A bottom-up rural regeneration initiative: A social learning analytical perspective

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Abstract: *This paper takes a social learning approach for the discussion of a bottom-up rural regeneration initiative. A social leaning approach to rural development may prove useful as it allows for a multilayered analysis of the driving forces operating at different level of aggregation, while keeping in focus the expected outcome, e.g. sustainable rural development. The objective here is the investigation of some background conditions for social learning to emerge that the literature frequently suggests such as is; the presence of multi-actor dynamics, of collective processes and possible drivers, and the type of outcomes that resulted from it. In our case analysis we find evidence of these background conditions and of a collective change process, for which we conclude that social learning occurred in our case analysis.*

Keywords: *rural development, bottom-up processes, social learning, collective learning, concerted action*

Introduction

Over the last decades rural areas in Europe were subject to a number of development approaches. During the post-war period Western Europe pursued agricultural modernisation so to achieve food security (High and Nemes, 2007) and policy instruments such as is the Common Agricultural Policy had a key role. Likewise also governments in Central and Eastern Europe sought to increase food production and be self-sufficient. There the rationale of centrally-planned economies relied on policy instruments as the nationalization of private land, setting-up of farm-cooperatives and mechanization of agriculture on large farms (Sumelius et al., 2005). In both cases an intensive use of land, of pesticides and of fertilizers occurred, and both were later criticized for the implications on biodiversity, on soil and water, e.g. nitrification of groundwater and watercourses, eutrophication of watercourses and soil erosion (Bowler, 2002).

Also, in Slovenia, which then was part of the Yugoslav Federation, state authorities choose to pursue agricultural modernisation with substantial investments into agricultural production (Erjavec et al., 2003; Vrišer, 1993). State investments converged in the areas with most favourable climatic conditions and fertile soils along the Mural River in the Pomurje region. Hence, during this period Pomurje saw the introduction of swine and bovine farming and extensive cultivation of crops (Hočevar and Juvančič, 2005), which favoured heavy mechanisation, the use of pesticides and fertilizers. As a result pollution from ammonium, nitrate and phosphorus was severe with consequences on water quality in the form of nitrates and pesticides, on biodiversity and consequently also on human health (Belović et al., 2007; Moser et al., 2006). In the 1990s, with the fall of the centrally-planned economic project and the opening up of the Slovene society, some local actors started to envision alternatives with environmental protection and rural well-being at the core. In 1991 these launched an initiative for a protected area establishment in the northern territories (Goričko territory) and in 2003 succeed in this bottom-up renewal undertaking.

Some observers have conceptualised that in circumstances with a reflexive construction and re-construction of the problem domain and an emerging communicative rationality, promoting collective learning processes, the result may be a process of change (Ison et al., 2007; Van Bommel et al., 2009). Some refer to this as social learning; an all-inclusive process of change (Röling, 2002; Röling and Wagemakers, 2000).

It is the aim of this paper is to use a *social learning approach* in the investigation of this initiative and focus on the following: the presence of multi-actor dynamics; collective processes and possible drivers; and the type of outcomes that resulted from it.

A social learning approach to rural development

The disciplinary domain where social learning is most extensively used is natural resource management, however, a *social leaning* perspective may prove to be useful also for rural development studies. This because it allows for a multilayered analysis of the driving forces operating at different level of aggregation (e.g. farmer, cooperatives, communities), while keeping in focus the expected outcome (e.g. rural development).

Social learning, according to Woodhill and Röling (2000), is a non-linear, non-deterministic, and non-coercive process, which incorporates an 'action-driven' philosophy. Röling (2002) gives a discussion of social learning that he characterizes as a move from 'multiple cognition' of different cognitive agents with *multiple perspectives* to 'collective cognition' of agents toward *collective action*. He draws upon the Santiago Theory of Cognition of Maturana and Varela, where organisms are seen to be structurally coupled through co-evolution and learning with their environment, and proposes that "cognition goes beyond thinking, involving perception, emotion, and action" (Röling, 2002:32). A distinguished element of this kind of reasoning is the focus on a particular type of learning, e.i. *collective learning*, and on a particular type of action, i.e. *concerted action,* which Röling assumes arises from the first.

