

New Challenges for Sustainable Rural Development in the 21st Century

INTRODUCTION

The social and economic fabric of rural areas and their environment has been shaped over time by agriculture, more than by any other sector, and by associated up- and down- stream activities. In the past, agriculture was viewed as a purely sectoral activity producing primary products, today, however, it is recognised as fulfilling a multiplicity of economic, social and environmental functions, producing, in addition to raw materials for a dynamic quality food production chain, also other important environmental services and public goods, which provide a solid foundation for a vital rural space. A sustainable and competitive agri-food sector is therefore important not only as an element of the rural economy, but also, and sometimes even more so, due to its contribution to preservation and improvement of the quality of life and the social economic and environmental fabric of rural areas. Today, new challenges are faced and new solutions must be found in order to assure sustainable rural development in the future.

The annual IGU conferences are organised around themes which explore and develop the long-term research tasks of the Commission: interpretation of "rural sustainability", regulation of rural sustainability, sustainability and the rural business enterprise, sustainability in the interaction between rural and urban systems, rural community dynamics and sustainability and land use cover and change.

This is a special issue of the Journal for Geography published at the occasion of the 17th Annual Colloquium of the IGU Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems entitled *New Challenges for Sustainable Rural Development in the 21st Century*, which took place from 13th to 18th July 2009 in Maribor, Slovenia. In this issue, experts from Brazil, Australia, India, Japan, Israel, France, Ireland, Austria, Romania, the Netherlands and Slovenia present, analyse and explain the diversity of ways to improve the quality of life in rural areas all over the world.

Ana Maria de Souza Mello Bicalho examines in her paper the possible role of jute cropping in revitalising stagnated floodplain farming in the Brazilian Amazon, once the most important farming activity in an extensive area along the Amazon River. With the recent installation of a factory in Santarém, in the western Pará state, for producing fibre sheets with industrial applications in the production of vehicles and mattresses in the national market, jute cropping has been reintroduced. The factory is located 12 kilometres to the east of Santarém and draws its workers from the local rural area, paying higher salaries than earned in the farm sector. The main questions regarding the future perspectives of jute cropping in the Amazon are whether the industrial capacity will expand further and whether other manufacturing concerns will be attracted to the region, generating increasing demand for jute, so that the activity will spread further up the river. Another important issue is whether the articulation of floodplain farmers to this new agro-industrial sector will result in significant income and superior quality of life and not reproduce the exploitive subordination of farmers which was common in the past.

The authors **Vladimir Drozg** and **Stanko Pelc** present an overview of research work done in the area of rural geography in Slovenia. It is set up in three parts: the first chapter deals with contextual orientation of rural geography, emphasised by statistical analysis of bibliographic units according to individual areas. The second

part offers the most important research concepts and paradigms, represented in Slovene rural geography. The third part shows some key findings regarding Slovene rural areas/countryside. Among the most important contextual areas of rural geography in Slovenia, the studies from agrarian geography, morphology of settlements, demographic structure and demographic changes, regional development, environment protection and degradation stand out.

Throughout the history, agriculture has always played a dominant role in the development of rural areas, but today its significance is under discussion in many countries. **Andreja Borec** and **Jernej Turk** review in their paper some key milestones and CAP dates, and try to explain the new role of agriculture in rural areas through the concept of multifunctional agriculture. Multifunctionality is therefore argued as a model to bring post-modern agriculture in accordance with the new societal demands. It is emphasized that in addition to producing food and fibre, agriculture produces a wide range of non-commodity goods and services, it also shapes the environment, it affects social and cultural systems and it contributes to economic growth.

The concept of sustainable rural development has gained currency in public discourse in many countries of the world over the past two decades. Like the concept of 'sustainability' per se, it can have multiple meanings in different contexts, but there has been a gradual move from an emphasis on economic development to broader and more holistic approaches which include cultural, social and environmental dimensions.

