

3.3 The need for a less territorial, more people-centred and relational approach

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Background

After many decades in which attention has been one-sidedly concentrated on the “urban future,” since 2021 closer attention is being paid to the “left-behind areas,” where the remaining populations have increasingly been left to look after themselves. According to the EC’s rural vision document (and based on public consultation in rural areas), a large proportion of “local people” are discontented: almost 40% of respondents said that they felt left behind by society and policymakers (in spite of having advantages linked to farming and agritourism). About 50% of respondents stated that infrastructure was the most pressing issue for rural areas, and 43% said that access to basic services and amenities, such as water and electricity, as well as banks and post offices, was an urgent requirement. Around 93% believed that the attractiveness of rural areas depends on the availability of digital connectivity, 94% said that it depends on basic services and e-services and 92% stated that it rests on improving the climate and the environmental performance of farming. Due to limited connectivity, underdeveloped infrastructure and a lack of diverse employment, rural areas are less desirable for younger people to live in (EU, 2021).

The MATILDE Manifesto and the EU’s long-term vision coincide in their plea for closer attention to reinvestment in rural “left behind” areas, which are home to 137 million people (almost 30% of the EU’s population). In calling for the “renaissance of remote places,” MATILDE highlights the need for local autonomy – and also the need to move away from neoliberal development in the direction of alternative development while being explicit about the positive role of immigration and newcomers. Remoteness is presented as a “strength” because it makes it possible to rethink “business as usual” and take the “local” as the new point of departure for rebuilding society. This is different from the EU’s long-term approach, where much emphasis is given to “improving connectivity both in terms of transport and digital access” and making these areas contribute to “green growth.” The top priorities are

making rural areas more prosperous by diversifying economic activities and improving the value added of farming and agri-food activities and agritourism and enhancing resilience by “preserving natural resources and greening farming activities to counter climate change while also ensuring social resilience through offering access to training courses and diverse quality job opportunities” (EU, 2021). The goal is to foster economic, social and territorial cohesion and “respond to the aspirations of rural communities” (which is less strong than the Manifesto’s call for local autonomy), but community empowerment is acknowledged to be important for successful interventions.

There are a number of dilemmas and risks which need to be resolved before rural remote areas are flooded by projects coming from the outside to contribute to sustainable, cohesive and integrated “green” development. What are the core challenges and how can it be ensured that “local” people benefit?

Challenge 1: Remoteness versus connectivity: how to prevent resource-grabbing, displacement and gentrification

MATILDE’s call for the “renaissance of remote areas” comes at a time when large numbers of projects are awaiting implementation for “green growth” and/or achievement of climate goals. Given that there are currently billions available to be spent on the “green transition” and climate change, how to prevent the projectification of landscapes and outsiders taking over, and what will be the long-term for possibilities to achieve integrated, cohesive and inclusive development? What are described as “remote” areas with potential for alternative development in the MATILDE Manifesto can easily be seen as empty areas by policymakers and investors, providing cheap land suitable for green investments. The “green deal lobby” is extremely powerful, and investors are eager to find places in which to install large-scale windmill and solar parks or acquire large tracts of forest land for ecotourism or inexpensive land to be given back to nature (space for reforestation or as flood zones). Since COVID-19, urban residents are increasingly interested in buying second homes, raising prices for land and real estate, there is a risk that local people are not powerful enough to counterbalance futures that are projected by outsiders (Zoomers et al., 2021).

Assessing the possible consequences, it might be interesting to draw a parallel with the global “land rush” – the rapid increase in large-scale land acquisitions following the 2007–2008 world food price crisis as the consequence of large-scale investments in land for food and biofuels, but also with tourism complexes, hydro dams, infrastructure, nature conservation, etc. (Borras and Franco, 2014; Cotula, 2012, 2014; Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; Zoomers, 2010; Kaag and Zoomers, 2014). It is apparent that local populations are often not well-informed or powerful enough to play a real role in decision-making,

and landscapes have experienced rapid transformations, restricting people's access to open commons (land, water, forests, etc.). Investments generate new employment opportunities, but jobs are often given to outsiders (with better educations) or are poorly paid, temporary jobs. Local groups are penalized by their loss of access to commons, or displacement and compensation is often not enough to buy new land, due to rapidly increasing prices. This leads to gentrification and pushes people towards more marginal, low-cost areas and makes them more vulnerable to climate risks of flooding and drought. It is now commonly acknowledged that large-scale land investments have, in many places, been at the cost of local livelihoods and local landscapes, leading to enclosures, displacement and resettlement of vulnerable groups and the fragmentation of landscapes. Given the lack of an underlying masterplan, the global land rush has, in many places, led to the "projectification" of landscapes, which has limited local people's manoeuvring space (Zoomers, 2010). Large-scale land investments in plantations for biofuels, mining, dams, solar and windmill parks, etc. have resulted in landscape destruction – loss of biodiversity and deforestation – and the exclusion of local populations (the rapid growth of "no go" areas).

