

# THE NEW PARADIGM OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RECONCEPTUALIZATION USING THE ‘RURAL WEB’

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the traditional paradigm of modernization, which took an exogenous, sectorial approach to developing rural areas, has been replaced by a new rural development paradigm of a more local, endogenous, integrated nature. The objective of the present article is to present a theory-based reflection on this new paradigm of rural development, with the goal of shedding a little light on the seemingly endless debate about the meaning and implications of rural development.

Our methodology is based on a thorough review and synthesis of the most relevant literature on these new concepts of rural development, from which we developed a critical assessment of existing theory, highlighting the need to consolidate new theoretical frameworks such as the ‘rural web’ (van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). Finally, emphasizing the need to complement the theory behind the new rural development paradigm with new definitions that help us to more precisely understand what is meant by rural development, we offer a new definition of *rural development* as a necessary step in that direction.

## II. THE ORIGIN OF THE NEW PARADIGM OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

After World War II, the accepted approach to development rested on the idea of modernization, by which all societies evolve from an irrational, technologically limited state to a rational, technologically advanced state. Urban centres were seen as magnetic poles for growth, while rural areas were considered backward territories with a sole focus on production. Therefore, the focus of rural development had an exogenous orientation; modernity had to be brought out from the city to the countryside and, more specifically, to the agricultural

sector (Ward et al., 2005). Agrarian productivism, characterized by the mechanization and industrialization of agricultural processes, had major environmental, economic and social impact, and despite an effort to promote the agricultural specialization of rural areas, eventually caused the decline of the sector (Woods, 2011).

After the 1960s, the first critical voices began to be heard, challenging the paradigm of modernization and the related exogenous policies on development that focused exclusively on economic aspects. Soon after, the economic crisis of the 1970s revealed that regional policies developed from a centralized perspective with a zeal for modernization were unable to generate sustainable development in peripheral regions. As a result, the idea of territorial development began to emerge, taking a more local perspective that focused more on people than on productivism. Slowly, the concept that had been associated with *economic growth* began to acquire a qualitative dimension that paid attention to the nature, quality and sustainability of that growth (Pike et al., 2007). Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 1992 and the creation and implementation of the European Community's LEADER initiative had an important role in consolidating this new way of thinking about and confronting development in rural areas. Sectorial focus was abandoned in favour of new crosscutting approaches that allowed researchers to make progress toward the target objective of territorial cohesion (Barke and Newton, 1997).

The three main characteristics of this new focus are the use of resources available within the territory, local control of the development process, and retention of profits in the local area (Bowler, 1999). These attributes led to the term *endogenous development*, although a later acknowledgement of the role of external actors suggested that *exogenous* and *endogenous* must be understood as ideal models that are diametrically opposed but can never be exclusive categories (High and Nemes, 2007).

In any case, the hypothesis that guides this new approach is that each territory has its own economic, social, technological, institutional, infrastructural, environmental and cultural resources that comprise its development potential (Hernando, 2007). This new model of development has brought with it three major changes with respect to the previous exogenous model: it has shifted attention toward the territory's own resources, converted local communities into the protagonists of development efforts, and allowed integrated development at the territorial level (Woods, 2011). This break with the modernization paradigm has led many authors to conceive of the new approach as a new paradigm of rural development; in other words, as a new framework or set of ideas that is widely acknowledged and with which the objective of rural development can be approached.

### III. THEORIZING THE NEW PARADIGM OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Europe has experienced a large number of very diverse actions in the name of rural development. The social science analysis of the impact of these actions has led to the appearance of a large number of theoretical contributions to the literature that have allowed us to advance from practice toward theory. The present article offers a synthesis of the most relevant literature dealing with this new paradigm of rural development, grouping the literature into three broad thematic categories: rurality as a consumer space, redefinition of the agro-food system, and revitalization of the rural social sphere.