Communicative interaction between rural actors at different levels (vertically and horizontally) is seen to support a reflexive construction of the problem domain and promotes a collective learning process that may result in a change benefiting the rural area; its social and ecological elements (Rist et al., 2005; Röling, 2002). During interaction rural actors benefit from a revision of the norms, rules and power relations through which they define how natural resources should be used (Ison et al., 2007; Rist et al., 2005). Such interaction contributes to a newly acquired awareness and knowledge, but also to a revision of own identity as well as place identity (Shucksmith, 2009). Rural actors may envision new development alternatives, and redefine their roles from passive receivers of state intervention to catalysts of rural renewal.

In an analysis of the Danish extension system Christensen and Sriskandarajah (2008) found that despite the need for collaborative projects is recognised collaborative efforts are sporadic and so is as well the occurrence of social learning. While Van Bommel et al. (2009) in an analysis of the Drentche case, where there were conflicting objectives, observed that a convergence of ideas and tools needed to cope with the problem is hard to achieve without an institutional setting favouring such a convergence. Both studies advance that the *institutional setting* is an important element, which can support or hider communication and collaboration between rural actors. Authors indicate that where the institutional setting favours the emergence of some background conditions there are better opportunities for social learning to emerge.

This position is aligned with the understanding of rural actors as advanced by the *integrated rural development* (IRD) literature, which emphasizes a diversified rural economy were rural actors can negotiate, and advance, locally designed solutions (Shucksmith, 2009). A perspective that elevates the role of local actors to the promoters of change through collective action

Hence, within the rural development literature social learning is understood as an all-inclusive process of change that involves actors who have different knowledge, and who operate at different decision-making levels (Groot et al., 2002; Röling, 2002; Van Bommel et al., 2009; Wals and van der Leij, 2007). It incorporates the principle of *participation* where the contents are open to collective agreement, or disagreement.

Other literature on social learning, conducted within the domain of natural resource management, has a similar interest in *participation.* This literature focuses on learning processes (and change) triggered during a participatory workshop and some empirical studies give useful information about

the workshop setting, its facilitation and possible ways to improve it (e.g. Schusler et al., 2003; Webler et al., 1995). On the other hand such assessments do not give insight into what happens after participation. For instance such assessments do not clarify whether, or how, change could have occurred in the group of practitioners where the workshop participant is a member. Nor clarify whether, or how, change could have occurred in the community where the workshop participant lives. It could be advanced that this type of research has a narrow focus on the *individual* as most of the empirical investigations are limited to the assessment of whether the workshop participant has learned something, or not. Second, this research is much focused on participatory workshops and as a consequence it does not consider a less "structured setting" with limited policy coordination/ facilitation.

However, if we assume that *a social learning* is a collective process of change (e.g. Röling, 2002; Röling and Wagemakers, 2000) it follows that research may benefit from the investigation of learning beyond the individual/workshop participant and from the investigation of driving forces in a less structured setting. In this paper we acknowledge the relevance that different levels of aggregation have and assume that social learning may occur beyond the intervention of the mentioned type, i.e. a participatory workshop. To this end we discuss a bottom-up initiative for rural renewal by focusing on the presence of multi-actor dynamics, on the emergence of collective action and the type of outcomes that resulted from it.

Methodology

The research methodology used is a case study that draws on empirical material collected for a research project that commenced in 2003 and ended in 2007, and is reported in Rodela (2008). For the development of the present analysis we use the transcripts of 30 interviews (on a total of 33 administrated interviews). Interviews were semi-structured covering five thematic areas (local governance; the park initiative; the process that had driven it; and their experience at the participatory workshops), however, for the present analysis we focused on the parts addressing the park initiative. Interviews were conducted with the following categories of respondents: state public servants (2) and local public servants (4), interest-group representatives (4), mayors (4), experts in nature-protection (3), farmers (4), activists (4), participants to workshops (5), and entrepreneurs (3). The sampling method was snowballing, the involvement in the park establishment the criteria for respondent selection while data saturation was the criterion for closure. Face-to-face interviews lasted from 1.5 hours to 3.5 hours, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

For the purpose of the present analysis transcripts are triangulated with archive research (policy documents and reports) and secondary data made available by the Slovene Statistical Office. These, the transcripts and archive documents, were surveyed by searching for themes with the aim to gather insight into the above mentioned. In this, we acknowledge that there is a "tension between interpretation and representation" which the literature on organizational learning sees to converge in the researcher. For instance the researcher is not only a lone observer, but is part of the story (Jeffcut, 1993). Respondents' accounts make up the set of qualitative data that the researcher textualises into a story which incorporates his voice as well. This voice here is grounded in the social learning discourse.

