



Sustainable development and policies in rural regions; insights from the Shetland Islands



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ABSTRACT

To address rural diversity, a place-based approach to sustainable development becomes more relevant. Place-based approaches to development are said to strengthen the resilience of rural areas against global pressures by decreasing state dependencies and increasing the economic competitiveness of rural areas. How can such place-based trajectories be analysed and understood in the context of European rural regions? On the basis of empirical research undertaken in 2008 and 2010 as well as (updated) data since then, this paper traces the rural changes in time on the Shetland Islands in the UK.

We have applied the model of the rural web as an analytical tool. While the web has been used to 'picture' the interactions between domains of the web at a specific and static moment in time, we test if the rural web can be used to analyse changing rural relations over time, thus capturing rural dynamics and describing varied development trajectories. The case of the Shetlands Island illustrates such competing development trajectories, expressed in conflicts over land use, the branding strategy and its contested policies towards a large wind energy project. Our hypothesis is that in Shetland we can witness elements of bio- and eco-economic development trajectories, each underpinning an alternative model for economic growth and sustainable development. These trajectories frame notions of place, space and time in different ways.

The central question addressed in this paper is: how can the rural web be applied to analyse rural dynamics and development trajectories, in the empirical case of the Shetlands Islands?

The process of unfolding of the rural web in Shetland indicates dependence on its place-based specificities, resting on a complex interplay between the agency of individual and institutional actors as well as wider structural conditions and pressures. The outcome of the unfolding of this web may be implicated in the development of an eco-economy. On the other hand, the planned new large wind farm has led to contestation over the future development trajectory of Shetland; this can be considered as an ambitious bio-economic project to substitute for oil as a large-scale corporate-led investment.

The web as a framework for retrospective and comparative analysis has enabled us to study the ongoing change Shetland has undergone from a "peripheral", "clientelist countryside" to a "segmented area", characterised by a unique and shifting configuration of rural development domains. The web, used in the manner attempted here, highlights the dynamism and captures the multidimensionality inherent in rural development processes. The findings can inform the debate on how to achieve an effective interplay between agency and institutions, and balance 'bottom-up' versus 'top-down' approaches to development.

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1. Introduction

In a world of globalisation, new complex relations are emerging in rural regions. Many studies see globalisation as an overwhelming and dominant structuring process and as a hegemonic force. This approach force can be witnessed in the conceptualization of places as competing for global resources and capital (See Pike et al., 2006; Armstrong and Taylor, 2000; p. 886).

Bristow argues that this “place-less” discourse, lacks sensitivity to critical issues of context and place (Bristow, 2010) and the interdependencies between places. It also leads to an emphasis upon a relatively narrow route to regional prosperity, downplaying the potential for growth and development to be achieved through more diverse avenues (Bristow, 2005, 2010). However, the global countryside is not a uniform, homogeneous space but rather is differentially articulated and contested through particular rural places. In this sense, globalization cannot be considered as a linear narrative. For example the reconstitution of rural places under globalization must be understood as involving hybrid interactions at different levels (Woods, 2007). Hybridization mingles the local and the extra-local; places can then be seen as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings (Massey, 1991). Furthermore, the countryside can be considered as a hybrid of the human and the non-human (Woods, 2007 citing Murdoch, 2003, 2006). Actors at the local level reproduce and transform the global countryside through their meaningful conduct, either intentionally or unintentionally. It is through this dialectical relationship that transformation takes place (Pacione, 2005). Therefore globalization does not merely lead to uneven economic development of places, marginalization and homogenization of culture, but also elicits different responses, leading to “territories of differences” (Escobar, 2008) including different forms of economy operating in any given space (Gibson-Graham, 2008) as alternatives to the dominant development model of modernization. Rural places are unique compositions, not only an ongoing mix of traces that are purely local and non-local but also influenced by traces of the past (Anderson, 2010).

So the message is that globalization transforms rural areas in different ways, creating heterogeneity between and within rural regions. Coinciding with these processes there is a shift in rural policies towards bottom-up approaches and policies, characterized by a de-centralised style of policy making and a shift from government to governance (Dragan and Schucksmith, 2008; Hermans et al., 2008; Pike et al., 2006; Horlings, 2011; Hermans et al., 2008; Pike et al., 2006; Horlings, 2011).