In the first category, we pay special attention to the multifunctionality of rural areas and commercialization of the rural heritage. We argue that the European agricultural sector has undergone a series of changes since the 1980s that attempted to do away with productivism and begin a new “post-productivist” period. Nonetheless, the criticisms of this concept led to the rapid appearance of new conceptualizations centered on *multifunctionality*, an idea that moves beyond the rural space as simple a production space and supports the concept that the value of agriculture is also embedded in the social and environmental benefits it generates (Atance and Tió, 2000). As a result, the multifunctionality of agriculture supports the multifunctionality of the territory and, as such, various authors have considered it to be the nucleus of the new paradigm of rural development because it allows us to reconstitute the value of agriculture and of rural territories, adapting them to society’s current needs (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008). However, because this multifunctionality occurs in a capitalist context, society has sought a way to exploit the social and environmental benefits of agriculture. Attributes such as landscape, nature, heritage or culture have been converted into commodities that can be bought and sold. As a result, rural areas are no longer only production spaces, but are also consumer spaces, resulting in a much more polyvalent scenario than in the past (Armesto López, 2000). The commercialization of everything rural brings us, in turn, to other concepts highlighted in the literature, such as the *cultural economy*, a term designed to refer to the use of local cultural heritage in rural development efforts (Ray, 2001), or *place branding*, a concept that refers to linking a territory to a “brand” concept in order to position and differentiate the territory in an increasingly globalized context.

In the second category, we include all research related to the agri-food system and its relationship to rural development. We argue that a new current of opinion has recently emerged that defends the notion of agriculture playing a central role in the new paradigm of rural development, which requires that more attention be directed to the concept of *sustainability*, one of the pillars of this new paradigm. The increasing adaptation of agricultural practices to the current needs and demands of the society, with a more local, sustainable focus that emphasizes quality, is in full accord with the new paradigm of rural development and is directly related to the transition from the predominant agroindustrial paradigm toward a new “integrated and territorial agri-food paradigm” (Wiskerke, 2009). This redefinition brings us to questions such as the “turn to quality” (Goodman, 2003) or the importance of short supply chains, found at the base of many rural development strategies (Marsden et al., 2000), facilitating job creation, the generation of value-added ideas, preservation of the rural setting, shorter food transport times, the creation of social capital and the restoration of society’s confidence in the agri-food system (Wiskerke, 2009).

Finally, in the third category we direct our attention to the multitude of social aspects that are somehow related to this new paradigm of rural development. We begin with the concept of *social capital*, a term that refers to the repeated social interactions between individuals and groups that generate confidence, establish social norms and build cooperation and reciprocity (Lee et al., 2005). Social capital is relevant to rural development because it facilitates the achievement of objectives that would otherwise be impossible. In turn, the concept of social capital brings us to many other conceptual contributions, such as *capacity-building*, *governance*, or *social innovation*.

#### IV. RECONCEPTUALIZING RURAL DEVELOPMENT

First of all, we would comment on the confusion generated by the existence of a multitude of different terms that refer to the new approach to rural development. This factor constitutes an obstacle to defining the new paradigm of rural development as a research objective because it is not always obvious that all of the variations in the terminology are referring to the same concept. Therefore, we consider it necessary that the academic world reach a certain level of consensus on using a single term. In this sense, remembering that the current concept of *development* (applied to a territory) carries with it intrinsic notions of sustainability, territoriality and transversality, we favour consolidating the use of the most basic term, *rural development*, to refer to this new paradigm and abandoning all variants that do not contribute any useful semantic distinction and only generate confusion and vagueness. We also consider it preferable that the concept of *rural development* not be burdened with geographic adjectives such as *local* or *regional*, because the meaning of these descriptors is not universal (Pike et al., 2007).

Secondly, we want to point out that the multiple contributions to theories of rural development made since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by many and diverse disciplines have led, in our opinion, to a somewhat fragmented literature. It meanders through very diverse concepts and questions of theory that have each been studied in depth but hardly ever related to each other. In this context, Messely et al. (2013) point out, there is a crucial need for exhaustive development of new theoretical frameworks that make it possible to deal with the nature, the dynamics, and the heterogeneity of today's rural development processes. One of these frameworks is the model of a 'rural web' proposed by van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008), which makes an innovative contribution to an overall vision of rural development, integrating a good part of the many theoretical questions identified in our review of the academic literature.