In the following we first give some brief background information on the case and then move to the discussion of interview data.

Background to the case

Pomurje is a rural region in the north-east of Slovenia that has historically lagged behind the rest of the country, a circumstance that persists today as the region ranks low on several developmental indicators.

During state socialism the authorities invested here into agricultural modernisation, which saw a shift toward livestock rearing and extensive crop cultivation (Hočevar and Juvančič, 2005). As a result pollution from ammonium, nitrate and phosphorus was severe in the region with the following consequences issues with drinking water and biodiversity loss (Belović et al., 2007; Moser et al., 2006). Moser et al. (2007) report on the Mura River pollution levels and comment that water quality was extremely poor also due to the up-stream Austrian paper and cellulose industry discharges of waste waters. Bilateral agreements and advances in industrial technology, in particular with waste-water treatment plants, led to a reduction in pollution levels of 75% by the end of 1990s. Currently, pollution levels are kept under control and do not exceed the authorised levels, but recent monitoring data suggests that the region still has the highest level of pollutants in the country (Moser et al., 2007).

During the 1980s agricultural crisis brought some important changes in the region. The reconstruction of agriculture resulted in a) migration of the labour force from agriculture to industry and b) decrease of cultivated land. While later, in the 1990s, the breakdown of the Yugoslav federation added further issues. Several state-owned farm cooperatives failed along with industrial companies and this contributed to a rise in unemployment levels in this region (Tajnikar, 2001).

Today agriculture absorbs 11% of the local population. There are only few large farm enterprises professionally engaged in a farm business (with 4 ha to 15 ha) as many prefer employment in other sectors and choose to cultivate only for own consumption (not more than cca. 2 ha). Official reports warn that the region still lags behind the national average on a number of indicators (Table 1) and has not come to grips with many of its past issues (RRA, 2007).

Table 1: Some socio-economic indicators: Pomurje and Slovenia in 2002.

	Slovenia	Pomurje Region
Inhabitants	1.964.036	120.875
Surface (km²)	20.273	1.337
Household members (mean value)	2,8	3,1
Unemployment (in %)	13,8	19,3
Employed in agriculture, fishery and forestry (in %)	4	11
Population above 15 years with higher education, or more (in %)	13	8

Source: Slovene Statistical Office

Against this background a local initiative for the establishment of a protected area in the northern parts of Pomurje (the Goričko area) formed in the 1990s. The initiative was pursued by local actors who saw the need for a different and more sustainable development model with environmental protection and rural well-being at its core. In the following we will discuss the case from a social learning perspective by focusing on few aspects seen to be relevant in such an approach.

Analysis and Discussion

Respondents' accounts are analysed with the aim to understand how locals make sense of the bottom-up initiative and the implications they see coming from it. The emergence and relevance of *learning processes* at different level of aggregation was already discussed elsewhere (Rodela, *submitted for publication*).) where it was demonstrated the occurrence of transformative learning and its links to social capital. Here we chose to focus on the presence of multi-actor dynamics; collective processes and possible drivers; and the type of outcomes that resulted from it.

Presence of multi-actor dynamics

The presence of multi-actor dynamics appears to be one of the key prerequisites of social learning since it is assumed that change processes are the product of the multitude of forces, the resulting negotiation of perspectives, norms, and power relations, which are present in a rural area.

Interview data allowed for an understanding of the diversity of claims and related power-relations over the Goričko's natural resources, and consequently the park initiative. Small farmers, tourist

enterprises, environmental associations and some local inhabitants supported strict regulations for the protection of the natural environment and for the amelioration of water quality. The first two groups welcomed a protected area on further grounds; due to its potential to attract tourists and forms of stewardship. Yet other groups of actors had a competing position; large farm entrepreneurs, hunters, developers and the industry were against the protection regime because of restrictions on human activities. These are actors who had historically shaped the region's economy and in this have used lobbing.

