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Rural areas development – local needs and external forces

Abstract: *Compared to urban regions, rural areas can be seen as historically marginal space. They, as a rule, leave behind in the process of participation in general developmental trends, mainly due to lack of local capital stock and personalities. Marginality, however, is a context dependent phenomenon and some of its formative features can be converted into factors local development can be based on. The process of commodification of 'non-marginal parameters' may, in the end, lead to opening of rural areas to general trends of globalisation. Embedding of rural areas into global context raises at least one question – what is the role of local communities in decision making process on future development of a region or locality they live in? Should such a decision be taken primarily on local level or is the future of a particular locality predetermined by decisions taken on national or even international levels? In this context, the article discusses problem of distribution of power in decision making process between local community and representatives of 'external force' by use of empirical evidence taken from two examples – blocking of foreign investment aimed at building of huge leisure park in pristine landscape of South Bohemia, and long term clashes between Šumava national park administration and local communities.*

Key words: *rural development, local communities, marginality, tourism, protected areas.*

Introduction

Compared to urban regions, rural areas can be seen as historically marginal space. They, as a rule, left behind in the process of participation in general developmental trends, mainly due to the lack of local capital stock and personalities available. Marginality, however, is a context dependent phenomenon and some of its essential features can be converted into comparative advantages local development can be based on. The process of commodification of 'non-marginal parameters' may, in the end, lead to an opening of rural areas to general trends of globalisation. In this context it is worth raising a question about the role of local communities in decision making process on future development of a region or a locality they live in. Should such a decision be taken primarily

on local level or is the future of a particular locality predetermined by decisions taken on national or even international levels? In other words, what is the distribution of power in decision making process between local community and representatives of 'external force', or, to use Bauman's terms, who ultimately has the legitimacy to define or at least to negotiate the identity of a particular locality (Bauman, 1999)?

Implicit in the rural development approach is the need for the local to engage with the extra-local, since ultimately it is external forces which enable local activities (Ray, 1998). Local identity can be used in mediating a locality's relations with extra-local forces through, for example, trading strategies which involve the 'selling' of localities themselves or the marketing of local products to 'outsiders'. The success in local development depends thus to a great extent on communities' willingness to participate actively in the integrative process and on their capacity for social entrepreneurship.

The premise that localities function as self-defined economic and cultural units, however, proved to be rather problematic (Storey 1999). Conceptually, localities should be seen as fluid, multi-faceted and dynamic entities, and local areas need not be necessarily culturally or socio-economically homogenous (Ray 2000). Cultural diversity within a particular territory, however, does not mean that communities are not able to subscribe to a common territorial 'repertoire' (i.e. a stock of resources or techniques).

The nature of locality is contested, changing and unique, and localities have even been conceptualized as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings" (Massey 1994). This suggests that localities should be thought of as processes, distinct mixtures of local and wider social relations which in turn take their specificity from accumulated local history and culture.

In the light of the Massey's conception of 'places as processes', and Ray's view of the need for the 'local' to engage with the 'extra-local', we can state that the local should not be conceived as being inevitably in opposition to the extra-local. Local actors and networks are enmeshed in relationships with extra-local actors and networks, and "identity has (...) always been negotiated within a complex and often confusing mesh of interaction across multiple geographic scales" (Oakes 1993); the precise manifestation of the local / extra-local dialectic being specific to each place.

In theorising regional or local development it is also important to take account of the factors that can constrain it. Constraints may include cultures of non-co-operation within and between relevant sectors, the lack of formal agreements between key actors, and the lack of a shared vision for the future development of a locality. An awareness of power relations and how these may promote or inhibit the formation of networks of social relations and understandings is, therefore, of key importance (Selin 1999). It can be argued that the issue of power and authority can be resolved simply by including legitimate stakeholders

and identifying suitable conveners to animate the collaborative planning process (Jamal, Getz 1995). This approach, however, does not explain why, how, and under what conditions those with power would be willing to share it with others. Furthermore, in situation, when interests are often not collectively organised, the identification of legitimate stakeholders may itself be a contestable task (Jenkins et al. 2001).

