

LOCAL (TRADITIONAL) KNOWLEDGE AS THE KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: UTOPIA OR REALITY?

(Introduction to thematic section)

SANJA LONČAR

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

10000 Zagreb, Ivana Lučića 3

sloncar@ffzg.hr

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SAŠA POLJAK ISTENIČ

Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, SRC SASA

1000 Ljubljana, Novi trg 2

sasa.poljak@zrc-sazu.si

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Sustainable development is one of the most popular buzzwords in the last few decades and the principle that has become central for governments, businesses, educational institutions and NGOs in both urban and rural contexts. Sustainable development is even advertised as “the only global survival strategy and key comparative advantage” of cities, regions and states all around the world (cf. Tome 2010). The concept evolved from earlier conceptions of eco-development and environmental literature from the 1960s to the early 1980s and has thus been prevalently associated with preserving natural resources. The most well-known definition of the phenomenon is from the so-called Brundtland report that aimed to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection. There it is described as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). The majority (if not all) current developmental strategies have been written in the similar vein and have conceptualized the sustainable development as

three “pillars” – economy, environment and society that shall be in harmony, although economy is usually seen as the main force of development and therefore superior to other two pillars.

However, the 1990s already showed that those dimensions of sustainable development cannot reflect the complexity of contemporary society. Especially researchers from the global South argued that the term “development” and people’s (re)actions to it in the “west” are different from those in the “rest” of the world (cf. Leontidou 2015). Moreover, they vary even among neighbouring regions and communities since different cultural entities interpret phenomena in different ways. Culture was therefore included in the concept of sustainable development as its fourth, central pillar fully integrated within other three. This has allowed for greater diversity in policy choice that has been especially relevant for the Non-Western countries with specific trajectories of development (Banerjee 2003). Therefore, in the new model of sustainable development, the central position belongs to cultural identity which is surrounded by the pillars of social justice, ecological balance, and self-reliance (cf. Nurse 2006). Apart from having the main role in all public policies, it has been argued that culture (or cultural sector) can significantly contribute to development (cf. *Agenda 21 for culture* 2008).

Until today the principle of sustainable development has penetrated and taken over all aspects of urban as well as rural planning and development. Although nowadays not many areas can be conceptualized as purely rural or urban, we decided to direct our attention to the perceived rural areas as they are the traditional sites of ethnological research. Furthermore, traditional knowledge – after the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted by UNESCO in 2003 – has exceedingly been promoted as an important economic, social and cultural resource, and is more often used to refer to the development of the countryside than of the cities. Following Malcolm Moseley (1996b:20), we understand rural development as “a sustained and sustainable process of economic, social, cultural and environmental change designed to enhance the long-term well-being of the whole community.” As such, it has long been the agenda of regional and local policies. Nevertheless, straightforward instructions for exploring its cultural aspect are still vague, i.e. how cultural sustainability in

rural areas shall be envisaged and planned and how it could be implemented. What is happening between policy adoption and its implementation? Who are the main stakeholders and which resources are used in this process, and how can its success be measured? These questions have prompted thinking about the local (traditional) knowledge as a key for achieving sustainable development in rural areas.

THE CULTURAL TURN IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Since sustainable development in rural areas increasingly seeks to reconnect the economic base (agriculture) with its cultural context (cf. Sumner, Mair and Nelson 2010), traditional ways of living are perceived as an effective source of information, knowledge and skills for achieving a healthy and sustainable way of life, for developing tourism and designing developmental projects. This thesis was addressed at one of the panels in the 12th SIEF congress “Utopias, Realities, Heritages. Ethnographies for the 21st century”, held in Zagreb in June 2015. The aim of the discussion was to theoretically question the role of culture in rural sustainable development and to present ethnographic case studies on links between local (traditional) knowledge and sustainable development in European rural areas. The presentations focused on the traits of the traditional way of life that correspond to the modern quest for a healthy and sustainable living. The presenters analysed the current perceptions, representations, transformations, and usage of traditional knowledge, discussed the effect of various projects on local and regional communities, and reflected the influence of such processes on the daily lives of residents and the interactions among different communities.

