



Using the rural web in dialogue with regional stakeholders



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A B S T R A C T

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Globalization transforms rural places through different ways, resulting in a newly differentiated countryside. Some regions appear to be more successful than others in reacting to the opportunities and threats that accompany these globalization processes. These change processes also resulted in the need for new theoretical frameworks, tackling the nature, dynamics and heterogeneity of rural development processes. The rural web (van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008) is one of these new comprehensive theoretical frameworks on rural development. The web not only offers a tool for comparative analysis of different development paths both within and between regions, it can also be used as a diagnostic tool for exploring the potentials and limits of rural development patterns.

It is within this context of a changing and globalizing countryside that the Social Sciences Unit of ILVO was approached by the coordinators of two LEADER-areas in Flanders. They wanted to take the bottom-up philosophy of LEADER a step further and wanted to involve local actors in writing the Local Development Strategy (LDS). The LEADER-coordinators were however faced with a lack of engagement techniques and tools to facilitate the dialogue with the local community. Therefore we explored the possibilities of using the rural web, not only as an analytical tool, but also as a mobilizing tool that can actively engage actors in reflecting on the development of their region. Based on a case-study research in two regions in Flanders we believe that we succeeded in adding an innovative applicability of the web. If certain preconditions are met, it lives up to the expectation of enriching the dialogue with regional actors. Furthermore, it can enable local actors to assess the state of their own region and to position it within a broader picture of changing rural areas.

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1. Introduction

The common trend of economic decline of agriculture and other land-based industries within rural economies has resulted in increased questioning of the appropriateness of sectoral agricultural policies (Wiskerke, 2009). These policies were principally aimed at supporting agricultural production and incomes through subsidies, as a means of promoting wider rural economic development (Ward and Brown, 2009). The key actors were the national governments and farmers. However, in the last decades, new actors with multiple demands and preferences for the countryside have entered rural areas (Dessein et al., 2013; Horlings, 2010; Kerselaers et al., 2011). These new actors demand, for example, the preservation of environmental quality and cultural landscapes, possibilities for leisure and recreation and regional food supply. These

major changes within rural areas have urged both the European and national political levels to rethink rural development policy (Shucksmith, 2010), resulting in a shift towards a new rural paradigm (OECD, 2006). There is a growing trend towards bottom-up approaches, characterized by a decentralized style of policy making (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Hermans et al., 2011; Pike et al., 2006). Several authors have described the shift from government to governance (Pike et al., 2006; Shucksmith, 2010). However, this shift from a steering government to a more enabling one does not come about naturally. As Gedikli (2009) states, local authorities or agencies often lack adequate resources, professional skills and equipment to perform decentralized functions.

This shift to a new rural paradigm and decentralization coincides with globalization processes, which are also reshaping rural localities worldwide, resulting in entwined ties and interdependencies between different rural areas (Woods, 2007). Globalization transforms rural places in different ways, resulting in a newly differentiated countryside. Some regions appear to be more successful than others in reacting to the opportunities and threats accompanying these globalization processes. In this respect, some

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rural areas are under threat and face the prospect of becoming interchangeable and losing their regional identity in the globalizing economy (Simon et al., 2010), and are referred to as ‘cold-spots’ of development. Other regions however are performing well and manage to seize new opportunities arising from globalization and are thus referred to as ‘hot-spots’ of development (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; Wiskerke, 2009). Moreover, urbanization processes also affect rural areas, resulting in population migration and changing economic activities (Copus et al., 2007). The new urban demands offer new rural supply possibilities and new rural–urban relations are constructed. How every region responds to urbanization and globalization and organizes its development depends on the learning capacities of the regional actors (Wellbrock et al., 2012). Wellbrock et al. (2012) thus regard regional learning processes as a very important aspect of regional development. They define regional learning as a process in which regional actors engage in collaboration and coordination for mutual benefit. Three simultaneous and intertwined facets characterize a successful process of regional learning. A first condition is that the activities and projects have to be initiated by the regional actors themselves. Secondly, the public administration needs to take on a supporting role. Finally, knowledge support structures need to facilitate and support the process of regional learning.

