



Territorial Coalitions and Rural Dynamics in Ecuador. Why History Matters

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Summary. — This paper analyzes the extent to which transformative territorial coalitions can deliberately change the exclusive structures that afflict rural territories in Latin America. A historical comparison of three rural territorial dynamics in Ecuador demonstrates that deliberate planning is not necessary to promote an inclusive and equitable economic dynamic if a long historical process has created favorable territorial social structures. When territories do not have such social structures, they are more likely to require a strong exogenous shock to create a new and inclusive economic organization.
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Key words — Latin America, Ecuador, territorial development, territorial coalitions, agency/structure, reflexivity

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite being a rather rare phenomenon, rural territorial development in Latin America is possible. This was the conclusion reached by the research program on Rural Territorial Dynamics – RTD (Berdegué *et al.*, 2012; Berdegué, Escobal, & Bebbington, 2015).¹ During 1990–2000, about one out of every ten municipalities showed a trend toward simultaneous improvement in per-capita income, poverty reduction, and decreasing inequality. This means that although there is a predominant tendency for those three positive outcomes to occur separately, a few territories achieve them in combination.

A systematic comparison of 20 cases (Berdegué *et al.*, 2012; Berdegué, Escobal, & Bebbington, 2015) indicates that this combination of outcomes depends on the existence of territorial coalitions that drive it within a framework of five favorable factors: (i) an agrarian structure that allows small rural producers to gain access to natural resources that are crucial for their economic activities, (ii) the linkage of the territory with dynamic markets that create substantial demand for goods or services from that place, (iii) a productive structure characterized by local connections and intersectoral diversification, (iv) a city that retains some revenues and redirects them toward the interior of the territory and/or plays a role of political “intermediation” with extraterritorial actors, and (v) public investment in public and private goods that favor territorial dynamics. Finally, territorial coalitions must act on those five factors in order to produce inclusive and equitable growth.

Many territories have coalitions, but they do not stimulate a rural territorial dynamic of inclusive and equitable growth. Fernández, Asensio, Trivelli, and Schejtman (2014) use the term “transformative territorial coalitions” to refer to those that do achieve it. A territorial coalition consists of “a series of different actors” that “engage in convergent actions around a territorial development dynamic” (Fernández *et al.*, 2014, p. 23). In other words, a transformative coalition is one in which the members seek to change exclusionary structures inherited from the past.

The purpose of this paper is to show how and why transformative territorial coalitions emerge and the extent to which they deliberately decide to change exclusionary structures. We seek to analyze the extent to which these coalitions create

a break with social structures inherited from the past or, on the contrary, reproduce the social conditions that led to them. This paper therefore addresses the question about the extent to which it is possible, through deliberate and coordinated action, to modify a territorial direction determined by inherited structural factors, since, as we have seen, in Latin America there is a predominance of economic dynamics that are far from inclusive and equitable.

The concept of transformative territorial coalitions is the result of theoretical work by Tanaka (2014), which aims at a deeper understanding of change and social interaction among key players in rural territories. Tanaka presents three possible theoretical frameworks to analyze the *modus operandi* of “transformative territorial coalitions.” The first is rooted in authors that see actors as emerging from a territory’s productive structures and interacting conflictively amid processes of economic modernization. Interaction over time will result in different political regimes (Moore, 1979). The second theoretical reference is based on works about collective action and social movements. These incorporate additional actors that do not emerge from the economic arena; emphasize the rationality, identity, and organization of the actors analyzed; and more explicitly incorporate the problem of the state in negotiation and dispute among actors (Olson, 1965; and Tilly, 1978, among the most representative). The last theoretical framework refers to the work of political scientists who explore the formation of coalitions in parliamentary arenas for the definition and negotiation of public and government policies (Riker, 1962).

Based on those sources, Tanaka (2014) suggests that coalitions that had a ‘successful’ influence on Rural Territorial Development (RTD) involve the convergence of more than one actor.² These actors may emerge from territorial economic structures or be extraterritorial or state actors or identity-related movements. Coalitions in RTD processes also organize based on a dynamic of economic growth. Depending on the composition of the coalition, on the territory’s prior