The discussion among eleven participants who contributed to the panel confirmed that many concepts used in the literature on local or rural development – such as sustainability, innovation, adding value, entrepreneurship, community, social inclusion, accessibility, partnership and community involvement (cf. Moseley 2003:x) – in fact overlap theoretically and even more in practice. In order to clarify the inconsistencies, further develop the concepts as well as critically examine the actual phenomena often labelled by such “strategic” terms, we invited the participants to elaborate their theoretical stance and case studies

utilizing the sustainable development concept in the rural framework. As a result, six of them submitted five articles that present case studies from four European countries – Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Latvia – which provide and highlight local answers to contemporary economic, environmental, social and cultural crisis, as well as point to the need for sustainability. The majority of them describe projects, programs and initiatives that seek to reuse and reinterpret the local resources – local knowledge, experiences, skills, tangible and intangible heritage – and analyze what happens when local values are recognized as having a development potential.

Jasna Fakin Bajec discusses the importance of active individuals and interest groups in endeavours aimed at sustainable development in local communities while questioning the role of experts in this process. She shows that heritage activities have considerable development potential and are socially and culturally beneficial. Creative interpretations of common heritage are therefore recognized as a successful way to ensure cultural and social continuity, intergenerational interactions, mutual trust and self-empowerment, which leads to richer social life and better quality of life. Furthermore, these activities – especially if they develop new products that are rooted in the past – can be regarded as an innovative response to the economic crisis and an impulse for the development of competitive, environmentally friendly economy. The case study of the Housewives' Association from Planina (Slovenia) presents the ways to overcome the gaps between the policies and their implementation. Fakin Bajec especially highlights the need for more effective cooperation between experts and local associations and the challenges of community participation.

Martina Losardo analyzes bottom-up answers to the economic, environmental and social crisis through the case study of the Italian Ecovillage Network. She acknowledges various perceptions of sustainability which direct practices and appearances of ecovillages in diverse local contexts. Among various activities of pursuing sustainable lifestyle in European rural areas, special attention is given to the revived traditional knowledge and practices connected with traditional forms of rural life and dependent on local resources, which are not being idealized but are – at least in ecovillages – interpreted in accordance with environmental challenges, new technologies and global interconnections. This is mostly

evident in practicing permaculture, growing food, using different forms of sustainable architecture, producing a number of primary goods etc. The crucial elements of these processes that lead to sustainability are the social aspects that contribute to the balance between nature and people – solidarity, cooperation, active engagement, closer relations, sharing, networking and connections.

Anete Karlson provides insights into the role of intangible cultural heritage, particularly traditional craft skills, in sustainable development of rural areas. Latvian project “Meet your Master!” mostly includes women’s handicrafts and contemporary applied arts which attract a large number of people and receive mass media coverage. The article shows how activities such as workshops, lessons, demonstrations, concerts, discussions and debates, encourage the process of sustainable development. Intergenerational socializing, self-study and informal ways of learning ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills as well as the strengthening of local patriotism. Furthermore, cultural and social benefits of the project have a direct impact on the local economy: activities organized by women are often seen as the basis for entrepreneurship, a trigger for establishing small businesses and a means for promoting tourist supply. The sense of belonging to the community also motivates young people to embed their (future) economic activity into their own (local) environment. Traditional crafts are therefore recognized as a tool for achieving broader aims such as better quality of life, multifaceted education, better cultural knowledge transmission, more diverse leisure and employment opportunities.

Špela Ledinek Lozej examines the revitalization of the past (traditional) practices and products with the aim of achieving sustainable development. Her analysis of dairying in the mountain pastures in the Julian Alps (Slovenia) shows the influence of the European and national legislation and agricultural procedures in authenticity certification on diversification and homogenization of local food products. She highlights the symbolic and social importance of (macro) regional and national branding while pointing out that traditional cheese production technologies can barely meet the standardization criteria. This hinders the utilization of brands and quality schemes as well as the products’ introduction to the general market.

