



Conceptualizing Spatial Diversity in Latin American Rural Development: Structures, Institutions, and Coalitions

JULIO A. BERDEGUÉ^a, ANTHONY BEBBINGTON^b and JAVIER ESCOBAL^{c,*}

^a *Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development, Santiago, Chile*

^b *Clark University, Worcester, USA*

^c *Group for the Analysis of Development, Lima, Peru*

Summary. — This article is the introduction to a volume containing findings from a program conducted over five years in 11 Latin America countries, to answer three questions: (1) Are there rural territories that have experienced simultaneous economic growth, poverty reduction, and improved distribution of income?; (2) What factors determine these territorial dynamics?, and; (3) What can be done to stimulate and promote this kind of territorial dynamics? The article outlines the analytical and policy issues and the methodology, summarizes the remaining 10 papers in the collection, and presents a conceptual framework that itself is one of the results of the program.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why do some rural territories within a given country grow with social inclusion, while others experience growth without reductions in poverty or inequality, and others simply stagnate? Rural development interventions have typically assumed that rural growth and inclusion could be induced and therefore, by implication, that the primary drivers of such growth were exogenous. Yet the fact that territories in the same country show diverse responses to the same or similar policy interventions and environments suggests that there are factors, both socially constructed and natural, that are not randomly distributed across space and which also have significant and territorially specific effects on development outcomes. Territory – and more precisely, particular conditions of territory – therefore become endogenous to development dynamics.

This article introduces a special issue of *World Development* that reports the findings of a research program whose aim was to identify such conditions of territory and to understand how, through their interactions with “extraterritorial” processes, these conditions drive patterns of rural change across Latin America. Our particular interest is in those conditions that lead simultaneously to economic growth, poverty reduction, and improved distribution of income within the territory.

Rural development dynamics are usually described and analyzed either through macro narratives (as, for example, in the debate on structural transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa), or through case studies that give a rich picture of a particular place or situation. Very rarely is there an attempt to describe and explain large-scale questions in a way that combines a discussion of both the forest and of the trees. This special issue is such an attempt, as it seeks to describe and explain key features of contemporary change in rural societies across a whole continent, Latin America, but focusing on the dynamics of a very large number of small-scale territories. Indeed, this collection of papers reports on what we believe is the largest ever coordinated and comparative study of rural territorial change in Latin America – and certainly the largest such study not led or supported by an international financial institution. Second, the theory elaborated through these papers is innovative not

only because it is interdisciplinary (the contributors come from economics, anthropology, geography, history, agronomy, and sociology) but also because it brings together theoretical traditions that have often been kept separate as a result of ideological filters. Third, its internationalism: these articles are the product of conversations among research centers based in eleven Latin American countries, three European countries, and North America. Fourth, in policy terms, the territorially tailored approach to rural change suggested by the findings of these papers challenges much current policy that is managed sectorally and from central government and implies the importance of enhanced planning powers and support capacities in decentralized public agencies as well as the need to foster market deepening.

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The research program found that only 12% of about 10 thousand subnational units (districts, municipalities, departments...) in 11 countries, experienced decade-long development dynamics that resulted simultaneously in economic growth, poverty reduction, and improved distribution of income (what we call WWW outcomes) and in fewer cases still, environmental sustainability also (WWW-W outcomes).¹ In the vast majority of territories, dynamics were characterized by little or no improvement in one or more of these dimensions of development (Modrego & Berdegué, 2015). While such territorially uneven development is partly related to the distribution of geographical assets and the effect of exogenous trends and shocks on territories, the more significant explanations lie in the spatially uneven effects of deeply rooted social structures and institutional arrangements that constrain socially inclusive economic growth.² Specific social actors invest significant resources and energy to sustain these structures through the institutions that create or reproduce them. Consequently, these structures and institutions are very difficult to change, especially in the direction of socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth. This resistance to change explains why inclusive dynamics are so rare in each of the 11 countries we studied, regardless of the aggregate economic or social performance of the country.