Distribution of power between local community and representatives of ‘external force’ in the land-use planning process is a key issue discussed in the article. It is articulated as a problem of legitimacy of particular actors in negotiating identity of a locality. In order to demonstrate the problem by use of empirical evidence, two examples are used borrowed from recent history. They describe two cases that occurred in the middle of the 1990s, both related to tourism development in South Bohemia. One deals with blocking of foreign investment aimed at building huge leisure park in the vernacular landscape of Jindřichohradecko region; the other tries to depict smooth development of the community based tourism in the Šumava National Park

Method used

The article can be seen as a historical analysis as it describes the situation of the middle 1990s. The idea to build huge leisure park in Rajchéřov village as well as a discussion about the future of the Šumava National Park, as socially sensitive issues, attracted attention of the media at that time. In parallel, they became subject of many research studies, including those conducted by the team of authors. As a result, there has been a relatively exhaustive data and information base available. Secondary analysis of articles in regional and nation-wide periodicals as well as secondary analysis of research reports was applied as the basic research technique to structure the information. It yielded a well balanced combination of scientific and non-scientific knowledge depicting multifaceted nature of both cases. The text below is a short summary of it.

Model areas

Jindřichohradecko region as well as the territory of the Šumava National Park are border areas located in South Bohemia, the former adjacent to Austrian while the later to Austrian and Bavarian Borders (Fig. 1). In most aspects, their recent history went along a similar if not the same trajectory of development. Post-war repatriation of German population and the presence of Iron curtain later on led to changes in social structure and ultimately to the decline of local population. At the beginning of 1990s, immediately after the political change, both areas could be seen as typical examples of marginal areas suffering from a lack of local capital stock and local personalities, primarily in terms of entrepreneurial elite.



Fig. 1. Model areas

Shift from the centrally managed economy to the market driven one led to at least temporal differentiation in the speed of development among particular regions within the Czech Republic. As a result, economic branches such as forestry and agriculture, traditional in marginal regions, collapsed there in their intensive form causing thus vanishing of job opportunities for local people. Discussions on new economic activities to substitute for the ones having disappeared became a hot topic in political debate on all levels of decision making. In this context, tourism began to be mentioned frequently as a very promising means to foster local economic development in marginal areas in general; and in particular in Jindřichohradecko region and the territory of the Šumava National Park. Their typical features, such as well preserved nature and distance from large population centres were assumed to carry positive values for tourism development. Since the nature of their cultural and natural resources was especially appropriate to commodification, and the valorisation of place, both regions were similar in having a potential competitive advantage as desirable tourist destinations. Regions, however, proved to differ in quality of their social and economic capital available, i.e. in factors crucial in the process of locality commodification.

Model cases

Story on the Rajchěrov leisure park:

Rajchěrov is the name of a former village, depopulated after the Second World War, located in the very south of the Jindřichohradecko region, close to the Aus-

trian border. The well preserved natural beauty of the surrounding area (Fig. 2) was recognised region-wide and the whole area was proclaimed nature park “Česká Kanada” in 1994.



Fig. 2 Typical landscape of the border area in the Jindřichohradecko region

In the very same time a Dutch company came there with the intention to make use of the local vernacular landscape and build there a huge leisure park which would be designed to host roughly 2700 visitors (Fig. 3). The number of visitors meets the one of inhabitants living in the nearby laying towns of Slavonice, Nová Bystrice. Such a big investment, which for sure would affect both social as well as natural features of the area, had supporters as well as opponents who jostled in red-hot debates lasting more that three years.