Besides local supporters and local opponents further actors had a role in the development of this initiative. These were the representatives of the cross-border area in Austria (Southburgenland) and in Hungary (Porabje), who during the early periods joined forces with the Slovene promoters, while later the circle of actors extended to include state authorities with duties in regional development and nature protection

Therefore, shortly after Slovene independence in 1992 a symposium on "Village Landscapes in Central Europe" was held in Austria and local actors (planners, landscape architectures) from the three bordering regions met so to debate concerns and issues the three regions shared, as these were equally characterized by remoteness, a lagging rural economy, the iron-curtain experience and environmental degradation due to agricultural and industrial production (Dešnik, 2004). One of our respondents, who participated to the event, commented that in that occasion the idea for a (transnational) protected area was brought forward and framed as an opportunity to pursue environmental quality, but also sustainable forms of economic development, rural regeneration and cross-border cooperation. The idea was formulated as a transnational-trilateral park, where each region designated first an own protected area under national law and later the three states signed a trilateral agreement.

Hence when the initiative was sufficiently mature state authorities had to take over the formal parts of the establishment process, e.g. formulation of the decree, public consultations, etc, as is regulated by the Slovene legal framework. Differences in legal provisions, governmental administration and political support resulted in a first designation of the Raab Nature Park in 1998 (Austria), followed by the Nature Park Órség in 2002 (Hungarian) and the Goričko Park in 2003.

The Goričko park proponents, i.e. local activists, planners and intellectuals, grasped very fast the opportunities that were coming forward during the accession process of Slovenia to the European Union. They collaborated with the two counterparts in a reflexive construction and de-construction of the problem domain (communicative action) and once the development alternative was formulated had to move promptly and strategically.

The park proponents were familiar with the region's developmental priorities and the associated power relations. Also, as one respondent reported, they were familiar with the national priorities in matters of nature protection and associated limitations for placing an additional protected area on the national list. Hence, the type of strategic action proponents pursed feed on the newly created opportunities that both, the Slovene independence and the European accession, offered. Proponents were engaged in networking within the region so to create preliminary alliances, but also understood the added value of cross-border collaboration with the Hungarian and Austrian counter-parts. As cross-border collaboration offered more than alliances; it resulted in a few small-scale and one larger cross-border projects financed by the European programmes (Phare CBC). As reported by this respondent this last aspect created momentum for the park initiative within the region, but also was an important step for obtaining support from the state authorities.

> *"In 1998 we got a cross-board project funded from EU funds. So have organised some first workshops and have mapped habitat types. Workshops were run in all municipalities and tried to engage the local population. They* [locals] *were asked about local problems and how they would solve them. And, we have offered the idea of a Park as an option."* (Senior officer, 2004).

Hence, despite some general scepticism and opposition when the first outcomes became visible and the initiative took on a transnational "European" dimension, consensus grew within the Goričko's

municipalities and later also at higher decision-making levels. In 2002 when the official park establishment process commenced, local and national decision-makers supported the initiative, but a division within the local inhabitants remained and had to be addressed. Some still saw the protected area as a treat to their well-being due to the associated restrictions on human activities, but this division was identified soon enough to be openly addressed and resolved during public consultations (a discussion is given in Rodela, 2008). In 2003 Goričko was officially designated as a protected area.

Our study seems to confirm what scholars have already suggested about the influences that the institutional setting has on the background conditions (collective learning, collective action, multitude of actors and knowledge) which are needed for social learning (Christensen and Sriskandarajah, 2008; Van Bommel et al., 2009). We could point to the question of what might have occurred to Goričo in the case Slovenia had not endorsed democracy and had not been allowed access to the EU pre-accession assessments and programmes.

Emergence of collective action

Interview data suggests that the initiative emerges as a response to what was then seen by some as an un-suitable and un-sustainable development model for this rural area. It is a bottom-up initiative for rural renewal which has grown up, and benefited from, a shared concern and collective action. But how collective action around this initiative formed and managed to endure for a whole decade?

From the respondents accounts we infer that the leadership, which matured within the circle of proponents was an important driving force for collective action to form and endure. These “experts” took a critical de-construction of *issues* (as described above) the regions were having and in this benefited from their own expert knowledge, from already available reports on environmental pollution, but also from own experiences and traditional forms of knowing. Issues were linked back to the developmental model, and the proponents in a reflexive construction of viable solutions started to formulate alternatives. Respondents reported, they tried to formulate alternatives which were not in contrast with the regional rural identity and rural heritage, but would build-upon these resources. Resources (rural indentify and heritage) to be used in the diversification of the rural economy through rural tourism, gastronomy and produce production, while throughout environmental and human health issues were a topic in the debate on the future of these regions.