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economic structure and on the objectives of the collective action, the dynamic of economic growth will be more or less inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. One key factor for Tanaka concerns the medium- and long-range objectives of these coalitions. These objectives, deliberately established, are crucial for both the cohesion and the orientation of territorial coalitions. If the objectives are very specific, sector-based or short terms, the territorial coalition could face greater obstacles to becoming a transformative territorial coalition. The question of transformative territorial social action is part of a long-standing debate over the extent to which actors can deliberately modify their conditions of existence and the extent to which inherited structural conditions limit their freedom of action. In classic social theory, the problem refers to the famous phrase by Karl Marx, that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited” (Marx 1996, p. 32). In more contemporary social theory, various authors (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Giddens, 1984; White, 2008) have written about the complex interaction and feedback between “agency” and “social structures” and have developed their own conceptual solutions. Bourdieu’s theory of practice includes the concepts of “practical sense,” “habitus” and “fields,” by which the external becomes internalized and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Giddens (1984) emphasizes structure and routine in society, based on a dual structure (agency/structure), which Bourdieu rejects as a false dichotomy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). White also rejects the dichotomy between agency and structure, especially emphasizing the way in which identity and patterns of social relationships organize the social world (White, 2008). Neoinstitutionalist theory also revisits this problem in its debate over institutional change. Mahoney and Thelen (2010), for example, state that “change agents” cannot be separated easily from the institutions they seek to modify. The characteristics of both the political context and the institutions in question would influence the type of change agents that exist, and they, in turn, would influence the type of institutional change. In other words, change agents are embedded within the context in which they act and from which they drive the desired transformations.

The argument with which we intervene in this long-standing theoretical debate is that the actors’ deliberate, coordinated, and planned action plays a minor role in the configuration of rural territorial dynamics in the territories analyzed. Inherited structural factors and previous history weighed more heavily. This does not mean that history is decisive, but history matters, because it is very difficult for actors who share a common cause to try to change those historical pathways when the conditions under which they act are not conducive to change. Collective efforts to change historical pathways should therefore consider the importance of critical junctures (Pierson, 2004), where fractures or disjunctions occur that can leverage coordinated and deliberate action. In other words, at these critical junctures it is more clearly possible to forge a path in a new direction.

We address the research question through a comparative analysis of three cases of rural territorial dynamics (RTDs) in Ecuador. The first RTD takes place in the province of Tungurahua, in the country’s central highlands, a territory of nearly half a million inhabitants, half of whom live in rural areas. The case of Tungurahua was crucial for the conceptualization of the Rural Territorial Dynamics program, because it has evolved around all of the five factors identified reported in this volume by Berdegué, Escobal, and Bebbington since at

least the last decades of the 19th century. Its economy is based on small-scale agriculture and highly diversified rural manufacturing, consisting of a large number of small enterprises, a rural–urban network of markets that connects local producers with extraterritorial markets, and a well-developed road system that has been expanding at least since the mid-20th century, when the province’s capital city became a hub for economic exchange between Quito and Guayaquil, Ecuador’s two largest cities.

The other two RTDs analyzed, which are located in two rural territories in the western part of the province of Loja, in Ecuador’s southern highlands, offer a significant contrast: the populations are smaller (50,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, respectively, 90% of whom live in rural areas), and the territorial economies are highly specialized in the production of corn and coffee. In addition, the territorial coalitions originated in transformations during the 1990s, and their activities are based on explicit territorial plans and strategies, that is, on the conscious coordination of activities by their actors, especially the powerful extraterritorial ones that are involved in each of the two cases. In this region of the Ecuadorian Andes access to dynamic markets and public infrastructure is very recent compared to Tungurahua’s RTD. Local actors have not had the opportunity or incentives to diversify their economic activities or establish strong ties with an urban center. The result is an economic structure that is highly dependent on a single product and therefore much more vulnerable to external shocks. We will argue that Loja’s territorial history shows that isolation and inequality in access to productive assets marked not only the structures that must be radically modified, but also the very composition, capacity for action and power resources of the coalition that drives change.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the methodology used to select and analyze the three RTDs. Sections 3 and 4 analyze the emergence and historical evolution of the coalitions in Tungurahua. Section 5 focuses on the context in which the transformative territorial coalitions emerged in Loja and in their interaction with the other five factors that are decisive for territorial dynamics. The last section discusses the results of the comparative study from the standpoint of the theoretical problems presented in this introduction.

2. METHODOLOGY

The case studies consisted of two phases. In the first one, a series of maps was prepared tracing the evolution of three economic variables: poverty, income inequality, and local per-capita consumption in Ecuador during 1995–2006 (Larrea, Landín, Andrade, Wrborich, & Fraga, 2008; Larrea, Larrea, Andrade, & Maldonado, 2011).³ Three rural territories that combined simultaneous improvements in the three variables were selected. The second phase consisted in an analysis of the emergence and functioning of the RTDs, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

In Tungurahua, a representative survey was carried out with merchants in the Ambato Wholesale Market, the core of the territory’s trade system, while in the territories in Loja, two surveys were carried out with producers and traders of corn and coffee.⁴ The three case studies also included ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, focus groups, participatory observation in workshops and assemblies of both producers and merchants, as well as other qualitative methods. The economic activities analyzed in this study were selected according to a typology of rural parishes, which was based on 17 economic, social, and demographic variables.

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