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CAN THE RURAL LANDSCAPE SURVIVE?

Jesper Brandt

1. Introduction

Globalisation is not new – most regions, especially in Europe, have for centuries been more or less involved in the world market, and the landscape and its use has been marked by that. Urbanization has been an important part in this globalisation process. But a substantial part of the regional economic activities in rural areas has nevertheless been local and the regional and the global involvement also related to the local and regional resource base.

However, the present neo-liberal trends within globalisation goes much further: Almost all economic local and regional activities are now more or less related to the world market, competing globally, and a still minor part of it is related to the local or regional natural resource base, also in rural areas. Thus it is justified to put the question: Can the rural landscape survive?

As landscape ecologists we are biased towards nature and cultural conservation and the need for long-termed sustainable regulation of local and regional land use. However we also have to face the immediate economic facts:

In the beginning of the 1990ties one of the most distinguished monographers of landscape ecology was published, Willem Vos and Anton Stortelders :*Vanishing Tuscan Landscapes* (Vos and Stortelder 1992). The study describes, how a Tuscan landscape – the Solana Basin in the eastern Tuscany in Italy is being transformed from a rich and varied cultural landscape with a very high bio- and landscape diversity, to a more and more monotonous forested landscape, due to the cease of an intensive and varied land use.

I remember a conference in Montecatini in Toscana shortly after the publication, where a gathering of mostly Tuscan planners almost begged the two authors of the book to give advices how to ensure the biodiversity and a management, that could save the natural and cultural value embedded in the landscape of the Solona Basin, not just of historical and natural interest, but also with considerable consequences for the tourist industry: "You are the experts of this landscape. Tell us what to do, and we will do everything to save it". Finally Willem Vos rose to his feet, and said: 'Indeed, the development has given rise to many landscape ecological problems. But landscape ecology cannot solve all problems.' The landscape is vanishing, because the intensive and varied land use in the area does not pay anymore. And I am still so much of a socialist that I cannot blame people to move to the coast, because they cannot find a job here. It is a problem of regional economy in a period of rapid urbanization'.

He could have added: regional economy of urbanization in a more and more globalized world. Indeed he was right. Urbanisation as regional development is mirrored in new trends of rural development, very difficult to control and rule: Global change following urbanisation is after all not the outcome of a few human actions of an immense scale, made in New York or Texas. It is the nearly incalculable number of small actions, which pile up to major changes in space and over time that is in the local and regional development. So, it is difficult to plan. On the other hand, recent development has proved that he was only partly right. Especially within the last years it has been clearer that landscape qualities are in fact of growing importance – also economically – for regional and local development. This offers chances, and everybody – also landscape ecologists - has to face them and find opportunities in local and regional resources.

2. The importance of rural areas for urbanisation

Today, rural communities are not necessarily threatened by urbanisation: Most developed countries have for years been facing trends of counterurbanisation, that in many respects can be interpreted as a reaction against unsatisfying urban conditions.
At least up to a distance of 50-100 km from larger urban settlements rural conditions do potentially have advantages for a modern living in many respects. In many cases the distance can be prolonged considerable if the right combination of conditions exists:
The Dutch advisory Council for the Rural Areas has presented the following list of such advantages, different from or the counterpart to the urban area:

- *"space and openness (in various situations and with various levels of scale)*
- *public accessibility of the space, the experience of freedom*
- *peace and quiet, "slowness", darkness*
- *nature specific for the creation, the national/regional culture and history*
- *'wild' nature which is (still) showing its forces*
- *rural cultural monuments (be they man-made or not) and cultural patterns that show the national/regional history and the development*
- *production potency of soil and water: the source which, if managed well, will never be depleted*
- *a natural source of inspiration and employment"*
  (Advisory council for the rural areas 1997)

They summarise the following broad functions of the urban environment, especially for the urban society:

- *"peace and space*
- *clean water and water reserves*
- *energy (wood, etc., wind, biogas, bio-ethanol)*
- *raw materials (forestry, fibres and other crops for industrial applications)*
- *high-quality food*
- *green space for living, working and recreation*
- *natural and cultural values*
- *processing of waste"*
  (Advisory council for the rural areas 1997)

So, obviously the need is there. Empirically, cases of prosperous rural environments can be found also.