The attempt to emphasize the authenticity, distinction and diversity of food products in this way contradicts the endeavours to achieve “standardization, unification and homogenization” that is needed in order to qualify as a brand. The examples indicate that the provision of geographical indication labels, tourism and events, promotion and marketing of certain products do not always increase the added value of the products and can therefore also negatively influence their price, variety, and the number of producers.

Darko Mrkonjić and Zlata Živaković-Kerže question the impact of legal regulations in protected areas on the environmental, cultural and social sustainability. The case study of the traditional fishing in Kopački Rit Nature Park (Croatia) illustrates how different views of sustainability between official bodies and residents can impact the traditional way of living and cause tensions in local communities. Perceiving institutional prohibitions as the obstacle to rural development, local activists advocate revitalization of traditional activities such as fishing, navigation, and cleaning of the canals and ponds, as they find them crucial for the preservation of nature and culture as well as for the coexistence of man and nature. They stress the interconnectedness of fishing with all aspects of local everyday life – nutrition, construction, flood prevention etc. – which shows how significant it is for the maintaining of local identity as well as for potential economic activities including tourism. The case study also exposes the clash between two legal protections – that of the Nature Park that already exists and that of the traditional fishing as intangible cultural heritage advocated by activists. This reflects the need to regard heritage as a whole.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: UTOPIAS AND REALITIES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The presented case studies provide an insight into the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development in rural areas and prove that local cultural and natural resources, people, knowledge and experiences are at the core of its implementation and achievement. In particular, the local people are extremely important “as sources of information, ideas, energy and enterprise” (Moseley 2003:5). People’s – or community – involvement in planning and developmental projects has its origins in the 1960s and 1970s when the integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches has been

recognised as the possibility to respond to people's needs and aspirations and to strengthen their connection to places and communities (Sanoff 2000). In recent decades the principles of community participation have been applied in various urban and rural projects, and a number of socio-cultural, economic and environmental benefits have been recognized and discussed in different contexts. Among others, the possibility of including a greater number and variety of people from the local community is often emphasised as an advantage of this approach, especially when individuals and groups, who are usually ignored by the authorities, are involved in decision-making process and are finally given voice (Sanoff 2000; Toker 2012:18). Although advisable and ideally envisaged, local developmental projects often rely on individuals, small groups of locals or newcomers with different experiences, fresh ideas and new connections. Real challenges connected with the amount of hard and often voluntary work, multitasking, and lack of operational and financial support, are nicely summarized in Moseley's description of "the real heroes of rural development" who "turn up on dark winter evenings to manage the village hall, drive the community minibus, plan the parish appraisal or organize the good neighbours scheme" (Moseley 2003:xi).

Apart from enabling closer relationships between residents, local projects foster links and collaborations between residents and professionals as well as networks (or partnerships) among residents, public sector, financial institutions, and community and voluntary organizations (Sanoff 2000). Examples of sustainable projects in rural areas show that networking of people with similar interests and establishing partnerships are crucial for the projects' success. The contacts between people often provide opportunities for *learning from each other* (Toker 2012) or *mutual learning* (Wates 2014). As demonstrated by the case studies, informal workshops, seminars, and courses – through which people gain new knowledge and skills, exchange experiences, develop social innovations etc. – often fulfil the contemporary needs in a sustainable way. They are usually not organized by a formal educational institution, but rather by local associations and groups, NGOs and activists who are often more successful than formal educators and thus the main driver of the education on sustainable ways of living.

Also, community participation ensures development of social and

human capital that is considered to be the key for long-term sustainability of community-led projects (Sanoff 2000; Wates 2014). Close interactions among community members result in friendships, “sharing and strengthening common values” as well as in “strengthening the capacities of individuals and families” (Sanoff 2000:7). The final result is *empowerment* or *building the sense of community*. This intangible aspect is often mentioned and recognised by locals as vital for the better quality of life, and by professionals as crucial for cultural sustainability.