According to **Mary Cawley**, the Republic of Ireland offers a particularly appropriate context in which to analyse the role of changing governance structures in association with the pursuit of sustainable rural development. Ireland has one of the most centralised administrative systems in the EU, yet, since the early 1990s, non-governmental local partnerships have emerged throughout the state to pursue a range of rural development initiatives, with EU financial support. Since the late 1990s, the local state has become involved more fully in the management structure of these partnerships. More recently, the central state, which is the conduit for their public funding, has sought to bring about greater coordination among the partnerships. The paper discusses the gradual evolution of networking and partnership in the pursuit of Irish rural development policy with reference to objectives and outcomes.

Social conditions in rural areas are at the same time the origin and the goal of sustainable development. Due to differentiated economic development, socioeconomic heterogeneity in rural areas is increasing, yet at the same time it varies greatly between countries and continents.

Frans Thiessen analysed the quality of life in Dutch rural communities in comparison with urban communities in the Netherlands. He found out that the quality of live in Dutch rural areas is high because of the residential quality of villages, the mobility of the inhabitants and the strong commitment of the inhabitants to the local society. Today's Dutch villages, however, bear no resemblance to the traditional village, and social capital is not self-evident nowadays. Social capital is present when local social cohesion contributes to the liveability and social vitality of villages.

The differentiation of social structures is grounded on the different levels of economic development, the different cultural environments, the gap between tradition and modernity, and the measures of regional policies.

In the paper entitled *Coping with Depopulation and Demographic Ageing in Rural Japan: From Government to Local Governance*, **Doo-Chul Kim** and **Hye-Jin Bu** have analysed the administrative process initiated by the Japanese government which has resulted in the merging of municipalities across the country. Since then, the quality of services provided to inhabitants by the local government has declined in depopulated areas. As a result, it has been suggested that there may be a role for self-organization in the revival of local governance. In many depopulated areas, the distance between the local government and the local community has continued to grow, and this has led to the newly established local government transferring certain responsibilities. Consequently, the reorganization of the local community has become indispensable. This research shows that the success of the Kawane Promoting Association lies in its unique style of management, whereby there is no central authority; instead, decision-making powers are transferred between units as required, ensuring full participation by local residents. For decades, the Kawane Promoting Association has been revitalizing the local region. This is the result of the fact that the Kawane Promoting Association is organized by the local community, with full participation of the local residents. In turn, the situation has greatly improved the abilities of the community for self-governance.

In the following two papers, the authors represented the economic view characterized by the strong presence of the emerging market economies: on the one hand, with the continued expansion of trade and investment accompanying globalization and, on the other hand, by converting – in post-Communist Southeast Europe after 1989.

Peter Jordan investigates in his paper the reasons for the current state of rural space in Southeast Europe, as well as its current structure. It is confirmed that pre-Communist structures, as well as divergent Communist systems and policies contributed as much to the current structures as have divergent post-Communist approaches and developments. Thus, we witness today very different situations in the rural space of Yugoslavian successor states on the one hand, and of other post-Communist countries of Southeast Europe with a planned economy (Romania, Bulgaria and Albania) on the other. But even the countries of former Yugoslavia show many divergences, mainly due to divergent demographic development in the wake of the Yugoslavian dissolution wars. Since economic aspects were more or less neglected, this process resulted in heavy economic and social decline frequently accompanied by depopulation. It is questionable whether under the auspices of the European Union (all the countries of the South East Europe have at least an accession perspective, if they are not already EU members as Bulgaria and Romania) this development can be reverted or at least smoothed down. Having proclaimed the "Lisbon Strategy" in 2000 with the aim of becoming "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world" and having adopted also the position that the objectives of growth and disparity equalisation were not compatible, the EU objective of macro-economic growth overrules now the equalisation objective. This means that EU structural funding will also in Southeast Europe favour the centres rather than the peripheries. Taking into account that also regional policies of national governments follow the same direction, prospects for rural spaces in Southeast Europe do not look bright.