The area of interest was defined socially rather than geographically, as community/population in a close neighbourhood, i.e. as people who could be directly affected by building and operation of the leisure park. Defined in this way, it was in fact composed of some 600 residents and 50 second home owners. They were living along, sparsely scattered. The residents were former employees of the bankrupt local state farm, not skilled enough to meet newly emerging demands; their chance to compete on regular job market was very limited. It was not surprising then that their expectations as to the job opportunities were very high towards the newly emerging potential investment.



Fig. 3 Visual aspect of the proposed leisure park Rajchěfov

The process of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), as a legally framed game, became the platform for the debate. In its nature, the EIA process presumes to be a balanced combination of ‘objective’ expert evaluation and participation of public. The problem at hand was who in fact represented the public in our case – the locals or the extra-locals.

The local population could not be seen a community in the full sense of the word as the local people were socially poorly organised. The sociological study undertaken there (Novotná, 1995) described the area as being “socially defenceless”. Weak position of locals might be the reason why there were two lobbies that fought each other in the process of approval of the leisure park – the Dutch company and its Czech representatives on the one hand and the ‘ecologists’ represented by a coalition of forty seven ‘green’ NGOs, operating nation-wide, academic institutions and regionally operating educational and sport clubs, on the other hand, both extra-local.

In the media, which ultimately were dominated by the ‘ecologists’, the problem was, as a rule, articulated in terms of a conflict between two priorities – interests of foreign capital and interests of nature protection. Local people with their everyday problems and interests as if disappeared. From the perspective of the question discussed, the question of legitimacy in defining the identity of a particular locality, we should say that not only the Dutch company, but as well the ‘ecologists’, who declared themselves as “defenders of the area (including people living there) against the devastating economic interests and against the international capital”, can be accused of arrogance. The arrogance of ignoring the needs of the locality when trying to enforce the interests of nature protection, which tended to preserve the status quo. The ‘real’ locals, it is – the people living permanently in the area, played a rather passive role in this game, being more an audience rather than actors (Bartoš et al. 1995).

In the end, ‘ecologists’ succeeded and the investment project was blocked. However, they did not put realistic developmental alternative on the desk. Both lobbies left the territory after the game was over, letting the local population to live their life in a situation they had not a chance to define.

Story on tourism in the Šumava National Park

Šumava is a name of large mountain range which is shared by three states – Czech Republic, Germany and Austria. Due to the post-war history, the nature-driven processes dominated there during the last forty years. As early as in 1963, protected landscape area was proclaimed there. The most valuable parts of the region were declared as national park in 1991 (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Emblem of the Šumava National Park

Unlike the situation in the Jindřichohradecko region, the Šumava Mts. has a reputation of traditional tourist destination dating back to the end of 18th Century (Fig. 5). Numbers of tourists and particular forms of tourism had been changing over time, the motivation to visit the region, however, remained the same – search for beautiful nature, quietness and physical exercise (Moss et al, 2000). After the change in 1989, ‘nature’ was recognised as the most promising commodity in this region internally, i.e. by local elite as well as by general public (Těšitel et al.1999). Recognition of tourism as the most important driving force to foster local development originated in very good knowledge of local population not only about the natural but also about social capital present in the region.

The territory of the Šumava National Park had recreational facilities of different kind as it had been a target territory for Czech and foreign tourists for a long time, even in the time of communism. Some of these facilities did not meet the standards required by the clientele of that time, and further investments were



Fig. 5 Historical sightseeing tower

necessary. Nevertheless, there were premises as well as tradition (i.e. people – former stewards, now tenants or owners) to provide the necessary basis.

Even though being under nature protection, the whole area sustained cultural landscape cultivated by man, socially ‘coherent’ (Bartoš et al. 1998). The spatial overlap of nature protection interests and interests of local municipalities to commodify natural capital were causing conflicts very frequently. Conflict in this case can be articulated as the conflict between National Park representing the state interests, i.e. extra-local interests, and local population.