3. What are the characteristics of a prosperous rural area?

However, the presence of rural qualities is certainly not enough. A number of preconditions for their actualisation and sustainable management seem to be of importance, too. To elucidate these one has to put the question: What are the characteristics of such a prosperous and sustainable rural area?
The British geographer John Bryden, studying rural development and policy in Europe for years, has set up the following characteristics of healthy or sustainable rural communities:

1. They maintain their population – have a positive rate of net in-migration. So, they are seen to be good places to live and work in. Never mind, if young people leave for an education or just to see the world, but it is a problem if they never wish to return.
2. They have diversified the economic base, especially beyond the primary sector. Poverty and unemployment should not surpass that of cities and larger towns.
3. The physical and mental health of the rural population is as good as it is elsewhere. This is related to socio-economic determinants, but also to the availability of health care.
4. They value their history, culture and environment and have a pride in their identity. This is used to improve quality of life and economic activities.
5. They have widespread property ownership, clear titles and relatively high rates of locally financed and initiated new small local enterprise start ups. Transaction costs of doing business are low. There are many open and active networks linking different sectors.
6. The local public agencies work together towards common goals and with an agreed value basis, and do not fight against each other. Goals and values are set through local democratic and participatory process. They are working 'bottom up'. There is a lively and democratic local government, with reasonable fiscal and decision making autonomy.
7. They are doing their own development, and not having it done to them by others. Local savings are reinvested locally, rather than being exported. There are many local entrepreneurs. There are local decisions and enough taxation to give local autonomy, which is supported nationally. The autonomy is used wisely for the community. (Bryden 2004)

However, this is a characterisation in socio-economic and political terms, and in reality they do not comprise the importance of ecological sustainability and how to relate to this in the strategy for a healthy and sustainable rural community. The healthy community might exist or not, but is it possible to influence this situation in a local or regional community? What are the most important factors to influence? And who can actually influence?

4. Different types of geographical competence

A distinction between different forms of competence existing to put forward changes in a landscape has been set up by the late Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand:
In a paper on the political geography of environmental management (Hägerstrand 1995) he emphasizes that all human management of the environment is in general based on a clear partition of competence to given geographical domains. The lowest primary domain is the unit of property, within which the owner have the free right to change the landscape, only limited by some general rules set up by society. However the owner or user is the only one that can do physical changes within his or her domain, and this right receive strong protection in almost all societies today. Fixed rules must be followed when they are transferred from one owner or user to the next, and boundaries tend to be very stable over time. Hägerstrand calls this exceptional right to manage and change the primary domain the right to exercise **territorial competence** – this to be seen in contradiction to the much more limited **spatial competence** of all power holders of domains at higher levels – that is municipalities, regions, nation, EU, typically represented by politicians and the public service related to these domains.

They certainly have competence within their strict defined domains, but only the competence to set up general conditions on what should or could be done within the domain or to designate sub-domains, and set up special conditions for these areas. But if they want to change the landscape physically, also the designated areas, they have to make an agreement with the owner or to bye up the land, meaning acquiring the territorial competence of the domain at the lowest level. The only exception to this rule seems to be within the infrastructural sector.
The power holders of higher order domains will often be split up in two different strata: **Functional specialisations**, such as a ministry of environment, and an integrating body, such as a government or a local council, uniting the specialisations within a geographical domain. The functional specialisation might have a certain extended spatial influence, setting up conditions also at the lower levels of domains, but still the power holders of functional specialisation cannot directly make any changes at the lowest level.

5. The limits of symbolic transaction

All the power holders of higher order domains can only take care of **symbolic transactions**: political deliberations, rule setting, control, tax collection, subsidy provision etc.
Symbolic transactions at the social level are vital for the transformation of society and for its ability to unite for common future goals. But we should have no illusions concerning their power in a direct transformation of the rural communities. Hägerstrand characterises the difficulties facing a transformation towards a sustainable use of our landscapes through symbolic transactions in this way:

"The social realm of symbolic transactions has a surface part which is mobile and where only lack of imagination sets limits to the content of desire-pictures about the future. But deeper down this highly visible canopy is held in place by the rather stiff stems of social institutions. Their task is in most cases to resist rapid change. On the landscape itself, for quite different reasons, there is also inertia. It takes almost a century for a coniferous forest to mature. Big cities persist for millennia.
So, when a new thought such as the large-scale management of the biosphere emerges among the desire-pictures, every form of real practical action pointing in a new direction meets a world in which social institutions and physical arrangements are plaited together in an intimate grip and with few exceptions organized for exploitation of nature rather than caretaking and rejuvenation."
(Hägerstrand 1992, translated by the author)

