CHAPTER 2

RURAL DEVELOPMENT: ACTORS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

From a more general point of view the initiatives and novel practices of farmers represent ‘seeds of transition’. They are the ‘sprouts’ out of which new socio-technical modes for organizing production and marketing emerge — ‘sprouts’ that, taken together can be described under the term ‘rural development’. The examples are, on the whole, well-known; they include agro-ecological production, on-farm processing, agro-tourism, new credit associations and cooperative forms of commercialization. But it remains important to develop a more sociological interpretation of these new forms: since they are produced by social actors and are constantly redefined and modified through the relations and interactions implied by these new forms. This chapter defines the outline on actors and practices that will be discussed in later chapters of the book.

Keywords: Rural development; peasants; innovation; Brazil; China; Europe; rural sociology
INTRODUCTION

Rural development is not the self-evident outcome of the interplay between rural markets and agricultural technologies. Rather, rural development is actively shaped by the many actors, social movements and/or state apparatuses that are involved in it. Rural development is constructed through the many encounters that take place at the decisive interfaces where these agents meet and engage in complex and often contradictory practices (see Long, 2015). This applies a fortiori to the current materializations of rural development processes, which are evolving as, more or less, coherent sets of responses to the squeeze on agriculture (and, more specifically, to the economic and financial crisis that is now threatening agriculture), socio-economic and spatial inequalities and the poverty, deprivation and backwardness that these engender. In short: rural development is a (highly variable) set of responses to market failures (van der Ploeg et al., 2000; van der Ploeg, Ye, & Schneider, 2010). These responses assume, and create, new relations between the rural and the urban. They often occur through (and materialize as) the production of new goods and services that satisfy emerging new societal values. At the farm level this translates into multi-functionality. At a wider level it translates into the construction of new markets (van der Ploeg, Schneider, & Ye, 2012). These new products and services are channelled through new markets which provide better remuneration to the farming population. Rural development also materializes as a social struggle aimed at defending the resources and regulatory space needed for these new products, services and markets. In this sense rural development represents a ‘counter development’: it differs from the development of agriculture and the countryside (and, consequently, the development of food processing, distribution and consumption) that is induced and shaped by the main agricultural and food markets. In hegemonic discourse rural development is understood as merely correcting or complementing market-led development. But it may well go beyond this and can replace market-led development — not in and through a sudden change — but through a complex and contradictory process of transition. Careful empirical research is needed to assess how rural development really operates (and particularly whether it should be understood as being complementary to market-led development or as a counterforce that might transform market-led development).

In other publications we have focussed on the nature and dynamics of rural development processes (van der Ploeg et al., 2010) and on the performance of rural development policies (Hebinck, Schneider, & van der
Here, the focus is on actors and practices. This book explores who the actors are that operate as driving force in these processes, what motivates them, how they relate to each other and how they structure their practices. And, echoing the contribution of Long to this volume, we ask how the newly emerging practices, and more generally rural development processes as a whole, shape the actors that are involved in them. For, we argue, it is not only the actors that shape new practices, but the practices equally shape actors involved.

Naturally, there are major differences in rural development practices between China, Brazil and the EU (which we documented in the special issue of Rivista di Economia Agraria, 2010). Equally there are major differences between ‘pioneers’, those who instigate novel activities, and ‘followers’, those who apply elements and ingredients that have already proven their validity. But, alongside the many dissimilarities, this book also identifies some commonalities and the authors attempt to distinguish the commonalities from coincidental similarities.

THE MAIN ACTORS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

It is important to note that in this book we do not talk about actors or practices in general. We restrict our investigation to those actors who are actively involved in rural development processes, constructing new practices and, therefore, new relations, networks, resource constellations and identities that are central to, and strategic for, the further unfolding of rural development.

