



Redefining rural prosperity through social learning in the cooperative sector: 25 years of experience from organic agriculture in Spain



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 July 2015

Received in revised form 11 January 2016

Accepted 1 February 2016

Keywords:

Cooperative
Organic farming
Rural prosperity
Social learning
Knowledge

ABSTRACT

In the political system and in public perception, the well-functioning of economy is frequently equalled to the output of the national economic system. However, during the last decades, this narrow conception of economic prosperity started to erode. This paper is based on a rural prosperity conceptual framework that takes into account the systemic nature and dynamics of interactions and impacts within rural systems through the analysis of an organic agriculture cooperative called Camposeven in the south east of Spain. The focus is on rural prosperity, differences in understanding, related parameters and strategies used by the cooperative's farming partners to success without following the traditional conventions of economic growth and farm-efficiency. Experience lessons in this paper demonstrate that the "technical-economic" approach of rural prosperity is not sufficient and results emphasize the important role of individuals' behaviour as well as the contexts in which they are involved. The findings point to the increasing relevance of expanding both the theory and practice of rural prosperity approaches in sustainable rural development. This is important in order to enrich the connections between rural prosperity and other concepts such as social capital, innovation, social learning and resilience.

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1. Introduction

Conventionally, the concepts of prosperity and wellbeing have been strongly linked to economic activities, and consequently, growth has been traditionally measured through the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), i.e., based on increasing material throughput. However, growth of output does not accurately represent the growth of human welfare as GDP counts only goods and services that are traded in the market or have prices attached (Baumol et al., 2007; Darnhofer et al., 2014a,b). As it fails to account for non-market services (such as household and voluntary labor), negative externalities (environmental degradation) and for changes in the asset base which affect our consumption possibilities, the widespread use of GDP as a key indicator of prosperity has been widely criticized (Stiglitz et al., 2009). According to Stiglitz et al. (2009), GDP neither outlines how income and wealth are distributed among people. Undeniably, a type of prosperity that is founded on ecological destruction and persistent social injustice is not a foundation for a civilized society (Jackson and Anderson, 2009).

As a consequence, since the 1970s, a reformulation process of the key concepts was initiated and alternative definitions and measurement techniques for progress were developed. For example, Jackson (2009: 44) points out that in a world of limits, certain kinds of freedoms are immoral e.g., the freedom to endlessly accumulate material goods at the expense of child labor. His point is thus to aim for fair and lasting prosperity. Jackson (2009: 37) builds on the three understandings of prosperity elaborated by Sen (1984): Prosperity as opulence, this corresponds to the conventional understanding that prosperity is about material satisfaction; Prosperity as utility, recognizing that – given a diminishing marginal utility of goods – 'more is not always better'; and Prosperity as capabilities for flourishing, the capability (or freedom to) function in a context (Sardar, 2007; Rapp, 2008). The Sustainable Development Commission has also developed a new understanding of prosperity (SDC, 2003; Kasser, 2007; Wall, 2008; SDC, 2009). The report by the Commission Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi recognizes that well-being has to do with both economic resources, such as income, and with non-economic aspects of peoples' life. The Commission recommends taking into account eight different dimensions which are also considered by the various alternative indicators that aim at measuring economic progress and that have been created so that economies can reach long-term prosperity, some examples of these indicators are: (1) Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) which build on Daly's and

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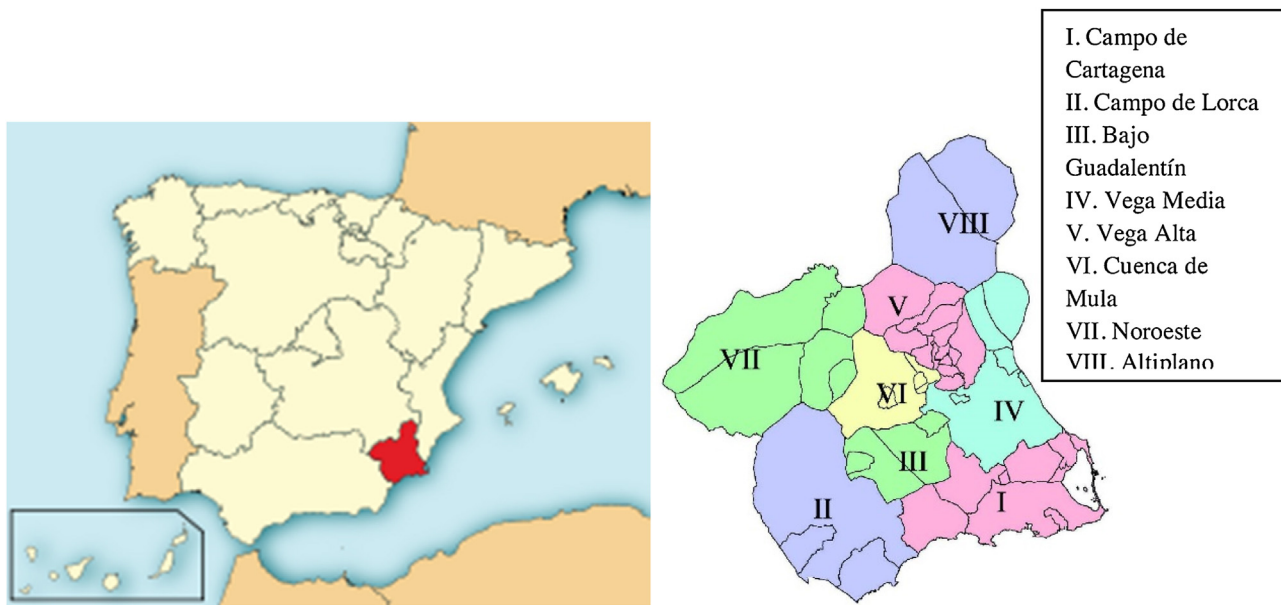


