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How to visualise the invisible: Revealing re-use of rural buildings by non-agricultural entrepreneurs in the region of Roeselare–Tielt (Belgium)

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ABSTRACT

Peri-urban rural areas are undergoing profound change in many regions, including the northern region of Belgium, Flanders. One driving force is the gradual conversion from an agriculturally based economy to a much more diverse economic base. Re-use of rural buildings by nonagricultural entrepreneurs is a part of this economic diversification. This re-use is changing not only the rural economy but also the social structure and spatial and environmental quality. However, re-use of rural buildings is chronically and severely underestimated. In most cases these activities are prohibited by spatial legislation, which results in their exclusion from census data. Standard methods based on measuring land use change do not measure this transformation either, as these new activities do not necessarily lead to a change in land use.

This paper presents a survey method for describing and quantifying this hidden re-use of rural buildings by non-agricultural entrepreneurs. Several datasets were combined in a GIS environment. This led to an inventory which was further refined by confirming the knowledge of local civil officers and local authorities. Field visits provided final confirmation of the data. A case study using this survey method gave profound quantitative insights in the re-use dynamic for the region of Roeselare–Tielt in the north western part of Belgium. In the rural areas of this region, 1015 addresses were detected housing a non-agricultural activity. Further information was gained about the type and the age of the detected activity and the type of building in which these activities are taking place. The most common activities are (building) contractors, trade or commercial companies, landscapers, transport and woodworking companies. Furthermore, 35% of all detected enterprises are located in (former) farm buildings.

These results then formed the starting point for individual interviews and focus group discussions on the current policy on this non-agricultural dynamic. Studying the re-use dynamic in the rural areas of the north western part of Belgium (Flanders), provides further knowledge on the economic diversification of rural areas under high urbanisation pressure. The results also illustrate that the current policy lacks both data and efficiency. A clear discrepancy was found between the legal rules, spatial reality and the policy attitude towards the reported illegal non-agricultural economic dynamic. We call for increased awareness of the non-agricultural re-use of rural buildings, given the effect on future spatial planning.

Introduction

The re-use of farm buildings

Since the 1950s, European rural areas have been undergoing profound change. This transformation is due to general processes, such as globalisation of activities and decision-making, the urbanisation of rural areas (Antrop, 2004; Bürgi et al., 2004; Schneeberger et al., 2007; Hersperger and Bürgi, 2009), demographic change (Verburg et al., 2009), and specific processes in the agricultural sector such as scale enlargement, farm rationalisation and diversification (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; van der Vaart, 2005).

Specially for the strongly urbanised and densely populated peri-urban rural areas, one major driving force is the gradual conversion from an agriculturally based economy to a much more diverse economic base. Here, the importance of the agricultural sector has been partly replaced by other enterprises and consumption functions such as residence and recreation (Busck et al., 2008). As a consequence, rural areas especially those in peri-urban areas, now harbour an increasing number of functions, including

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residence, recreation, forestry and nature conservation, as well as non-agricultural activities (Fry, 2001; Kristensen et al., 2004; Kerselaers et al., 2011).

This functional and economic transformation not only changes the rural economic and social structure (Daalhuizen et al., 2003) but also changes biodiversity and natural resources (Reger et al., 2007; Purvis et al., 2009), the landscape functions (van der Vaart, 2005; Busck et al., 2008; Van Eetvelde and Antrop, 2009), and the spatial and environmental quality (Busck et al., 2008; Purvis et al., 2009). Although economic diversification is argued to be a driving force in the transformation of rural areas, reliable data is lacking and knowledge of its drivers and specific manifestations is limited.

The "spatial reality" of economic diversification is underestimated. Because of this, it is either insufficiently represented in the discourse about rural spatial planning and policymaking, or it is completely neglected. Bomans et al. (2010) argue that underestimated transformations are the result of a vicious circle, in which "spatial planning does not incorporate transformations that are difficult to measure and since they are not incorporated into policy, those transformations are not measured". Activities not related to the customary functions of the countryside (i.e., agriculture) are prohibited in most countries according to the official spatial planning policy. This leads to assignation of illegal status to existing non-agricultural activities, even though they take place in legally built rural buildings. Standard methods based on measuring land use change within conventional categories and sectoral census data are inadequate to describe these activities in existing rural buildings, since these new activities do not necessarily decrease land use for agriculture and other traditional categories such as nature. Instead, these activities are more related to economic and landscape features.

The illegal status of these non-agricultural activities further complicates their recording (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; van der Vaart, 2005; Bomans et al., 2010). The resulting inability to fully understand the economic diversification of rural areas is hampering planning and the design of sustainable strategies for rural areas (Antrop, 2004; Schneeberger et al., 2007; Hersperger and Bürgi, 2009).