As mentioned before, there are major differences, both temporal and spatial, in how rural development processes are socially constructed. In Europe rural development is generally driven by farmers’ ongoing search for new possibilities that enhance the likelihood of maintaining the continuity of their farms. Thus, new rural development activities are first born as individual initiatives and only then tied together into new networks. By contrast, in Brazil, social movements play a central role in triggering rural development processes, whilst in China the state clearly plays the leading role (Ye, Rao, & Wu, 2010). This does not imply that the state does not play a role in Brazilian and European rural development processes, or that there is an absence of individual initiatives (of the type that dominates in Europe) in Brazil or China. Far from it. The point is that the gravitational centre of rural development processes clearly differs between China, Brazil and Europe.
This has major consequences for any attempt to characterize the main actors involved in rural development processes. These actors are socially shaped by the relationships that they engage in. These relationships are often developed through necessity, although actors can also sometimes choose (or even construct) these relationships in a voluntary, goal-oriented and knowledgeable, way (Long, 1985, 2001). Actors can even be involved in different ‘multiple structures’ which may wholly or partly contrast with each other. They may spend part of their time engaged in ‘conventional’ farming (and being subordinated to unequal power relations) and another part being involved in creating new patterns (new contrasting structures) that allow them to go beyond their historically inherited situation.

In Europe, pride is an important keyword that describes the motivation of the actors involved in rural development processes. Their pride stems from their capacity to show that they are not just a victim of circumstance, but are able to make a difference, to construct (rather than to find) new responses, even if they are only partial ones. Fig. 1 shows a mother and her

Fig. 1. An Expression of Pride.
son who have changed their farm into a very attractive multi-functional enterprise whose portfolio includes providing berths for passing yachts and their passengers. Rebelliousness could be another keyword. Many rural development practices are, especially initially, deviations from the rule.

They involve actors explicitly contesting the existing rules of the game and the seemingly immutable regularities associated with them. In so doing they construct new practices and new networks. Once the value of these is proven, this can create a sense of pride. Finally, we should also mention passion. These actors are usually people who love farming and who have a strong desire to continue with it, to renew it, to make it match new societal demands and be viable for the next generation. Needless to say the balance between passion, rebelliousness and pride has to be continuously adjusted over time, especially in the face of the setbacks that often have to be dealt with.

In Brazil resistance is one of the forces that motivates rural development actors (Schneider & Niederle, 2010). This, of course, is related to the leading role played by social movements. Actors’ relationships with each other (and others) are primarily defined through their involvement in the social movements through which they construct rural development. Yet, there is no absence of resistance in Europe — but it is more underground in Europe than in Brazil, where it is more overt. This is partly because rebelliousness is more a feature of individuals and resistance is more carried by organizations and movements (Scott, 1985, 1998). Equally there is no absence of pride and passion in Brazil.

There is pride when common endeavours bring practical results or when distinction is created, for example when productive employment, a certain level of self-regulation and acceptable incomes are created where they were previously lacking. These elements flow together in one carefully coordinated balance, summarized in Fig. 2, taken in one of the settlements created through an extended struggle by one of the social movements. Ocupar translates as occupation (of the land) to open up (create) space for manoeuvre. This is followed by resistir (resistance), which is required to remain on the occupied lands and to obtain titles, credit, access to markets, etc. Then comes produzir (production), the next stage in the struggle. Underlying all these key words, there is cooperar (cooperation), not only between the actors involved but also with state agencies that might be led to view the movements and settlements in a positive light.

In China many of the actors actively involved in rural development are driven by a carefully regulated balance of tradition and renewal. To understand this, one has to take into account that multi-functionality has always
been an important feature of Chinese farms. The current generation is building on this tradition and is strengthening and renewing it. Another important balance is that between local initiatives and central intervention. Some rural development practices in China have started from local initiatives. These are often daring and highly novel. Others stem from government initiatives and are often backed up by considerable state support. On the whole, most initiatives involve strong cooperation between the state and peasants. Fig. 3 shows the construction of new terraces in the hills surrounding a peasant village. Once constructed these new fields will be used for walnut production, an attractive form of diversification. Elder farmers are investing considerable amounts of money here to create new opportunities for their children. In this they are supported by government subsidies and co-ordination from the local village committee.