This creates challenges for local and regional governments to facilitate development trajectories in co-production with stakeholders. How to do this in a ‘place-based’ manner, acknowledging and using place-based assets? The OECD sees the emergence of a new rural paradigm which includes a new, multi-sector, place-based approach to rural development (OECD, 2006). This paradigm claims a need for closer inter linkages between the rural and urban economy, and to see rural development as a close interplay with regional development more generally. Key elements are the valorisation of local assets, a shift from subsidy-driven development to more variable development through investments, the exploitation and valorisation of hitherto unused resources. This rural paradigm illustrates the increasing attention for place-based development as the basis of an area’s economic activity and livelihood.

Place-based trajectories become increasingly favoured as the European policy goals for 2020 on smart, inclusive and sustainable development and the EU policy on territorial development show, paying attention to the development potential of areas ‘from within’ (EU, 2007; EC, 2010). The OECD (2009) report ‘Regions Matter’ for example stresses the individual characteristics of regions and their place specificity and proposes to go beyond the ‘one-size-fits-all’ development approaches. According to OECD (2011) policy actions are needed that not only take spatial context into account intentionally and explicitly, but apply a combination of endogenous and exogenous forces whereby the exogenous action being needed to bring knowledge and values from “outside” the area, governed through appropriate multi-level governance tools to smooth cooperation between endogenous and exogenous forces.

Development trajectories ‘from within’ become more relevant, because rural places now face “wicked” problems of sustainability and challenges in the arenas of climate, energy, food, migration and poverty. These challenges are becoming more interconnected, unfolding in places and can lead to controversies and contestation over land-use, for example in the context of the search of new rural sites for renewable energy production as this paper will illustrate.

How can the heterogeneity of rural regions, different development trajectories and the consequences for land use and policies be analysed and understood in the light of the current sustainability challenges? On the basis of empirical research undertaken in 2008 and 2010, and more recent data (collected till 2015), such as policy documents, this paper traces development trajectories of the Shetland Islands in Scotland.

In order to analyse development trajectories and the consequences for land use and policies we have applied the model of the rural web (Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). Our aim is to test this theoretical model as a tool to analyse development trajectories through the empirical case study of the Shetland Islands. The rural web, based on practice, theory and policy (Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008) has been developed as response to the need for new theoretical frameworks, tackling the nature, dynamics and heterogeneity of rural processes, in the light of an increasing awareness of the shortcomings of the modernisation paradigm (Messely et al., 2013; Woods, 2005). According to Van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008) regionalised rural development is grounded and driven by complex sets of externally generated interrelationships and interactions, which shape the relative attractiveness and competitiveness of rural spaces economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. The *unfolding* of the rural web refers to both the density and the quality of internal and external interactions of different rural spaces affect the pathways and velocity of rural development trajectories. An assumption is that the unfolding of the web leads more ‘place-based’ development trajectories as endogeneity and place-based assets are important elements within the web.

Previous research on the rural web (see e.g. Marsden, 2010; Milone and Ventua, 2010; Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008; Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008) has shown that the concept (1) provides an approach to sustainable rural development; (2) a tool for comparative analysis of different development paths both within and between regions, (3) a diagnostic tool for exploring the potential and limits of rural development patterns (Messely et al., 2013).

While the web has been used to ‘picture’ the interactions between domains of the web at a specific and static moment in time, we want to test if the rural web can be used to analyse changing rural relations over time, thus capturing rural dynamics and describing varied development trajectories. The case of the Shetlands Island illustrates such competing development trajectories, expressed in conflicts over land use, the branding strategy and its contested policies towards a large wind energy project.

Our hypothesis is that in Shetland we can witness elements of *bio- and eco-economic development trajectories* for sustainable rural regional literature, each underpinning an alternative model for economic growth and sustainable development (Marsden, 2010), but framing notions of place, space and time in different ways (Horlings and Marsden, 2011, 2014). It is suggested in literature that the eco-economy is more place-based. It does not result in a net depletion of resources, but instead can provide cumulative net benefits that add value to rural and regional spaces in both ecological and economic ways (Kitchen and Marsden, 2009; Marsden, 2010). However, there is still limited academic work on how the eco- and bio-economy emerge and evolve as a regional rural development trajectory. This paper therefore wants to contribute to the debate and apply these notions in an empirical setting. Our assumption is that such insights in bio- and eco-economic development trajectories are particularly

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