Fixing rural development cooperation? Not in situations involving blurring and fluidity

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ABSTRACT

Rural development cooperation often took the form of a fix: external actors fixed a problem by introducing a fixed solution. Since the late 1980s the increased recognition of diversity, embeddedness and complexity, resulted in a shift from a 'best fix' approach to a 'best fit' approach. Context specificity replaced one-size-fits-all models. Yet in the specific case of forestry cooperation with the Yuracaré in Bolivia, it is argued no fit-in-context was found because of blurred phenomena and a confusing development situation. Moreover, the Yuracaré together with a Bolivian NGO blurred boundaries, reworked categorical divisions, and intermingled knowledge. This case sensitizes policy and rural development actors more generally to a novel conceptual and ontological perspective on such unstable situations, which revolve around fluidity. Fluid situations call for a rural development approach labelled 'go-with-the-flow'. Recognizing the heterogeneity of development situations implies that any singular approach to realise rural development is at best partial.

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1. Introduction

For several decades, development theory and practice were based on the conviction that development problems could be solved by making use of scientific knowledge, technology, democracy and capital.[3] In the 1960s these elements were expressed in modernisation theory, which held that the delivery of modern, external inputs would trigger innovation, industrialisation and modernisation (Rogers, 1962; Rostow, 1960). These inputs were usually provided in one-size-fits-all forms: mass communication messages, uniform technological packages, universal standards, policy recipes and prescriptions or much later best practices (Lerner, 1958; Schultz, 1964). Modernisation was seen as a fixed, linear structural transformation through a number of different stages and in various dimensions.

Neo-Marxist theories (for instance Frank, 1969) were different in aspects of political economy but very similar regarding assumptions and practices of one-size-fits-all fixes. Both modernisation and neo-Marxist theories were structuralist, abstract, general, ignorant of the complex heterogeneity of the real world and reliant on grand simplifications (Booth, 1994). Both theories were characterised by the use of techniques to fix or solidify realities. The 'will to govern or, more specifically, the will to improve' (Li, 2007: 264) generated a desire to control the development process, to fix the problems and to rigidify the institutions. In general, the customary was codified, the informal was formalised, the traditional was modernised, the spontaneous was planned, etc. Inherent in the approach was the fabrication of multiple overlapping binaries (traditional – modern; underdeveloped – developed; stagnant – dynamic; etc.). This fabrication enabled external actors to intervene and fix problems. These theories and practices form illustrations of the fix-the-problem approach.

However, as Booth (1994) notes, in 'failing to reflect the diversity and complexity of the real world of development, the earlier theories were incapable of explaining it' (Booth, 1994:4). During the 1980s the need to rethink social development was recognised. New work started to focus on actors and agency (Long, 1989), the social construction of reality (Arce, 1989), practice and policy relevance (Edwards, 1989) and multiple scale levels. This body of work revealed many on-the-ground transfer failures and divergences in

development experiences (Booth, 1994). Transfers of knowledge and technology were not diffusions (Rogers, 1962) but transformations (Long, 1989) or translations (see Buttel et al., 1990). Local actors did not adopt but adapt technology. External entities could have widely differing workings or consequences in heterogeneous underdeveloped contexts (Long and van der Ploeg, 1994). Context was no longer perceived as a structure out-there-and-above but as an integral part of a wider system.

System approaches were developed to stress the totality of entities and context. Detaching one entity from this system affected the other parts and the whole. Adding one part to the whole implied it had to fit into the whole. This new approach was seen in farming systems research, agro-ecological systems, agricultural knowledge systems, soft system methodology, management and information systems, and so on. In the field of rural development, system thinking correlated with the emergence of integrated rural development and community development approaches.

Development then is not only a matter of fixing complicated problems. It is about fitting a solution into a complex context (OECD, 2009). The fix-the-problem approach shifted to the fit-in-context approach. Within this fit-in-context approach the protagonist role shifted from the outsider to the insider. The local actor was no longer the object of development but the subject of its own development (Chambers, 1993). Professionals changed their role from interveners to facilitators of local development. Indigenous knowledge and self-determination received recognition. Heterogeneity and plurality were acknowledged within endogenous development paths and multiple modernities (Arce and Long, 2000).

