

Portugal: education, development and citizenship. The foundations of an alternative rural intervention

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The author is the National Coordinator of the ‘Rural Schools’ project operated by the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas (ICE). In this article he offers a detailed analysis of the modern rural world from a European perspective, showing how modernisation and other factors have critically damaged the fabric of rural societies. From this, he postulates the need for rural people to collaborate with those who have the power, in partnerships dedicated to inventing a new rural reality. This builds on the best values of the rural world, yet embraces new ideas and ways of thinking as it constructs and controls its own modernity. The article is illustrated by an example of how this works in practice (page 12)

A critical look at the politics of rural development

The recognition of the extent and depth of the crisis that pervades rural areas of Europe is not new as is shown by the fact that, for several years, the European Union (EU) has invested massive amounts of money in such areas, especially those that it considers under-developed. Just one example: the LEADER+ Programme that supports civil society organisations

in stimulating the development of rural areas, has provided more than EUR 162 million to Portugal alone – and that represents only a small fraction of the EU’s investment in rural areas. Overall, national and European efforts and proposals, while they value some original solutions, are based on a perception of the current state of the rural world in Europe as ‘delayed’ or ‘a mistake’ when compared with industrialised zones.

Because of this, efforts and proposals are structured around three major axes. The first of these centres on an increase in productivity and in the competitive capacity of the agricultural sector. This is to be achieved by:

- modernising production processes and products;
- rationalising agricultural activities via production quotas for each country and each region; and
- improving infrastructure to facilitate the movement of products.

The second axis is about funding the development and marketing of non-agricultural rural industries such as crafts and tourism; and the third is about the reorientation of rural areas, of their functions

and needs, and of those who depend on these for their livelihood. This means attracting industries and capitalising on the unemployed by training them so they are qualified to work in the new industries. Effectively, the idea is to de-ruralise rural areas.

Clearly there have been some positive results from these investments. But, overall, they have not energised or upgraded the rural world. In fact, as many surveys and studies show (Amiguiño, 2002), they did not even achieve enough to justify the ‘demographic bloodshed’ that they have caused; did not make up for the loss of competitiveness of goods and products; and did not alter the rural world’s dependence on, and subordination to, the urban world since 1950 (Freitas, Ferreira de Almeida and Villaverde Cabral, 1976).

Everything was determined and managed upstream, with the idea of bringing the rural world into line with the urban world. The decisions were made by people who themselves lived in the urban world, with the consequence that the kinds of investments that were made hastened the de-characterisation of

the rural world without offering its inhabitants new opportunities in their lives:

- the only time that many people in the rural world actually earned any money as a result of these initiatives was during their training for employment;
- many of the alternative businesses were barely able to survive;
- new businesses did not necessarily generate economic development; and
- as a recent Portuguese television report showed, although some agricultural enterprises created, for example in the Alentejo region, were successful, this was because they were set up by businessmen who had previously established that there was a preferential European market for their produce. This explains why few of these businesses are owned by Portuguese.

The contribution of the state

Over the last 10 to 15 years, we have seen interventions on the part of the state that, in some ways, don't especially reinforce the de-characterisation of the rural world. Instead they help to paralyse it rather than support its rebirth or regeneration. Led by economic objectives – especially the need to save money – and by rationalisation (business efficiency), administrators have centralised resources and services such as education, health, mail and so on, in small towns. And the consequences are clear:

- that support to the rural world is conceived in terms of an urban logic, with services appropriate to urban dwellers;
- that rural inhabitants are implicitly encouraged to

move to where the services are; and

- that interactions between resources and those who use them are weakened which, in turn, means that the potential of rural inhabitants to exercise power, influence and pressure is also lessened.

This network of state services meshes with the actions and growing omnipresence of local Governments that, to a large extent, organise life in rural environments. They do this by satisfying the basic necessities of rural inhabitants – being the source of what people need in order to survive – and therefore being the source of the jobs. In its turn, this reinforces the tendency towards rural stagnation and crisis, as it finds its way down to the level of rural councils. Further reinforcement of this tendency stems from a growth in administrative staff, with many new jobs being filled by outsiders attracted by such employment. The effect of this is to replace local people in rural areas, many of whom are driven to the fringes of the big cities.

Putting this another way: the centralisation that is carried out in the name of improving quality is actually contributing to the stagnation and inertia of the rural environment that it is supposed to revitalise. (d'Espiney, 2003)

An alternative way of looking at development

The profound crisis that is afflicting the rural world is structural. It won't be overcome by returning to the past, by reconstituting the old order, or by removing the original causes of the crisis. Instead, it must start from the effects of the expansion of the market economy and the transformation that occurred in the relation between output and the structure of ownership.

Because of this, the development of the rural world, and the investment necessary for that development, presupposes the inevitability of accepting changes in ways of life, and in the ways in which wealth is generated. And it also clearly presupposes improvements in accessibility, better public services, and new understandings of the nature of agricultural activities.