This research illustrates the trend towards economic diversification using a case study on the re-use of rural (farm) buildings by non-agricultural activities. The average farm size is increasing all over Europe while the number of active farms is decreasing (van der Vaart, 2005; Fuentes et al., 2010; Calus et al., 2008; Candura et al., 2008; Vandermeulen et al., 2009; Dal Sasso and Caliandro, 2010). A direct consequence is that many traditional rural (farm) buildings lose their original agricultural function and become redundant for the agricultural sector. Literature shows that areas under urbanisation and population pressure (The Netherlands: Daalhuizen et al., 2003; van der Vaart, 2005; Denmark: Busck et al., 2008) as well as more depopulated areas (Spain: Fuentes et al., 2010; Garcia and Ayuga, 2007; Italy: Dal Sasso and Caliandro, 2010; Candura et al., 2008) can be recognised by an outfall of traditional rural (farm) buildings from the agricultural production system. This dynamic leads to an overabundance of vacant buildings and the need for new legal function allocations appropriate to the rural context. But the re-use dynamic differs strongly from region to region. In depopulated areas, the main concern is to avoid long-lasting abandonment and deterioration. In densely populated areas with competing spatial demands, the need is mostly to prohibit unwanted new use of the disused buildings. In these highly urbanised rural areas, the re-use dynamic can be described as an autonomous process of hidden urbanisation (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; van der Vaart, 2005; Busck et al., 2008). Studying the re-use dynamic in the rural areas of the northern part of Belgium (Flanders) will provide further knowledge on the economic diversification of rural areas under high urbanisation pressure (Van Eetvelde and Antrop, 2009; Vandermeulen et al., 2009). Furthermore, the case study area, which is situated in the western part of the highly urbanised region of Flanders, comprises the existing diversity between more and less urbanised rural areas (Cabus and Vanhaverbeke, 2003). As mentioned above, the lack of reliable data and the difficulty of measuring this non-agricultural dynamic are common knowledge. Official statistics on vacant buildings and the comparison of the statistics of active farming businesses at different times should be the appropriate information source to detect sites with a new non-agricultural economic activity (Daalhuizen et al., 2003; van der Vaart, 2005; Fuentes, 2010; Candura et al., 2008; Dal Sasso and Caliandro, 2010). However, official census programmes only result in limited (scientific and political) knowledge and an incomplete overview. So far only explorative case studies have illustrated some qualitative aspects, but they do not provide a coherent overview of the magnitude, frequency and speed of the non-agricultural dynamic in rural areas.

This study started from the hypothesis that the highly urbanised rural areas of Flanders, can be characterised by a non-agricultural re-use dynamic of rural buildings. The study has two goals: (i) to develop a new measuring tool for describing and quantifying this thus far invisible non-agricultural transformation and (ii) to illustrate this transformation based on a case study that detects the policy challenges as well as opportunities. This paper will answer the following questions: *How does one identify (on a regional scale) new economic activities in former rural buildings? Are rural buildings in Flanders becoming vacant, abandoned and dilapidated? Is there re-use/recovery of rural buildings in Flanders? How widespread is current re-use? How do public authorities look at this phenomenon of re-use? What are opportunities for future sustainable strategies?*

First, our survey method offers a practical tool for measuring the magnitude, the frequency and the speed of the non-agricultural activities in rural areas. Second, an in-depth analysis using the survey method in the region of Roeselare–Tielt in Flanders (Belgium) gives profound quantitative insights into this hidden and little-known dynamic. These results then form the starting point for individual interviews and focus group discussions with local authorities, civil officers and spatial planners on the current policy on this non-agricultural dynamic. Last, the results illustrate where the current policy lacks efficiency and identifies stumbling blocks and options for future policy strategies concerning the economic diversification of rural areas.

Methodology

The study area

Given that this project was commissioned by the Regional Economic and Social Committee (RESOC) of Midwest Flanders, the study area was defined as their working field, i.e., the two districts of Roeselare and Tielt located in the province of West Flanders. The municipality of Wingene was the pilot area used to develop the survey methodology of this study.

This study area consisted of 17 municipalities (605 km^2), with an average population density of 387 inhabitants/km^2. The existing diversity between more urbanised and more remote rural areas, within the highly urbanised region of Flanders, is reflected in this study area. The northern district (Tielt) has a low population density (271 inhabitants/km^2) whereas the southern district (Roeselare) has a higher population density (528 inhabitants/km^2). Roeselare is more densely populated than both the Flemish average (456 inhabitants/km^2) and Belgian average (349 inhabitants/km^2), whereas Tielt is less densely populated than the Flemish and