A further driving force was proponents’ strategic action and the resulting activities which allowed that they interfaced with other rural actors, and portions of local inhabitants, to whom an alternative rural development model was introduced. This occurred through mentioned project activities, e.g. workshops, seminars. The agricultural crisis and a growing awareness about water and soil pollution contributed that over a decade the initiative gained new supporters of which some took a central role and contributed to its development (e.g. associations, municipalities, local developmental agency). The entry of new actors helped that the initiative endured. Here we need to acknowledge that throughout the process besides organized groups also single individuals (activists, intellectuals) , who define themselves as not belonging to a specific group, had an important role.

The type of outcomes that resulted from it

The process that has driven the park initiative seems to have resulted in the following outcomes. First, there are new institutional arrangements that a protected area designation implies for the Goričko. Even if a landscape park, as Goričko is, does not imply strict restrictions as a regional or a national park; nature protection still is a priority and human activities are limited where these prove harmful to the natural environment. Hence, there changes as is; farming standards up-grade, new procedures for land purchase, new protocols when constructing new infrastructure and protocol for the protection of flora and fauna.

Second, a new awareness permeated into this rural area. During the past decade many activities occurred where information and expert knowledge was made available to locals and to different

groups of rural actors. Respondents' accounts suggest that this favoured an understanding of how intensive agricultural practices can affect the natural environment and awareness about alternatives.

> "*[A]bout the otter, before I could have passed by without noticing it, but now you look at it differently. You know that it is* [nature protection] *useful. Frogs and plants too.* [in this region] *we were used for intensive agriculture and then you start looking at it more ecologically. You see the problems*. " (Municipal Public Servant, 2005).

> "*We were* [the region] *the granary of Slovenia. The land is fertile but many farmers keep using a kind of help* [chemical products] *to improve the harvest. It smells like hell and it damages the land, but if you want to get returns this is the option. Otherwise what you can do with a small farm? But, this park is an opportunity also for us* [small farm holders]*, it will keep the earth clean and help me to place my produce*" (Farmer, 2005)

Further, the establishment process seems to have led locals to reflect on the Goričko's *rural heritage,* often perceived and described by images of poverty, remoteness and backwardness. The condition of "rurality" was revaluated. Its characterising elements, not previously considered, are now showcased and used overtly to attract tourism demand. These include the local dialect, the local cuisine, and the type of housing. The local dialect began to be used also in radio broadcasting. A similar revaluation occurred for the traditional peasant housing, which in this region had simple features and a straw roof (panonska hiša). This type of housing was in use until the end of the 18th century when it was replaced with brick houses. In the 19th century only the poorest lived in a panonian house. These were last constructed in the 1920s, but during the park establishment few were secured and two constructed anew, now used as tourist accommodation.

Conclusions

In this paper we presented a bottom-up initiative for a protected area establishment with the purpose to investigate the presence of some background conditions for social learning to emerge, which the literature frequently suggests.

The bottom-up renewal initiative emerged as an alternative, a response to shared concerns about a lagging rural economy and environmental degradation. In this we identified that *multi-actor dynamics* was an important prerequisite that allowed for a negotiation between different perspectives, norms, and power relations present in this rural area. A multitude of actors also helped that the bottom-up initiative did not faded away, but it endured for a decade benefiting from different input and knowledge as became available, on when new actors joined. Also, we identified that the leadership and strategic action, which the park proponents took on board, were paramount and have benefited the emergence of *collective action*. In terms of the type of outcomes that resulted from this process few are very tangible such as a re-orientation of the rural economy and the establishment of the Goričko Landscape Park, other outcomes are less tangible such as is the revaluation of their own rural heritage and rural indentify. Both however may be an indication that social learning, hence a collective process of change as defined by Röling (2002), occurred in Goričko.

In conclusion, the above analysis suggests that *social learning* can occur in a different context than a participatory workshop and without a structured policy intervention. The above identified institutional aspects certainly played an important role, but these can be understood more as contextual circumstances that were present in that moment and helped in the development of the initiative, since these were not policy instruments designed to facilitate social learning. Hence, while we do recognize the need and usefulness of policy instruments targeting sustainable forms of rural economy, a recommendation that comes forward is to integrate these with the understanding of contextual circumstances drawing upon, and enhancing, locally available resources.

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