Lučka Lorber discusses in her paper the changes in Slovenian rural areas after socio-economic changes in the post-socialist European states in the 1990s. Special emphasis is put on the analysis of structural indicators of socio-economic changes in the Slovenian rural areas in comparison to the neighbouring countries. Slovenian population is strongly attached to their traditional rural way of life. When ranking people's life values, care for maintaining the rural landscape, assuring the quality of life in relation to nature, and production of healthy food come out among their highest priorities. Transitional processes as a result of socio-economic changes in the Eastern-European countries affected the standard patterns of regional European development. Many rural areas have undergone a successful process of structural change and independent development. However, regional disparities are significant, and not only among the countries that developed under different socio-economic conditions, but also within individual countries, where considerable regional disparities can be observed, in particular between the urban and the rural areas. There is no doubt that revitalisation of agricultural areas and assurance of sustainable rural development pose major challenges for the post-socialist countries.

The global economy is increasingly characterized by the strong presence of the emerging market economies, with the continued expansion of trade and investment accompanying globalization, on the one hand, and on the other hand by the growing uncertainty concerning violent fluctuation of petroleum prices and turbulence in financial markets.

Australia's highly profitable cotton industry is geographically constrained to districts in northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland. However, the rural towns servicing the industry are facing unprecedented stress on account of fierce commercial competition between them, many years of drought in the first decade of the 21st century, technological innovation in cotton production, the chance occurrence of non-agricultural economic opportunities, and even ethnic composition.

Tony Sorensen researched the role of innovative small business in overcoming community stress. The selection of a representative sample entailed the classification of cotton communities on the basis of their economic and social profiles and how they had evolved over the inter-census period 2001-06. This analysis surprisingly showed that cotton growing regions are highly differentiated not just at a single point in time (2006), but also in their development trajectories. This considerably complicated the process of sample selection, but also demonstrated the diversity of rural settlement. The paper starts by sketching the geography of Australia's cotton production and the criteria for the selection of cotton communities studied. Further on, it presents briefly the methods and results of the statistical appraisal. Thirdly, it explains the diversity of economic and social circumstance found. A fourth and final section explores the implications of such variable conditions both for public policy in general and attempts by local actors to secure their community's future. In this respect, it is obvious that some localities are rather more sustainable than others in the long run. Furthermore, it is possible to diagnose the factors apparently contributing significantly to sustained community viability. This, in turn, raises important questions about latent stress points as those factors potentially evolve in hostile directions.

Zarja Bohak and **Andreja Borec** discuss in their paper the importance of farm succession for any family farm, as well as for the future structure of farming and for rural policy makers. This is a process whereby the skills, traditions and the capital of farming are passed from one generation to another. Scientists have acknowledged the importance of scientific investigation of the succession of family farms no more than thirty or forty years ago. There are many different scientific methods used to process the surveys' data and to represent the process of farm succession. The paper offers a review of foreign and Slovene studies made in the last 15 years, in which econometric methods are used in order to describe and analyse family farm succession process. The authors expect that more studies on family farm succession will be made in the future, since this issue is of vital importance for farm survival. Namely, farms without a declared successor are often doomed to decay.

With rapid economic growth in certain regions of the world, the function, appearance and identity of rural areas are changing. A gap is emerging between tradition, in terms of lifestyle as well as methods of production, and modernity, which places quality of life at the top of value systems.

Laucette Laurens's paper deals with periurban areas, which are characterised by radical changes on the social level as well as on the level of spatial organisation. These changes allow us to question urbanity in the sense of everyday life and the art of living together. The author wonders whether agricultural areas could be given a specific or central place in periurban environment. She believes that this question is in place, as agricultural areas are not exclusively private areas anymore, but are becoming more and more public areas, which are characterised by multifunctionality and inhabited by varied actors. The paper also provides an analysis of agricultural areas which have lost their traditional usages and are therefore available for development of different projects and usages. The author is particularly interested in areas which are in transition and in the emerging areas, as well as in the development of new political projects in these areas. She questions such evolutions in order to understand the link between this uncertain context and the innovations in the governance of agricultural periurban areas.

Cultural heritage and cultural landscape are a set of human products that reflect the society needs, thoughts and memories. They represent and symbolize the relationships of power and controls – out of which it has emerged – and the human processes that have transformed and continue to transform them. These transformations create new cultural landscapes that often hide the processes that have made them – political, social, cultural, ideological and economic.