Symbolic transactions have first of all to be formulated and developed in accordance with or at least not against the interests of the power holders of the primary domains.
Looking at John Bryden's seven point list again from that perspective confronts us with the more operational question: How can symbolic transactions stimulate activities especially among the power holders of primary domains to build up and maintain a healthy or sustainable rural community?
The 5th point relates directly to the territorial competence of private property owners. Widespread property ownership and clear titles also mean that people owing their property have access to collateral, hence loans at reasonable interest rates, for investment in landscape changes based on their territorial competence.
The 6th and 7th point emphasises the importance of a joined and efficient effort of all public spatial and functional competences in the area, thus through the local democracy delivering a

responsible and through that also an authoritative guidance for the landscape management and landscape changes made by the holders of territorial competence.
However, these points are also strongly connected to the 2nd point, the striving towards diversifying the economic base. This point has many aspects:

a) The urban population move to rural areas due to the possibilities of getting a territorial competence of even a small area around a private house, in general not economically affordable in urban areas. To a small allotment in the countryside can be added a landscape diversity of the surroundings offering many near-recreational opportunities not present in an urban environment.
b) Indirectly, this gives opportunities both for a basic market, but also as a cheap location for a diversity of small enterprises, taking advantage of the qualifications of people that settle in the rural environment.
c) It might however also attract industry, demanding an open environment giving room for pollution by wastewater, material, smell and noise.
d) Agriculture can and will also diversify in the future in very different ways:
    i) Productive full-time agriculture are diversifying into still more specialised intensifying industrial agriculture on the one side, and different types of organic agriculture oriented not just towards a local and regional market, but also towards a growing world marked for special labelled high quality products, on the other hand. The regional and ecological consequences of this diversification are very different: In general it seems plausible that the organic farming might produce more local or regional coherence than the world marked oriented industrial agriculture, but this also depends on its ability to ensure a regional added manufacturing of the primary agricultural production
    ii) Other farmers will develop more in 'post-productivist' direction, by focusing more on other land-based alternative uses of (former) agricultural land, in a multifunctional use of the territorial domain related to the local and regional context rather than the vertically oriented relation to agribusiness.
e) Private and public forest owners, can be divided in the same manner as agriculture, but are probably in general mowing towards a more multifunctional use of forest resources, often supported by national forest policy developing in that direction.
f) Private and public owned nature reserves are in a very different position compared to designated reserves in private property: Where the owned nature reserves are heavily dependent on the financial capacity of the owner (private or public), the designated reserve is first of all dependent on a well functioning spatial competence among the public authorities.

6. A classification of competences of different land users

How are these different groups of upcoming land users involved in the development of the landscape in a healthy or sustainable community?

The upcoming of new settlers and of small and industrial enterprises certainly will represent a growing diversity among landowners and other people with territorial competence, if it is developed over a broad fan of possibilities. From a landscape point of view, however, the composition of the diversity of farmers, forest owners and owned nature reserves will continue to have a special status, since they will normally comprise the vast majority of the territorial competence within the community, whereas housing and enterprises will only take

up a minor part. However housing settlers and enterprises are nevertheless crucial, since they represent the majority and backbone of the democracy in an active and healthy community. Although industrial enterprises will in general only represent a very limited number of owners or managers, the connection of many settlers to these enterprises as well as their general economic importance for the rural community will give them a considerable influence, however in general not especially involved in landscape management and landscape changes.

	Group of population	Power of territorial competence	Power of spatial competence	Power of functional competence	Influence on health and sustainability
1	Housing – settlers	÷	+	÷	+
2	Small enterprises	÷	+	(+)	+
3	Industrial enterprises	(÷)	(+)	+	(÷)
4	Organic farmers	(+)	÷	(÷)	+
5	Multifunctional land owners	(+)	÷	÷	+
6	Specialised industrial farmers	+	(÷)	+	(÷)
7	Productivist forest owners	+	÷	+	÷
8	Multifunctional forest owners	+	÷	(+)	+
9	Owned reserves	÷	÷	÷	+
10	Designated reserves	÷	+	+	+

Table 1. A sketch of the variation in power of geographical competences and influence on health and sustainability of a rural community among different population groups.

Table 1 shows how the different population groups of a rural community have the power of different geographical competences in their possession.
All 10 groups are involved in the formation of the identity of the rural community, they are all involved in the need to 'do their own development', through the local democracy, supported by (local) public agencies working together. However, in general, the majority of the population will be related to group 1-2, rather few to group 4-6, and very few to the four last types.
Measured in area the situation will be the opposite: Group 4-5 and especially 6 can take up considerable part of the area, where as 1-2 only shared small areas, especially 2. In most rural areas group 6 are in majority, and their common tradition of production practise dominates the way they exercise their territorial competence.

7. Literature

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