This research program has shown that escaping the fate of the majority of Latin American rural territories requires institutional change that in turn is effected by individual and collective forms of human agency. In the Latin American context, our research showed that territorial dynamics over the period from the early and mid-1990s to the early and mid-2000s³ were the result of the interaction of actors (human agency) and institutions operating in a number of domains, among which five “critical factors” appear recurrently in our studies of the more “successful” territorial dynamics: (i) the level of equity in agrarian structures and, more generally, in structures of natural resource governance; (ii) the sectoral and organizational diversity of territorial economic structures and the density of interactions among them (in contrast with territories with more uniform economies dominated by one enclave or only one type of firm); (iii) the strength of linkages (capital, labor, products, services) with dynamic markets external to the territory; (iv) the presence of a small or medium city within or very close to the otherwise rural territory; and (v) the ways in which territories deal with large public investments (although evidence here is more mixed and further research is necessary). The transformation of these five conditions into territorial dynamics characterized by socially inclusive economic growth depended on “transformative social coalitions” characterized by a convergence in the agency of different actors around a similar vision of territorial development. In order to have such “transformative” effects, social coalitions need to be characterized by: a diversity of social actors; the existence of common objectives (albeit perhaps because of different motivations); sustained action over a long period of time; and power derived from different types of assets and capabilities (political, economic, cultural...).

These ‘bundles of factors’ are not constrained to the boundaries of the territory: in all cases they also involve supra-territorial structures, institutions, and actors. In that sense, there is no simple distinction between “territorial” and “extra-territorial” factors in explaining territorial development. Furthermore, as the articles in this special issue will show, what matters most is how these factors interact, both in the territory’s history as well as in the present.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Building on this introductory discussion, we introduce elements of a

theoretical framework for analyzing the drivers of territorially based development. This framework is itself a product of the program, and as we elaborate it we make connections to particular papers that illuminate particular elements of our argument. In the third and final section we present the research strategy and summarize the articles in this collection.

2. AN EMERGING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Over a period of five years, from 2007 to 2012, the associates in the RTD program worked in 11 countries in Latin America in order to address three major questions: (1) Are there rural territories in Latin America that have experienced simultaneous economic growth, poverty reduction, and improved distribution of income?; (2) What factors determine such kinds of territorial dynamics?, and; (3) What can be done through public policy but also from other spaces of public action, in order to stimulate and promote this kind of territorial dynamics?

Answering the first question was largely a descriptive (though large-scale and methodologically complex) exercise (Modrego & Berdegué, 2015). The remaining two questions required a conceptual framework that could both address our hypotheses regarding the roles of institutional form and human agency in processes of territorial change, and at the same time account for why institutional forms differ across territories, why institutional persistence and change are spatially differentiated, and why the outcomes of similar institutional forms vary across space. The program developed this conceptual framework through a process that iterated between empirical research, synthesis and conceptualization, the emergence of new research results, and then further synthesis and conceptualization. In the following subsections we first explain our approach to territory and spatial unevenness. We then present our approach to the relationships between human agency and institutional change, as well as the relations between factors that are conditions of the territory and those which are in some sense “extra-territorial.”

(a) *Territory and uneven territorial dynamics*

We start by defining what we mean by territory and by territorial dynamics. A territory is a space with a socially constructed identity (Schejtman & Berdegué, 2004)⁴ and over which some form of authority is exercised (Agnew, 2005). This socially constructed identity can be the result of a diversity of factors, including a distinctive history, ethnicity, culture, economic structure, biophysical conditions (climate, ecosystems), infrastructure (particularly that which determines connectivity and transportation flows), large private investments, social conflicts, and the influence of political-administrative boundaries, or a combination of several of the above. People in a territory as defined here share a social identity, but the territory need not be a “homogenous” unit along a number of dimensions.⁵ This definition resonates with Storper’s (1997) idea of a territory as a stock of relational assets. We use the term “territory” instead of other alternatives, such as “region,” for two reasons: the practical one is that in Latin America, a “region” usually covers a very large area, such as Northeastern Brazil or the Pacific region of Nicaragua; the normative reason, is that the intellectual history of territorial development has some of its roots in European debates and policies that make frequent use of the term “territory.” By territorial development dynamics we refer to processes of change in *both* the social and economic structures and institutional framework of territories, *and* the territorially

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