But the persistence of the rural crisis, despite the measures that were introduced to bring about improvement, shows that these measures alone will not bring about a revitalisation of the rural world. In fact, they have led to greater marginalisation, thereby showing the error of thinking that to modernise is to follow modern fashion.

Seeing rural development in terms of its reanimation and well-being implies seeing it not as something technical and/or organisational, or as a matter of modernising activities or introducing efficient systems. Rather it has to be understood as, and achieved through, social processes that are centred in, and created from in the potential of the rural world.

Seen in this way, modernisation happens through new forms of socio-economic and cultural intervention, through the functional transformation of property and of ownership, and through new rural realities that stem from a new social understanding of rural inhabitants. It is not about external help and the logic of that, but about social processes that produce a future of new forms and practices, that is lived and built by the victims of today's crisis. This must be at the heart of rural development.

Obstacles to the social development of the rural world

It's important to know the causes of a structural crisis, to understand its contours and the depth of the changes that it imposes or produces. However, it's not enough to just have an understanding of the factors that militate against social processes. It is also necessary – even fundamental – to spell out the nature and form of the social obstacles that militate against the involvement and the mobilisation of those who will both be changed, and be the agents of change themselves. There are many such obstacles but here I will focus on just five.

1. *The residual character and the interconnected nature of those activities that are specifically rural*

Rural populations tend to depend more and more on non-agricultural activities for their livelihoods and on agricultural activities becoming viable through these (Leeds 1975). Investment in new forms of rural activities has, in many cases, been related to the creation of facilities that are complementary to those of the urban world, and that are for the enjoyment of urban dwellers. These include: hunting areas; ecological reserves (which, being conceived from an urban logic, are forbidden to rural populations); rural tourism; second homes; and so on.

2. *The rural dweller's dependency on, and subordination to, the urban dweller*

This is, in many ways, a consequence of the first obstacle. Such dependency and subordination is partly a result of rural clients finding themselves facing a multitude of urban providers of essential

goods and services. Equally, it is partly caused by the distance between the rural world and the political and economic decision-making institutions – and indeed, the rural world's distance from the markets for its goods. The nature of the relationship is further reinforced by the increasing amount of goods and non-local produce that the rural dweller requires.

3. *The compartmentalised nature of the essential services that are provided*

In contrast to normal family income which is spent according to need, the income or benefits which a family (and any of us) receives from the state, comes in packages (health, education, culture, and so on). And it is very often provided according to the organisational logic of each service provider, in the form of 'sub packages' that compete with each other.

4. *The social and cultural disruption of the rural way of life affects the identity and the practices of families and of each family member*

Such disruption polarises aspects of rural life that were once interacting: output and consumption; nature and man; informal and formal education; culture and education; possibility and opportunity; and so on. As O'Neill (1988) and Pinto (1985) show, rural communities are not, and never were completely homogenous. The notion of macro and micro is a false dichotomy (O'Neill, 1988) and it has never been, and is not now, possible to talk of communities harmoniously managing the production and consumption of what their labours win from the soil, or of living in a free relationship with nature. The management of these

polarities has always been marked by tensions and imbalances that resulted, and still result, from the structure of society. But even though these tensions and imbalances existed, there was, until recently, interaction between the polarities. Inevitably, the breakdown of interactions necessarily produced changes: new relationships had to develop in families and communities.

5. *The real and continuing loss of the competitiveness of social, economic and cultural goods produced in the rural environment compared with those of the urban world.*

Entering the EU has aggravated this process as traditional products such as cheeses, sausages, vegetables and fruits now have to meet centrally defined standards. In many rural communities, the consequence of this has been the abandonment of traditional activities such as wine making, olive pressing, leather tanning and the making of dairy products.

Towards a definition of strategies for rural development

If these obstacles are to be overcome then it's necessary to define the presuppositions that underpin an alternative rural development that is determined by the rural world itself, a development that understands the rural world as the subject of the development not as its object.

In this, the first necessity is to bring initiatives together. They can't simply pursue their own goals but must act as a means to encourage fellowship, to generate forms of cooperation that help to re-

establish an identity that binds people together, and to develop affection. No initiative, for all that it produces wealth, will ensure development unless it contributes to new relationships with authorities – and those new relationships must develop through establishing fellowship. Initiatives that depend on current relationships tend to lose their potential and be reabsorbed into the current systems and structures. Instead, they need to carry what I would call the ‘alternative power gene’.

The second necessity is to see development as integrated or holistic. This means not only overcoming the effects of the currently compartmentalised efforts of the state and others, but also reestablishing interrelations between those aspects of rural life discussed above that are polarised. Generally, there is a tendency to regard development as integrated when it is carried out simply through the convergence of activities, each of which is designed to remedy problems in one relevant area of community life – education, health, the economy, culture, and so on. In addition, each activity is carried out by the institutions responsible, in line with their own distinct vision. The sum is actually not integrated development, but simply an *ad hoc* collection of actions that responds to a particular set of problems.