In conclusion, the inflow of projects will not automatically generate positive results. Given the EU plans to improve connectivity – both in transport and digitally – this is supposed to go hand in hand with the creation of new employment opportunities. But before implementing any "new rural vision," it is important to protect the rights of existing people (including the provision of compensation arrangements) and carefully reflect on what investments are required, taking communities' priorities into account and considering the entire range of intended and unintended consequences, also in the long run. According to the EU's new vision, a necessary requirement for the socio-economic enhancement of rural areas is to improve their accessibility (to make them more attractive), but this may go hand in hand with rising land prices and gentrification (see also Thesis 7), pushing vulnerable groups aside (Zoomers et al., 2016a, 2016b). In other words, paying closer attention to "remote areas" and putting the "local community" at centre stage in decision-taking requires time and good preparation so that communities can take an active role in attracting the right type of investments, anticipate the intended and unintended consequences and find ways to benefit from profit-sharing.

Challenge 2: Local communities are not homogenous – how to deal with diversity and how to define community-based development?

In the MATILDE Manifesto, as well as in the rural vision document, much emphasis is given to local communities – giving them a key role as agents of

change. Whereas the MATILDE Manifesto stresses the need to base “local development” on the foundational economy, the European Commission seems to focus on the potential benefits of green growth. Local development impacts are mainly described in terms of income and employment generation, while rural areas are described as target areas. “Local” is conceived as spatially bound and small, and local “communities” are seen as “homogeneous, territorially fixed, small and homogeneous wholes with shared norms” (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, p. 633), able and willing to make desirable collective decisions such as when negotiating with investors. The challenge is how to deal with diversity: local communities, even if they existed as homogeneous “wholes” – which is, in reality, never the case – are increasingly fragmented due to differential impacts of influences from the outside as well as differences in the abilities of diverse locals to link to nonlocal opportunities. What does “local development” mean, and how can investment plans be brought into alignment with local people’s priorities?

Given that remote areas host various groups with usually different needs and aspirations, the question is how to make sure that plans are compatible with (local) views on “local development” and how to contribute to improved levels of well-being. To conceptualize “development” and gain a better understanding of rural dynamics (going “deeper” than “local community”), it is useful to employ two interlinked concepts influential in development studies: (i) the notion of “development as freedom” advocated by Amartya Sen (1999) and his “capability approach,” for which the basic concern of human development is “*our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value,*” and (ii) the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA), which captures how people build their livelihood using different kinds of capital (Bebbington, 1999; De Haan and Zoomers, 2005; Kaag et al., 2004; Zoomers et al., 2016A).

Typical of the livelihood approach is that – in contrast to the earlier tendency to conceive poor people as passive victims – it highlights the active, and even proactive, role played by the (rural) poor. The emphasis is on seeing people as agents actively shaping their own future, focusing not on what poor people lack but rather on what they have (their capital) and on their capability (Sen, 1999; de Haan and Zoomers, 2005). Given this reality, opportunities for (people in) remote rural areas to take the lead in defining their own future will depend on whether they are able to build consensus on what “development as freedom” is about and make strategic use of the various capitals.

More than elsewhere, people in remote, resource-poor areas are often obliged to combine a range of strategies in order simply to survive; individuals may engage in multiple activities, and the various members of a household may live and work in different places or opt for a development

path characterized by multitasking and income diversification. There is a tendency towards livelihood diversification, i.e., “a process by which... households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their standard of living” (Ellis, 2000, p. 15). In many cases, the bulk of the income of the rural poor no longer originates from agriculture; people have multiple income sources. Distinctions between rural and urban livelihoods are increasingly difficult to make: on the one hand, rural people (who are formally registered as “villagers”) live and work in the city for most of the year (staying with family members and working in construction, housekeeping, etc.); the better-off in the rural areas buy parcels in the cities in order to be able to give their children a better education (exit strategies). On the other hand, people in the urban sphere start growing food crops in the cities (new types of urban agriculture), whereas urban elites are increasingly expanding into the rural sphere by becoming the owners of rural land. Affluent urbanites obtain the land by foreclosing on loans. Increasing land values have led them to look upon land as an attractive commodity for investment purposes.