1.1. The rural web

The aforementioned change processes affecting rural development policy have also resulted in the need for new theoretical frameworks, tackling the nature, dynamics and heterogeneity of rural development processes. This need was expressed both by social scientists as well as policy makers (OECD, 2006; van der Ploeg et al., 2000; van der Ploeg et al., 2008). Over the last ten or fifteen years there has been an important shift in rural studies. Previously these studies mainly involved a simplification of the overall complexity of rural systems. Such simplification was needed to enable a focus on the overarching objective of maximizing profits within a productivist model (Ventura et al., 2008). This approach is however increasingly seen as inadequate, due to two main factors. Firstly, there is an increased awareness of the shortcomings of the modernization paradigm (Ventura et al., 2008; Woods, 2005). Secondly, theoretical advances and empirical evidence have given scholars a new motivation to reconceptualize rural development and link rural development strategies to issues such as equity, sustainability and social justice (van der Ploeg et al., 2008).

The rural web can be considered as one of these new comprehensive theoretical frameworks on rural development. It is based on practice, theory and policy (van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). According to van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008), regionalized rural development is grounded in and driven by complex sets of internally and externally generated interrelationships and interactions, which shape the relative attractiveness and competitiveness of rural spaces economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. This is what van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008) have called the *unfolding rural web*, whereby both the density and the quality of internal and external interactions of different rural spaces affect the pathways and velocity of rural development trajectories. From an empirical point of view, a rural web is composed by the interrelations, interactions, encounters and mutualities that exist between actors, resources, activities, sectors and places within rural areas (Ventura et al., 2008). From a theoretical point of view, this same web emerges as the intersection of six dimensions: endogeneity, novelty, social capital, market governance, new institutional arrangements and sustainability (Table 1). The six dimensions describe the regionally available social and natural resources and the specific ways in which these are combined and developed.

Table 1
Rural web dimensions (Marsden, 2010).

Dimension	Definition
Endogeneity	The degree to which rural economies are (i) built upon local resources, (ii) organized according to local models of resource combination, and (iii) strengthened through the distribution and reinvestment of produced wealth within the local/regional constellation
Novelty	New insights, practices, artefacts and/or combinations (of resources, technological procedures, bodies of knowledge, etc.) that carry the promise that specific constellations function better
Social capital	The ability of individuals, groups, organizations or institutions to engage in networks, cooperate and employ social relations for common purpose and benefit
Market governance	Institutional capacities to control and strengthen existing markets and/or to construct new ones
New institutional arrangements	New institutional constellations that solve coordination problems and support cooperation among rural actors
Sustainability	Territorially based development that redefines nature by re-emphasizing food production and agro-ecology and that reasserts the socio-environmental role of agriculture as a major agent in sustaining rural economies and cultures

Together, the six dimensions allow for a comprehensive description, representation and understanding of the constellations explored. Rural development proceeds as an unfolding and further strengthening of the rural web.

The concept of the rural web was introduced by van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008), based on the European FP6 ETUDE project, which has documented, described and analyzed over 60 empirical case studies in order to explore the variety of rural webs and to ‘test and load’ the theoretical model (van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). Their extensive empirical work and analysis has shown that the six dimensions are relevant and exhaustive and allow for a comprehensive and descriptive representation and understanding of regional rural development. The model as a whole helps to identify missing links in the building of new rural development trajectories (Ventura et al., 2008).

In their book ‘Networking the rural’, Milone and Ventura (2010) have elaborated further on the concept rural web and described their methodology for drawing up rural webs. The proposed methodology consists of two steps (Milone et al., 2010). The first step involves an extensive description of the studied areas through an analysis of structural characteristics defined by seven different types of capital and their dynamics: environmental, economic, human, cultural, social, institutional and symbolic capital (Milone et al., 2010). A combination of qualitative, quantitative, primary and secondary data is used for this description of the area. In the second step, the data from the first step are interpreted in order to compose the rural web configuration and its dynamics. Empirical evidence for every dimension of the rural web is collected. This evidence serves as a basis for the description of how different domains impact each other and it results in the development of the configuration of the rural web. Marsden (2010) and Horlings and Marsden (2012) have also used the analytical framework to assess the role of relocalization of agri-food in the rural web and to identify different eco-economic pathways within the dimension market governance.

Previous research on the rural web has proven that the concept of the rural web helps to consolidate the large body of theoretical and empirical work on rural matters within a comprehensive framework. The rural web concept provides 1) an approach to

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