These descriptions, and the associated pictures, initially seem to suggest major differences between Brazil, China and Europe. The actors differ, as do their main motives. Nonetheless, there is also an important commonality. Time and again we see agency: the capacity to make a difference, to get actively involved and to (jointly) shape the course of events. This agency translates into new material realities that are co-constructed by the actors involved. These may take the form of new settlements, new fields or new agritourism facilities, etc. In turn, these new material realities
provide new employment opportunities, increased and diversified production (and improved incomes) and new flows of people coming into the countryside. These new material realities (new objects and new networks that generate new and viable constellations) are the basis of pride and help partially transform the identities of those involved. It should be emphasized that without active agency these new realities would not emerge. They are not the outcome of the ‘self-regulatory capacity of markets’; nor the outcome of a blueprint elaborated by state agencies. They are the result of agency: the capacity to actively intervene in (or create new) markets and to negotiate and/or to mediate state intervention.

In the case of rural development such agency often requires *doggedness*. The chosen trajectory seldom represents the easiest way forward and often goes against the grain. Hence, insistence is needed. The trajectory might involve a long time span, which again requires doggedness as well as a certain amount of *stubbornness*. *Endurance* is also needed to see things through over a long time span. Such features appear, we believe, in China and Brazil as much as they do in Europe.

We do not want to romanticize the actors involved in rural development practices, nor do we want to represent them as some kind of folk heroes. What we want to do is to develop understanding of what motivates and drives them. We know very well that there is, on the whole, far

![Fig. 3. Rural Development in China.](image)
more opportunism than doggedness and endurance in the countryside, whilst modernization and education have wiped out much traditional stubbornness. Nonetheless, deviations are created through doggedness, stubbornness and endurance and the convergence of many such deviations forms the basis of emerging new rural development processes.

We neither want to analyse persistence, endurance, doggedness, etc., as mere psychological attributes and/or as behavioural characteristics of individual farmers. The point is that individual behaviour can be conditioned by social phenomena, and thus becomes a social fact in the Durkheimian sense of the word. The external pressures on farmers in Brazil, China and the EU might differ considerably, as might the actions and reactions developed to modify or change these external pressures. However, to understand the multiple and diverse strategies that farmers use to build their responses, it is necessary to use an analytical approach that recognizes the active role of social actors. Norman Long rightly described this active role of actors in terms of ‘agency’, which he defined as ‘the ability of an actor to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with social life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion’ (Long, 1985). It is quite possible that specific ‘coping’ strategies that (co-)shape social identities and features, such as doggedness, etc., emerge from this. Thus, tradition, pride, resistance, stubbornness, etc., might be viewed as important social attributes. Whilst the ‘peasant model’ may be most commonly outlined in terms of economics and/or resource-flows (see Milone, Ventura, & Ye, 2015), it can also be described in sociological terms, that is in the terms used above. In this respect it is important to signal that such features are relational terms that are at the core of specific ‘activity systems’ (see Long, 2015). Doggedness, for instance, describes the relation between something that shows itself to be resistant to change and a person wanting to change it despite that resistance. Pride also emerges, as a relational element, after the desired change has finally been realized, after expending much energy, insistence and creativity, and so forth.

Rural development does not happen ‘automatically’. The less so since it occurs through, and as, an evolving set of, more or less, coherent responses to market failures and the poverty, marginality and lack of prospects that these engender. The design and subsequent implementation of such responses critically requires doggedness, passion, resistance and the like. Thus, it can be argued that rural development practices very much (co-)shape the actors involved into the people they are. If rural development is counter-development — as we argued above — then it shapes people into rebellious people. This is inevitable, especially when actors attempt to launch initiatives and practices that run against the grain.
In summarizing a series of detailed biographies, Ye (2002, p. 1) concluded that rural development occurs through farmers’ initiatives. Such initiatives are an expression of their agency: ‘a farmer’s initiative is the impetus that sufficiently and necessarily drives a farmer to formulate a realistic strategic plan and to implement it as an attempt to create space for manoeuvre and to pursue change’. Ye argues that there is something special in such initiatives: ‘In the Chinese case we can identify farmer initiatives when actions go beyond the potentialities and opportunities of the existing farm household economy to embrace new livelihood pursuits’ (ibid.). Ye also argues that such initiatives are widespread: ‘There is the ubiquity of farmer initiatives in all agrarian sectors and all rural communities. It is farmer initiatives that intrinsically drive local development and social change’ (ibid.). We have studied similar processes of novelty production in Europe and in Brazil (Milone & Ventura, 2009; Schneider, Gomes da Silva, & Bezerre, 2014; Schneider & Niederle, 2010; Wiskerke & van der Ploeg, 2004). It is remarkable to discover that novelties are being produced everywhere — one can almost say that they are ubiquitous.