All five case studies in this thematic section undoubtedly show that local cultural assets and people are at the core of implementing and achieving the sustainable development in local communities. Although the global crisis and insecurity seem to act as drivers of positive change, the issues concerning the accessibility of the resources (human, financial, administrative capacities, time etc.) remain perpetual obstacles to achieving equality, and sometimes even minimum living standard in rural areas. Community-led projects and initiatives thus seem to have a crucial role in rural living, especially in depopulated and abandoned areas where they are drivers of economic development and a tool for social inclusion of marginalized groups, mostly women and the elderly.

However, the socio-cultural dimension of such projects is at risk of remaining inferior to other more directly profitable aspects and being taken into consideration inconsistently or unprofessionally. The involvement of professionals with suitable expertise is thus instrumental to achieving the desired outcomes; in case of developmental projects, cultural experts – in particular ethnologists or cultural anthropologists, with their specific ethnographic approach and qualitative research methods – can be key actors who make a difference, as they work with people in a way that they can internalize project results and start to regard them as essential part of community life. In this manner, the sustainability of project outcomes is ensured, and development probably more sustainable. We hope that this thematic bloc effectively proves the need for thorough analysis of practical obstacles to achieving sustainable development as well as the fruitfulness of theoretical reflections on the concept, especially regarding the rural areas, and that it will further motivate experts to engage in such studies and practices.

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Sanja Lončar i Saša Poljak Istenič

LOKALNO (TRADICIJSKO) ZNANJE KAO KLJUČ ODRŽIVOGA RURALNOG RAZVOJA: UTOPIJA ILI REALNOST?

Rad predstavlja uvod u temat časopisa naslovljen *Lokalno (tradicijsko) znanje kao ključ održivoga ruralnog razvoja: utopija ili realnost?* koji okuplja priloge izložene na jednom od panela SIEF-ova kongresa *Utopias, Realities, Heritages, Ethnographies for the 21st century* održanog u Zagrebu u lipnju 2015. godine. Cilj panela bio je teorijski preispitati ulogu kulture u održivom razvoju i predstaviti etnografske studije slučaja koje upućuju na poveznice između lokalnog (tradicijskog) znanja i održivog razvoja u ruralnim područjima Europe. U pet članaka koji predstavljaju studije slučaja iz četiri europske zemlje – Slovenije (Jasna Fakin Bajec, Špela Ledinek Lozej), Italije (Martina Losardo), Latvije (Anete Karlson) i Hrvatske (Darko Mrkonjić i Zlata Živaković-Kerže) – autori opisuju projekte, programe i inicijative koje tragaju za ponovnim korištenjem i reinterpretacijom lokalnih izvora – lokalnog znanja, iskustava, vještina, materijalne i nematerijalne baštine – i analiziraju što se događa kada se lokalne vrijednosti prepoznaju kao razvojni potencijal. Pritom autori analiziraju suvremene percepcije, reprezentacije, transformacije i korištenje tradicijskog znanja, raspravljaju o utjecajima različitih projekata na lokalne i regionalne zajednice, razmišljaju o utjecaju takvih procesa na svakodnevni život stanovnika te promatraju interakcije između različitih zajednica. Kroz studije slučaja preispituju se koncepti – održivosti, inovacije, dodane vrijednosti, poduzetništva, zajednice, socijalne uključenosti, dostupnosti, partnerstva i sudjelovanja zajednice – koji su nerijetko teorijski i praktično povezivani s lokalnim ili regionalnim razvojem. Radovi predstavljaju doprinos raspravi o sociokulturnoj održivosti te pokazuju kako su lokalni kulturni i prirodni resursi, ljudi, znanje i iskustvo u srži njezine implementacije i dostignuća u lokalnim zajednicama. Posebno je istaknuta važnost aktivnog sudjelovanja ljudi, tj. zajednica, te uspostavljanja mreža i partnerstava za dugoročnu održivost projekata vođenih zajednicom. Urednički tekst postavlja spomenute studije unutar teorijske rasprave o održivom razvoju te upućuje na potrebu analiziranja praktičkih prepreka njegovu ostvarenju.



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