I’m not denying the importance of the institutions that deliver such services and resources. But they must work in partnership with the actors of the rural world, and those actors must have the time and space to define strategies to regain – or reinvent – their identity as rural dwellers. An integrated development project has to organise the partnership rather than the

partnership organising the project, adapting itself as agreement is reached about what is relevant.

The third necessity is to anchor the process of constructing the future in activities and dynamics that ensure the sustainability of the alternative way that is developed, and its competitiveness. This is a necessary measure, one that depends on ascribing fair value for produce and services, and on fair exchange in the markets of the urban world – something that is achieved, for example, by several of the initiatives of the Rural Schools project of ICE.

The final necessity is to promote the quality of life, guaranteeing access to the various forms of well-being that modernity brings, but simultaneously to avoid the kind of patronage that transforms rural life into something imposed from outside, something that is somehow contradictory to the rural way of life.

Some strategic challenges

It is clear that we don’t know yet what the rural reality that is to be created will be: that is something that will be decided by rural dwellers themselves, through the processes I have outlined. The four strategic necessities to bet on that are set out above, should be understood not as mapping the path of rural development. Rather, they indicate entry points for the progressive involvement of the currently marginalised rural citizens in the development of a future that is centred in their rural world.

Four such entry points are evident. The first is education as a medium of culture that helps to bring about fellowship. As a time of explanation of

intentions and of the reproduction of social practices, education functions as, or can act as, a bridge between, on the one hand local knowledge, attitudes and practices that socialise contexts and lead to deep understandings of situations; and on the other, the universal knowledge that refines and amplifies local knowledge and carries it forward, thereby breaking down isolation.

It is not by chance that education is regarded as the determining factor in sustainable development; and that, in an initiative in February 2003, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation launched an initiative inviting all its member countries to raise awareness and understanding about the importance of education for the rural population, as a crucial step in reaching the Millennium Goal of the eradication of poverty and hunger.

The second entrance is through the power of traditions and the use of artisan knowledge in energising and promoting rural populations. Naturally, this is not to say that the work practices and beliefs of the past are the future. But it is to say that the work, the traditions, the competences that are passed down from generation to generation, can help to restore an affection for the rural ways, an affection that is the most important ingredient in restoring esteem for rural life and self-esteem, and laying the foundation for rural solidarity. And the future organises itself around solidarity!

The third entrance is via a necessary redistribution of rural resources. This requires a new relationship with those who manage public property, one based on promoting organisation and on the promotion

and exercise of citizenship. And it requires the identification of rights that can and should ensure participation and influence on political decisions – for example, in determining the priorities in autonomous budgets.

The fourth entrance is through treating the older generation and children as priorities and as the main subjects of rural development. The crisis of the rural environment is characterised by desertion/depopulation, and by the ageing of those who remain. Becoming the majority, yet simultaneously excluded from the active population, older people could be seen as bastions of conservation, of stasis, not of the rural future. But if they were seen not as obstacles to progress but as keepers of the affective fabric, as treasuries of knowledge and as custodians of the sense of belonging, they could prompt the discovery of a new identity with specifically rural roots. Their availability because they are pensioners, together with the mobilising force that can be generated by nostalgia for the past, means that older people are very visible actors in several projects that ICE operates – indeed their involvement is a permanent feature.

But to talk of the future necessarily demands being aware of the need for involvement with future generations. In a context of desertion and ageing, children emerge as privileged actors in the transformation of past affection into affection that is recreated and enriched by the new realities that they so easily absorb. Again, the experience of ICE projects, and of projects in several other countries that I have had the pleasure of knowing, allow us to see the potential of children to generate and sustain a particularly dynamic relationship with older people.

Conclusions

These reflections about the rural world centre naturally on the realities of Portugal, realities that are very much parallel to situations in other areas of the Old Europe.

However, the situation of the rural world in countries on other continents – Asia, Africa, Latin America – is clearly distinct. As we had opportunity of seeing during the international workshop in December 2002 in Alcácer do Sal, Portugal, and Lugo, Galicia, the poverty is much starker there; the extent of desertion and ageing is a long way short of that in Old Europe, and generally there is an ethnic dimension to the phenomenon of exclusion in many rural environments.

Curiously, as we also saw in the workshop, these differences are caused, above all, by the specific times and phases in which the process of rural transformation finds itself in a particular place, at a given moment. There are some realities in the Portuguese rural world (especially its crisis) that are embryonic forms of the rural realities of those other countries, on those other continents.

This is not intended to be a universal problematisation of rural realities, and I must underline the fact that intervention projects will only be appropriate if they are drawn from reflections about the situation in the country in which they are operating.

However, I can say that the development of the rural world can in no circumstances be seen as separate or independent from the reality of the urban world,

or from the general structure of society. On the contrary, the crisis that pervades the rural world is the other side of the coin to the crisis that is growing and deepening in the urban world. The causes may be different, as are the routes by which the cities came to be in crisis, and the alternative futures that they will face. But the cities are also being affected by marginalisation, by the loss of quality and character, by centralised control of the measures that are meant to redeem the situation – and even by desertion.

But, it was not my intention in this article to explore the plight of cities! □

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