The sets of motives (the different balances) described separately for Europe, Brazil and China, are tentative, as is our attempt to identify common elements. We present them here as mere hypotheses, hoping that they will stimulate and provoke more detailed inquiries and comparisons for discussion.

**RURAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES**

The rural development practices in which these actors are involved also merit discussion. It is important to note that these practices are shaped by the actors, just as the latter are shaped, to a degree, by the former. We assume that (a) these practices have certain traits in common, and (b) that there are important and intrinsic relations between the actors and practices, that is between the specific features of the actors and the specific characteristics of the practices they construct. Both (a) and (b) are still to be unravelled. In so doing we will need to keep in mind that each one informs and influences the other.

The new practices that are constructed in, and as part of, rural development processes contain several distinctive features. A first one is autonomy. There are two aspects to this. Rural development practices are usually (but
not always) autonomously generated. More importantly, they are a strategy for regaining and/or enlarging autonomy. Even when there is considerable state support, the unfolding of these practices represents a search for enlarging autonomy. This search for autonomy subsequently translates into a search for endogeneity, building as much as possible (but not exclusively) on locally available resources in order to avoid getting entrapped in new dependency relations. It also translates into novelty production, the search for local and original solutions which helps to avoid dependency on externally developed innovations.

The search for (if not the active construction of) synergy is a second important characteristic of rural development practices. This search is intimately related to multi-functionality, which is essentially about using one and the same set of factors of production to make a wider (and expanding) range of products and services. Marsden (2009, p. 124) defines this as ‘the relative capability for the local rural economy to do more than one thing at the same time from the same (and necessarily restricted) resource base’. Synergy involves doing this in such a way that the economic effects grow more than proportionally. If and when sufficient synergy is created, rural development practices can become self-propelling.

A third important characteristic is that the different practices increasingly interlink through horizontal networking (as opposed to vertical hierarchies). Within these networks reciprocity plays a major role. Newly created economic relations are embedded in reciprocal frameworks (Sabourin, 2011).

In the fourth place, we argue that most rural development practices explicitly carry the stamp of the rural. They make use of available resources (often mobilized through non-commodity circuits and often part of local ecosystems) and this makes it easier to start new enterprises. It seems to be far easier to start new entrepreneurial activities in rural areas than in urban ones, not only because there nearly always are at least some resources available but possibly also because people in rural areas are more able to draw on collective memories, available local knowledge and social networks. Trust, credibility, reputation and personalized interactions (as opposed to the ‘liquidity’ and anonymity of social relations in the urban sphere) are probably also important ingredients here. They are also often enhanced through rural development practices.

Typically, many rural development practices also adopt a remarkably long-term perspective (reflecting the stubbornness and endurance of the actors involved). They are often seen as contributing to the prospects of the next generation, offering them employment opportunities, attractive
working conditions and considerable autonomy. Finally, it is important to note that many rural development practices seem to contribute significantly to the quality of life — not only of those who are directly involved in them, but more broadly.

We believe that these characteristics, or at least most of them, are common to rural development practices (as they unfold at the micro-level) in Brazil, China and Europe, and that they are probably particularly characteristic of the new and novel practices being constructed ‘at the frontier’ of rural development processes.