In addition to multitasking and the blurring of the rural/urban interface, there is a trend in which rural people increasingly develop multilocal livelihoods. Rapid urbanization and the improvement of communications and transport technology have significantly increased mobility. Growing numbers of rural poor now engage in urban and rural life, commuting from the countryside to urban centres on a daily basis, sometimes travelling large distances to earn additional money as temporary migrants, and also, international migration is rapidly increasing. Considerable numbers of rural poor are no longer rooted in one place; although they maintain relations with their home communities, they are also attached to other places and function in larger networks.

Challenge 3: People do not live in containers – the importance of linkages and corridors

In endeavouring to achieve spatial justice, targeting remote, deprived areas – and providing them with projects – will not work. It is important to look outside: people in remote areas do not live in containers, and inspection of their capitals and capabilities evidences that they have geographically dispersed networks – even the smallest groups. Part of the potential for new ways forward arises from the inside, from the locally available resources which could become the basis for new developments, but the dynamics will in the longer run largely come from the outside. Understanding the broader spatial networks – and positionality of remote areas – is a *sine qua non* for understanding the potential dynamics, even in the most isolated places. We

argue that in “rethinking Europe,” it is time for a “mobilities turn” (Sheller and Urry, 2006) that challenges the sedentarist assumptions often still in the minds of policymakers and practitioners trying to plan for the future (Manifesto, thesis 7). Discussions on how to stimulate local development usually end up by calling for actions within fixed and confined settings (“the project area”), but globalization connects even distant people and places (Zoomers and van Westen, 2011). Rather than depending essentially on “local resources,” livelihood opportunities are increasingly shaped by positionality and the way people are attached to and participate in translocal and transnational networks.

In conclusion

We very much support the MATILDE Manifesto’s plea to put remote rural areas back on the policy agenda while stressing the need for community-based development and contributing to social and spatial justice. Since the summer of 2021, these areas have also been targeted by the EU as focal points for implementing “green growth” strategies – and billions of euros are ready to be spent on the “green deal” and projects related to climate change (see Thesis 1). EU recovery plans offer the occasion to put remote areas at the centre of the debate on the future of Europe. This is positive, but it also has risks. Citing the global land rush, we have shown the danger that remote (“empty”) areas may be invaded by large-scale investment projects from the top down (e.g., solar and wind parks, ecotourism projects and/or biofuel plantations, etc.) which do not offer space for “new rural and mountain narratives” (Thesis 2) and without really taking root in the territory concerned.

In order to achieve MATILDE’s goal of turning remote areas into breeding grounds for alternative development and social innovation, priority should be given to strengthening the self-determination capacity of local communities. Communities are, however, not homogeneous, and community empowerment is required in order for priorities to be set (and consensus to be built) in regard to the desired pathways of change. Given the characteristics of these areas (i.e., the high incidence of inflow and outflows of people), community building should be seen as a moving target. The “renaissance” of remote areas requires an open approach: rather than defining a “local” community on the basis of belonging to a particular territorially bounded space, it is important to include the people moving in and out of it. Given current realities – especially in rural and remote areas – part of the population will constantly cross boundaries (and be regularly outside) but can still make important contributions to the flourishing of the so-called “foundational” economy.

We agree with the MATILDE Manifesto (Thesis 9) that we need new criteria for a community belonging based on people's actual contribution to economic, social, cultural and political life, instead of one based on only legal and normative assumptions of belonging. Hence, newcomers are part of community as long as they perform "acts of citizenship" and take an active role in the provision, defence and reproduction of the local commons. Adopting this stance means that we need to distance ourselves from pre-established ideas about "integration" and "assimilation."

Finally, the dynamics and development potential of remote areas will usually not depend on local factors. Rural and mountainous areas cannot be seen as stand-alone places (Manifesto Thesis 3). They form part of wider networks, and positionality is one of the major determinants for being able to attract the human and financial resources required for alternative development or not. We argue that instead of focusing on the (socially constructed) confined space in which local people live, more attention should be paid to the relational aspects of livelihood and development, acknowledging that there is a need (even urgency) to deal also with transformations coming from the outside. Instead of trying to keep people in place and focusing on local assets, the challenge is to have a trustful and productive relationship with the outside. Establishing an extended network with people in different localities will help to mobilize resources in multiple directions, getting the best from various worlds. A less territorial, more people-oriented and relational approach could help to achieve a more sustainable and inclusive society.

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