The relationship between the National Park and the local community proved to be a key moment for the development of the whole territory. It changed over time. As a part of heritage from the former regime, National Park adopted the paternalist role of the state in the initial stage of its existence. Its administration behaved in this way and local population accepted it in this role. At that time, National Park was the strongest ‘player’ on the territory under its control. With local communities, whose representatives were only learning the rules of the newly born democracy, the administration of the National Park acted in a rather arrogant way – mayors were not seen to be partners to negotiate with. Later on, however, the power became distributed in a more balanced way. To create a common platform against the park, the communities formed the „Association of the Šumava Communities“, which started to function as a lobbying group. Since then, the power of the National Park started to fade and the position of communities got stronger. As a result, National Park changed its strategy from commanding towards co-operation and strived to improve its image towards the public (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Tourists visiting the Šumava National Park

The Association even founded its Regional Developmental Agency Šumava, which started to coordinate tourism activities within the region. As early as in 1995, the agency initiated preparation of the „Concept of Tourism Development in the Šumava Mts. region“. The key point was that all tourism-related subjects in the region participated in its preparation, including representatives of the national park, who were invited as well. The material was not obligatory as it only contained recommendations concerning some crucial points. Nevertheless, it articulated a joint vision of further development of tourism in the Šumava National Park. The material has been regularly updated and treated as a guideline since.

More general conclusions

As a basic setting, the general situation in the Czech Republic, and possibly in all the post-communist countries at the beginning of the 1990s should be taken into account if we try to interpret the aforementioned cases. Besides other things, it was a lack of experience with democracy in general and with involvement of locals in land-use planning in particular, that formed the situation. At that time the land-use planning was a relatively closed process done by experts and state authorities. The people affected by the planned activities were only consulted towards the end of the planning process, if at all. The local population, therefore, had hardly any influence on it and could not usually contribute to the

decision-making process at all. This general statement could be applied to both regions of interest.

However, even though facing the same general situation, the roles of local communities were quite different in each region in responding to developmental challenge. In Rajchěřov, the future of the locality (and the whole area in fact) was negotiated between extra-local players, while the local residents were practically not given the chance to participate in the game. Poor networking and social incoherence together with lack of touristic tradition in terms of skilled working power as well infrastructure in the region could be seen as the decisive factors causing that the local people were not prepared to respond adequately to the challenge. It is not to say they should have agreed with the investment. It is to say that they themselves had to be given a chance to decide yes or no.

In the Šumava National Park, the future was negotiated between local mayors and National Park administration, which in fact represented extra-local interests. The initial pressure caused by the National Park towards local communities yielded to some extent paradoxical result. The communities under pressure learned to organize themselves and formed an efficiently working coalition, which in the end was able to enforce its interests. As the tourism had a long tradition in the region, its future development was seen as something natural in the region. The only discussion was, and still goes on, about its form, scale and intensity to be adequate to local conditions, i.e. not to compromise interests of nature protection.

In the end we had to admit, that the question raised by Bauman concerning the legitimacy of actors in negotiating the identity and the future of locality cannot be answered generally. The concrete answer always depends on a particular situation. Ultimately, it is a historically developed social and cultural capital of a locality or a region that can substantially modify the answer.

Acknowledgements

The study was based on research projects: Participative management of protected areas – a key to minimization of conflicts between biodiversity protection and socioeconomic development of local communities (VaV 610/3/03), funded by the Ministry of Environment CR (<http://www.infodatasys.cz>); Research project of the Institute of Systems Biology and Ecology – AV0Z60870520 – Spatial and functional dynamics of biological, ecological and socio-economic systems in interaction with the global change of climate (<http://www.usbe.cas.cz>); Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity through sound tourism development in biosphere reserves in central and eastern Europe. Grant United Nations Environment Programme, Global Environment Facility Medium Sized Project, GFL / 2328-2714-4829, PMS: GF / 4020-05-01 (<http://www.tourism4nature.org>).

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