More recently it has become clear that system approaches sometimes fail due to the fact that in practice reality is not always systemic (Ong and Collier, 2005; Jensen and Rödje, 2010). Development situations can be simultaneously heterogeneous and highly fragmented. Such fragmented wholes can be conceptualised as assemblages (DeLanda, 2006). Problem solving of loosely connected fragments can focus on the binding constraints instead of taking all dimensions simultaneously into consideration (Rodrik, 2007). Assembling can also be approached as a practice: the ongoing labour of bringing disparate elements together. The 'practices of assemblage' (Li, 2007: 263) allows for a processual interpretation of institutions which articulate political-economic and cultural-political milieux (Rankin, 2008).

However, this paper demonstrate that beyond system and assemblage theories, development actors face contingency and instability that make situations fluid and difficult to grasp with the fit-in-context approach (see also Vargas-Cetina, 2005). Our case study of rural development in the global south is situated in such an unstable situation, involving cooperation in forestry development with the Yuracaré people in Bolivia. Our case study points to the need to grasp intermingling and *con-fusión*.[4] It calls for a third and fundamentally new approach to rural development: go-with-the-flow.

1.1. Conceptual framework

The research departs from the practice of introducing external solutions for local problems. This practice is premised on distance and detachment, not unlike conventional science. From the outsider's position a 'striated space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 399) is created that is instrumental to fixing conceptual boundaries, stable patterns, universality and predictability (Jensen and Rödje,

2010). Within development cooperation the striated space is initially shaped as a world divided in modern, developed countries and traditional underdeveloped countries. Development is seen as the transfer of capital, knowledge and technology from developed to underdeveloped countries. The transfers are either separate entities (capital or a technological innovation) or seamless totalities (systems). In the latter, the seamless wholes, the relations between entities are obligatory and essential to create an internal coherence and external boundary. DeLanda (2006: 10) describes these arrangements as 'relations of interiority'.

In rural development the already existing obligatory relations are affected by capital and technology transfers. In the developed world entities are lifted out of their context. Such decontextualization fractures reality and changes entities into fragments. These fragments possess an openness of possibilities for external connections with other fragments in the underdeveloped world where they are inserted. Through such recontextualization the fragments form wholes that often lack internal coherence. These assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) lack 'relations of interiority' and instead have loose 'relations of exteriority' (DeLanda, 2006: 11). Thus, processes of de- and recontextualization can change bounded entities into fragments and transform totalities into assemblages. Decontextualization is often incomplete since historical legacies, imprints and design principles stick to the fragments. During the process of de- and recontextualization these imprints travel along with the fragment as memories, embodiments, experience, etc. This is a source of unexpected transfer spin-offs and high levels of contingency.

In the specific case of forestry cooperation with the Yuracaré in Bolivia, discussed in this paper, it is argued that intermingling of fragments occurred. The intermingling is a different type of relation than the relation of interiority or exteriority. The field research findings led us to take Deleuzian philosophy beyond DeLanda's assemblage theory. The conceptual framework elaborated here builds on the concepts of fluidity, viscosity and intermingling mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari.[5] Under particular circumstances fragments connect with the context in such a way that they become co-constituted.[6] This co-actualisation of fragment and context blurs the boundary between them.[7] The conventional dualism of entity-context disappears. Fragments are thus not only interconnected or interwoven but also intermingled into a larger entirety (the Deleuzian immanence). Such a singular entirety has many fragments of multiple dimensions (material, social, political, etc.). This 'one, many and multiple' is what we call a multity. A multity is an internally fragmented and intermingled substance. An example of a multity is the Yuracaré territory in Bolivia. It is internally fragmented unit but with unclear, blurred boundaries. In various localities the sub-divisions overlap or intermingle. They cannot be neatly traced because they do not form part of a State geometry but of a 'primitive geometry' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 233). The divisions cannot be represented by lines on a map but seem more like Deleuzian 'lines of flight': they are a direction of escape.

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[4] *Con-fusión* is both 'confused' (see Boelens, 2008) and 'with fusion', referring to fluidity.

[5] Viscosity is mentioned in Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 4). This entry into Deleuzian thought is also taken by Ingold (2009).

[6] See Latour (2005) for a similar co-constitution of actor and network in actor-network-theory.

[7] Conventionally context is constructed as an external, separated phenomenon. It might take the form of a constraining structure or enabling environment. Another form of constructing context include pushing chaos to the margin of the context, thus making entities clear, legible, and open for scrutiny (Law and Mol, 2002). Context can also be constructed by grouping all entities which are 'other' or deviant and defer them to the context (see Latour, 2005).