ON ACTORS AND PRACTICES

So far we have talked about local people constructing local responses to global processes and the problems they bring. These responses (or ‘initiatives’ as they are called in Chinese studies) result in (and occur through) new productive practices and new networks that link producers and consumers in novel ways (van der Ploeg et al., 2012). In this respect they are highly distinctive. They are not merely an expression of protest and contestation; nor are they forms of sabotage or foot dragging. Instead, they represent a struggle of the ‘third kind’ (van der Ploeg, 2008) that goes beyond contestation and/or sabotage. They are productive responses, creating not only new goods and services but also generating new forms of production, distribution and consumption.

We believe that the ‘fingerprint’ of those creating these new practices can, in one way or another, be discerned in these practices and vice versa; the identities of those involved will be affected by the distinctive practices in which they are engaged.

Although some of the interrelations seem to be self-evident (we have already pointed to the possible convergence of stubbornness and long-term perspectives that are built into the new practices), we are still far from understanding the complex intertwinements and mutual transformations of actors and practices. We hope that the collection of chapters contained in this volume will help to formulate research questions to help people navigate through this difficult area.

In synthesis, this book discusses the ways in which farmers look for, and create, new ways of getting things done, in order to resolve everyday problems that emerge in the productive processes, the management of their properties, their access to markets, etc. Farmers invent new ways to face up
to, and go beyond, the difficulties related to their material survival and to the continuity of their social group. These ways build on the repertoires, practices and initiatives that farmers have developed to face the many contingencies, mostly unexpected, that undermine their autonomy and increase their vulnerability. The agrarian sector is increasingly enmeshed in market circuits, through which farmers have to mobilize the required productive resources and to sell their produce. The capacity to innovate and create space for manoeuvre within these circuits provides farmers with flexibility, learning capabilities and knowledge, all strategic requirements for their interactions with the general economy and society at large.

From a more general point of view the initiatives and novel practices of farmers represent ‘seeds of transition’ (Wiskerke & van der Ploeg, 2004). They are the ‘sprouts’ out of which new socio-technical modes for organizing production and marketing emerge – ‘sprouts’ that, taken together, form the basis of rural development (Schneider et al., 2014). The examples are generally quite widely reported on; they include agroecological production, on-farm processing, agritourism, new credit associations and cooperative forms of commercialization. But it remains important to develop a more sociological interpretation of these new forms: since they are produced by social actors and are constantly redefined and modified through the relations and interactions implied by these new forms.

What we seek to develop, then, is an overall view of these new practices: one that views them not just as reactions but also as new and creative constructions that promise far wider changes. In this respect the metaphor of ‘seeds’ is central. The seeds need to be put in fertile soil in order to germinate and produce new harvests. Some of them are already beyond ‘sprouting’ and have already clearly shown themselves to have a far-reaching impact.

NOTES

1. The contributions to the volume were first presented and discussed in the ‘Third Seminar on the Comparative Analysis of Rural Development in China, Brazil and the EU’ held at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at China Agricultural University (CAU) in Beijing between 30 October and 3 November, 2012.

2. Apart from the search for farm continuity, rural development practices may be spurred by a wide range of other motives. Some of these are discussed in Oostindie et al.’s contribution to this volume.
3. An example of such ‘seemingly immutable regularities’ is the commonly held idea that only large farms can be continued, whilst smaller farms must necessarily disappear. Many relatively small farms have disproved this notion by employing rural development practices and converting themselves into solid enterprises with strong prospects for continuity.

4. Whilst in Europe and Brazil it had to be reconstructed.

5. Ye (2002, p. 2) refers to the farmers actively engaged in rural development as being ‘enlightened’. This word would strike a strange chord in Europe and Brazil, but it nicely expresses a general feature: ‘it not only refers to being inspired by ideas from others, but more importantly, from engaging in and learning from social interactions, with events, and everyday experiences’.


7. To put it simply: if activity A renders 10 euros, and activity B also renders 10 euros when organized separately, then the judicious combination of A and B within one multi-functional enterprise might render 25 euros. The additional benefit of 5 euro is the synergetic effect of well-organized multi-functionality.

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