic structure, geography, natural resources and history (qualitative dimension). This makes it easier to shape and manage a coherent development path for the territory.

This institutional structure for territorial governance is however not exempt from criticism. The most frequent concern affects its suitability for generating „cognitive synergy” on the territory. The partnerships should recognize and provide sensitivity to the multiple discourses of the various interest groups in the territory. This is aimed at assimilating excluded collectivities into the processes of decision-making and discursive creation about the territory. In this regard, a first critique addresses the idea of the participation in terms of assessing who is to be considered excluded, why non-participation entails exclusion and what benefits are to be expected from participation. Partnerships are criticized as they tend to become elitist and neo-corporatist spaces,

lacking in capacity to effectively engage both excluded groups and those economic actors that have a key impact on the local economy. An additional issue refers to the political character of these new arenas, even when the local actors themselves might not recognize this as a critical issue for community participation.

Rural development

From the perspective of the development agenda, agriculture and rural development are key issues for the fight against poverty. In developing countries, 75% of the poorest live in rural areas and agriculture provides most of the employment opportunities for the poorest. Shortcomings in the access to basic services (water and sanitation, education, health) have the greatest impact on rural populations.

This situation however has not given rise to a significant increase in funding from donors yet, but to the creation of new financial instruments (global facilities) that address the lack of liquidity in the poor countries as a consequence of the global financial crisis. Nevertheless, this response should go beyond the present crisis situation [3, p. 207-216].

While rural areas in general and agriculture in particular have substantially decreased in importance on the priority list of donors in the 1990s, a renewed interest has emerged during the last decade. Partnerships have been launched to enhance donors' coordination and efforts have been undertaken to build a joint understanding of the main rural challenges in developing countries.

Developing countries have already gained an all-embracing experience in supporting community-driven priorities. For example, a large proportion of „social funds” projects carried out by multilateral institutions and development organizations have followed the so-called „community-based” or „community-driven” approaches.

Partly based on these approaches and the evidence from the theoretical and strategic shifts observed in rural development interventions, the discourse on rural policy in Latin America is being re-elaborated since about a decade ago. In this Latin American perspective, the territorial approach not only aims at reducing regional inequalities or stirring economic or institutional transformations in rural areas. The fight against poverty is set at the centre stage, thereby broadening the rural policy agenda that prevails in developed countries.

Conclusions:

During the last decades, rural policies have gradually integrated new issues to tackle the multiple challenges of poverty. Besides discussions about the effectiveness of policy content in terms of poverty impact or sector priorities, the delivery mode of aid has arisen as an essential question. Effectiveness happens to be closely related to institutional issues such as the coordination among different levels of the public administration, the transition from government to broader governance, the articulation and synergy of the rural sector policies and the coordination between rural actors.

The territorial approach to rural development aligns with these concerns on effectiveness, by making local agents take on a more decisive responsibility for territorial change and providing a mechanism to create and drive the development pathway. Our capacity to make predictions about the system or to manage its resilience does not necessarily improve with more information. Changes in the system are to be built and managed rather than forecasted or planned. Acting and adapting upon envisaged future scenarios becomes a more useful tool. Being aware that systemic grasp is an ever-expanding activity, leaders should be those individuals capable of helping us improve our systemic knowledge, keep an ongoing learning process and manage uncertainty.

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