Irit Amit-Cohen analyses in her paper a contested geographical environment where two cultures compete over land and its cultural heritage and therefore each of them has its own interpretations: the Jewish Zionist culture and the Arab Moslem culture. The aim is to define the landscape – its spirit and its representation – that emerges from these competitions and disputes; to characterize it, to analyze its symbols and its uses, mainly for the purpose of formation and construction of identities. The two geographical areas containing cultural heritage sites and cultural landscapes that have become symbolic represent four components: memory, commemoration, representation and function for the two societies. The first such environment is a rural area, which encompasses two very dominant landscapes adjoining each other – a new commercial and cultural centre, which was built for Jewish settlement alongside historical remnants of an Arab village, a mosque and

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'Bustan' – an Arab plantation. The second environment is an agricultural area planted with olive trees with a contested significance for the two societies. An examination of the two landscapes indicates that the struggle for cultural dominance between Arabs and Jews is the same struggle expressed by the different cultural landscapes. In this way, a definition of "Contested Landscape" can be used as criteria to describe the value of cultural heritage or cultural landscapes. This definition might serve also as a solution for cultural landscape or cultural heritage sites which present disputes or uncertain national proprietorship. In other words, the very fact that the sites or the landscapes are contested, bestows upon them their uniqueness and singularity.

Sustainable development in rural areas supposes a balanced development of the environmental, economic and social components, and all these are integrated into the development of tourism. The tourist approach to the development of rural communities is one of the most appropriate ways of finding sustainable solutions to the problems of the countryside.

To support this idea, **Pompei Cocean** and **Oana-Ramona Ilovan** have chosen a case study for the Romanian territory, the NUTS 3 level administrative unit. Under the circumstances of the present economic crisis, the European Union programme SAPARD represents for local communities one of the most reliable sources of support for the implementation of development projects. The analysis carried out focused on emphasizing the manner of attracting these resources in the field of tourism in the territory of Bistrița-Năsăud County, situated in northern Romania, in the North-West Development Region, where private initiatives are representative for Romania's approach to this sector. Sustainable rural development was partly triggered by the implementation of the SAPARD programme during the pre-accession period of Romania to the European Union, also focusing on sustainable tourism in the countryside, and the Bistrița-Năsăud County was such an example. The authors stress the importance of the tourist activities for the total number of rural development projects in the county.

Consumer demand for quality food is growing steadily. There is an increasing awareness of health and environmental issues, and higher disposable incomes in developed countries enable people to make 'lifestyle choices', such as paying more for the food which is better for them and less damaging to the environment.

Indian agriculture is still the main asset of Indian rural areas after five and a half decades of independence. It has been very successful in terms of foodgrain production through the adoption of green revolution.

Nizamuddin Khan, **Anisur Rehman** and **Salman Sadique** present in their paper Vegetable Revolution and Rural Sustainable Development in India the significant role of the vegetable revolution in the rural development. Vegetable cultivation has drastically increased over the last decade in the area studied. Most of the vegetables are bought and sold either in rural markets or in the nearest regulated markets. The socio-economic stratification of vegetable growers and workers has shown domination of some specific castes in vegetable cultivation, buying and selling, whereas the people of high castes are little involved in vegetable cultivation. More than 80% of vegetable cultivators are landless, small or marginal farmers and market or dispose of their surplus in nearby rural markets. The vegetable revolution has not only increased the income of vegetable growers, but has also contributed to

employment generation, social change and self-sufficiency among landless, small and marginal farmers. The expansion of vegetable cultivation in the sampled villages has been significant for reducing the vulnerability of small and marginal farmers to poverty and misery. Thus, the vegetable revolution is significant in the rural transformation and is a new dimension of rural sustainable development. An efficient vegetable marketing network with integrated markets at the grassroots level is urgently needed for sustainable, economically viable and socially acceptable planning of diversification of agriculture with value added crops like vegetables, both in the study area and on a national level.

The fourteen papers published in this issue represent different views on and good practice examples of solving the problem of revitalization and development in rural areas. They all acknowledge the dependency between authority and local community. The authors see clearly the impacts of globalisation and the gap which is emerging between tradition, in terms of lifestyle and the methods of production, and modernity, which places quality of life at the top of value systems.

Lučka Lorber
Chief and responsible editor

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