The 'rural web' model came from Enlarging Theoretical Understanding of Rural Development (ETUDE), a research project that analysed 63 rural development case studies and developed a new theoretical framework that integrates various emerging bodies of theory and allows researchers to overcome the traditional disciplinary and sectorial limitations. This framework is articulated on the basis of a key concept: the 'rural web', defined as a constellation of individuals, resources, activities and processes that encounter each other and interact in a territory. From that point, the authors of the model define rural development as a continuous process of unfolding or revitalization of a local 'rural web'. In other words, the rural development of a territory was based on, and at the same time directed by, its own 'rural web'—the constellation of individuals, resources, activities and processes that are interrelated with and jointly shape the territory's economic, social, cultural and environmental attractiveness.

From a conceptual point of view, a 'rural web' has six theoretical dimensions that, according to the authors, can combat agricultural decline and improve the quality of life in rural areas. These dimensions are *endogeneity*, *novelty production*, *sustainability*, *social capital*, *new institutional frameworks* and *market governance*; the interrelationships that are established between these dimensions are fundamental to the strength of the 'rural web' of a territory and, in the end, to its development. Therefore, the central hypothesis guiding this model is that when a territory's 'rural web' broad and functioning well, it translates into a more *competitive* local economy and better *quality of life* for its population (van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008).

The 'rural web' theoretical model has been well accepted in the academic world, and various authors have applied it to very different kinds of studies. Nonetheless, one of the great virtues of this model is that it not only constitutes an integrated theoretical framework for the new paradigm of rural development, but also can be used as a diagnostic tool, to assess the development potential of rural areas, and as an analytical tool, for the analysis and comparison of different processes of rural development.

Finally, having critically reviewed the literature and presented the 'rural web' model, we propose a definition for the ambiguous concept of *rural development*. We take into account the fact that most of the literature reviewed focuses more on different concepts and questions of theory that make up this new paradigm than on the meaning of *rural development* as an objective. This results in an abundant body of literature centered on multiple relevant variables to achieve something that is rarely defined beforehand. Therefore, based on the literature we reviewed, we propose the following definition: *rural development is the improvement of the economic, social and cultural conditions of a rural territory, with respect to the environment and in a manner that has positive repercussions for the quality of life of the resident population and integrates the territory with the whole of society*. With a definition such as this, we can begin to better understand why the current paradigm of rural development is composed of certain concepts and questions of theory, and not others. In this sense, we want to emphasize the need for the academic world to focus not only on the conceptual elements of the paradigm, but also on its goal, which is rural development.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Theories of the new paradigm of rural development have advanced greatly in recent years, as shown by the large number of contributions to the literature. The present article, a synthesized review of the multiple theories involved in conceptualizing this new paradigm, identifies three major themes that may be helpful to understand the multiple dimensions of rural development. In the article, we also suggest to streamline the existing terminology, focusing on the current trends and opting for one simple, flexible concept that avoids confusion and offers a more concrete topic for further study. In our opinion, *rural development* meets this requirement and encompasses many of the adjectives that tend to accompany the phrase, such as local/regional, sustainable, integrated, etc.

We also argue that the numerous bodies of theory that have been developed to define this new paradigm of rural development have not been well integrated, making it difficult to obtain a coherent overview of what rural development is and what it actually involves. We emphasize the need for new theoretical frameworks that are integrated, such as the 'rural web' model developed by van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008). In our opinion, this model could become a valuable tool because it allows us to think of rural development as a multidisciplinary phenomenon that depends on a great number of varied factors and offers no "magic formulas". Taking into account its potential to be applied as a diagnostic and analytical instrument, we believe that the 'rural web' could be valuable in planning rural development policies and evaluating and comparing rural development processes that have already been implemented.

Finally, the present study shows the lack of definitions that can help us to understand what rural development is. In this sense, in order to better comprehend the new paradigm of

rural development (widely addressed by the scientific community), we consider it essential to develop definitions of rural development understood as an objective or strategy, which justifies the extensive body of literature that has been produced to date.

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