Fig. 1. The study area.

Cobb's Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, (Daly et al., 1989) starts with GDP but adds factors like income distribution, volunteer work, leisure, education and subtracts factors such as environmental degradation and crime. It is currently used by the Government of Maryland (USA); and (2) the Legatum Prosperity Index based on the measurement of eight pillars: economy, entrepreneurship and opportunity, governance, education, health, safety and security, personal freedom and social capital.

All of the above indicators measure well-being at the national level, but indicators that specifically measure prosperity in rural areas have not yet been created. Rural areas are the main sustention of urban spots and therefore the guarantors of national prosperity. Van der Ploeg et al. (2008) point out that quality of life in rural areas is linked to a social life characterized by networks, shared norms and expectations that promote interactions and create a "sense of belonging". It can therefore be said that social capital is one of the most important determinants of prosperity. The term 'social capital' encompasses factors such as social cohesion and engagement, as well as community and family networks (Legatum Institute, 2013). Rural areas should search for models where people could thrive and find well-being ecologically sustainable with regulated markets that promote prosperity (SDC, 2003). Kasser (2007) and Jackson (2009) believe this vision of prosperity is much more complete than the materialistic one that has been used so far, and it could lead to qualitative development instead of quantitative growth (Daly, 2008).

Understanding prosperity this new way implies recognition that economic growth at regional level and economic efficiency at farm-level are not proper signs of prosperity in rural areas. Therefore, large specialized farms should no longer be the unquestioned ideal. Small farms can be linked with beautiful landscapes, based on small-scale, low intensity, environmentally-friendly farming (Darnhofer et al., 2014a,b). Shucksmith and Rønningen (2011) highlight the fact that small farms can present a support upon which rural households can sustain their livelihoods through activity diversification and maintaining the population in areas that without them would have been undoubtedly lost. Activity diversification has been proven to be essential for a rural area to be prosperous and resilient. There are new activities and concerns, hi-tech agriculture is in crisis as surplus activity, rural areas are no longer seen as a space designated for production enhancing

environmental conservation values which become the subject of political concern. The reappraisal of the "rural" concepts makes separation between town and countryside less marked (Wilkinson, 1982); with a more diverse relationship that includes new activities and changes. The rural environment is configured as poly functional space; not only productive but also recreational, residential and for conservation or environmental protection. In most developed societies, rural prosperity is not as simply as industrialization. New urban-rural relationships (Sibley, 1995), residential decentralization processes (Clark, 1982), spatial dispersion of the industry and services to the countryside (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993) came from this process of change.

Since the rediscovery of new forms of action, there is also a rethinking of matters regarding man-nature relationships that arise as a green claim (Ramos, 1993) against the traditional visions of prosperity (WCED, 1987). In this context, ecological agriculture has in the last few years become an important source of income and a way to diversify activities (Turinek et al., 2009; Kastner et al., 2012). Both organic and biodynamic agriculture can be described as production systems whose processes allow obtaining natural and healthy food (Steiner, 1924; Turinek et al., 2009; USDA, 2014). These two production systems respect the environment, protect biodiversity, provide for a beautiful landscape, use resources more efficiently and protect cultural heritage (Scialabba and Hattom, 2003; Wood et al., 2006; Turinek et al., 2009). Due to the holistic, diverse and distinctive nature of ecological agriculture (Jackson, 1980; Ikerd, 1993; Pretty, 2008) it requires of new forms of knowledge and learning that integrate social and environmental values (Curry and Kirwan, 2014; Pretty, 1995; Kloppenburg, 1991), as well as a diversity of knowledge sources and learning forms that are crucial for adaptive learning processes, and therefore essential to build resilience and prosperity (Berkes, 2007). According to Friedmann (1993) the "common action" occurs through social learning planning in a community by retaining the memory and continuity of actions to carry them out through dialog, teamwork, community projects and other means (Fig. 1).

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to analyse how a small farm cooperative that uses both biodynamic and organic production systems, is able to be prosperous without following the traditional conventions of economic growth and farm-efficiency. Both the evolution process of the cooperative – 30 years of expe-

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