

★ Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, of the ETUDE project, says that to successfully develop rural processes a wide-variety of issues need to be worked through. However, with the many lessons learned throughout Europe, a self-sustaining 'rural web' is closer than ever before

The roots of regional rural development

Rural development processes have led, in many European regions, to the creation of new economic activities that make a significant contribution to the commercial attractiveness and overall competitiveness of these regions. Over the last two and a half years, researchers from six European countries have analysed the nature and dynamics of regional rural development. Their research programme, ETUDE (Enlarging Theoretical Understanding of Rural Development), is aiming to better conceptualise rural development. This is not merely an effort to create a comprehensive theory encompassing rural development, but more because 'nothing is as practical as a good theory'. ETUDE has studied more than 60 rural development initiatives during the course of its work, and engaged in an in-depth analysis of 12 regions. The study covered mature as well as incipient realities, successful and failing initiatives, blossoming regions versus others that stay, as the saying goes, 'in the mud'.

Network of encounters

The main and strategically relevant finding of the ETUDE programme is that successful rural development processes are rooted in a myriad of encounters, transactions, interactions and networks that link people, resources, activities and markets. This loosely structured constellation is referred to as a 'rural web'. A well-developed rural web is characterised by synergy: i.e. it supports many rural development activities just as it triggers new ones. The presence of a strong rural web that extends in time and space and covers different levels makes rural development into a self-sustained and, if not right away, a self-strengthening process. Thus, any chronic dependence on external funding is avoided.

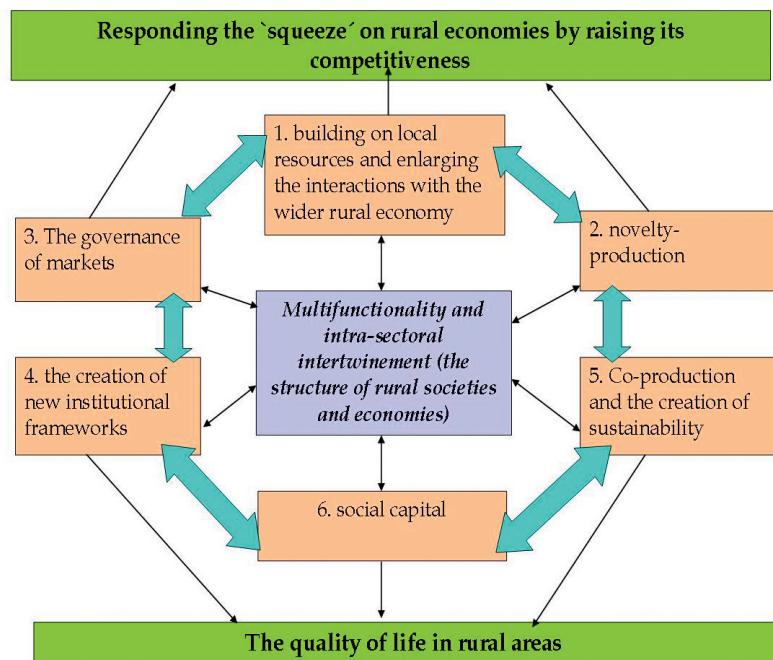


Figure 2 – The dimensions of the rural web

It might take many years before a rural web is constituted and able to sustain the regional rural development process. Such webs are basically created through the construction of new meeting points, increases of value added, decentralisation, innovativeness, bridging of different sectors, the use and revitalisation of local resources, and the organisation of 'attractiveness'. Figure 1 illustrates a rural web. At the lower level there are actors and enterprises involved in activities such as local processing and marketing, nature and landscape management, and the provision of care and agro-tourism. Through such activities value added is increased and new meeting points are created, for instance between urban consumers and rural

producers. At the same time these activities are coordinated through networks that allow for the inclusion of more actors.

In a next step the networks are then linked in new institutional patterns, which allow for decentralisation, regional embedding and a strengthening of innovativeness.

Rural webs also tend to be multidimensional, as can be seen in figure 2. Endogeneity refers here to the degree in which the regional economy is built on locally and regionally available resources. Novelty production refers to the capacity to innovate and to combine formalised with tacit knowledge. Together with sustainability, social capital, the governance of markets and the capacity to construct new institutional arrangements, these are the 'cornerstones' of rural development.

Another strategic finding is that town-countryside relations are increasingly important in rural development processes. Through successful rural development in regions surrounding the big cities, the quality of life in the latter is improved considerably.

What the programme found

From the findings of the ETUDE programme several policy recommendations have been derived. ETUDE indicates that an ongoing funding of rural development activities by, for example, European funds often is

around. It is precisely the other way around. Through the development of new multifunctional enterprises that link, through new market circuits to urban consumers many areas that otherwise would be marginalised, are now able to continue and to revitalise food production. In this respect, rural development represents a major line of defence that supports food production. This also applies to many family farms in highly productive areas. In short: rural development might very well help to avoid new 'food emergencies'.

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unnecessary. Rural development activities are to be grounded on a well-extended rural web that sustains these activities. Hence, a smart financial and technical assistance aiming at a further unfolding and/or consolidation of rural webs is far better than any 'direct funding'. The project has also concluded that enlarging the room for local and regional self-regulation (i.e. reducing the often asphyxiating external prescription and control) is an important vehicle for further strengthening rural development process at regional level.

The ETUDE programme also counters several myths that still surround the discourse on rural development. The results show, in the first place, that rural development is definitely not to be seen as an adieu to

Secondly, ETUDE shows that rural development is not to be considered as a 'luxury' that might be afforded in times of economic well being, but which is, in times of crisis, to be 'stripped'. Through rural development activities, important parts of the rural economy are grounded on new, more efficient forms of energy consumption. The emergence of regional markets for food and agro-related services also helps to reduce dependency on carbon energy. Finally, it is through rural development that new price/quality relations are introduced into the food markets. This helps consumers to spend less, whilst quality levels of food are higher. Meanwhile, the producers and processors involved might obtain better incomes. ★

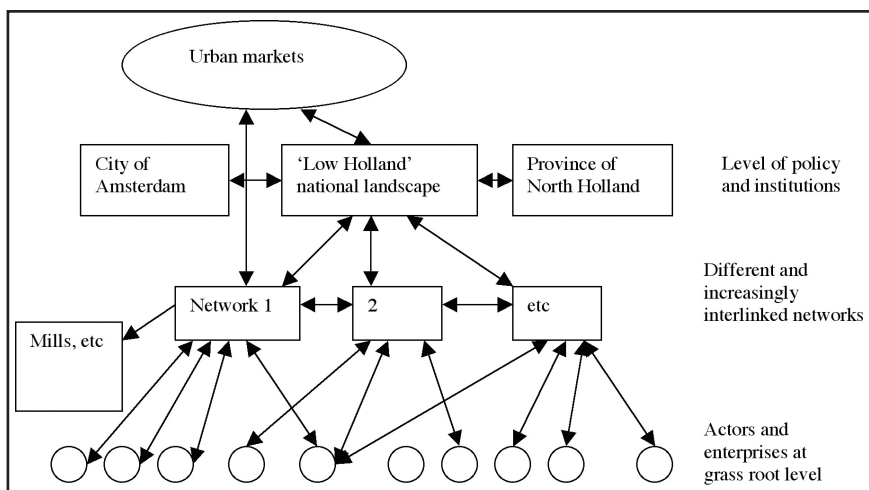


Figure 1 – The contours of newly emerging rural webs

At a glance

Full Project Title

Enlarging the Theoretical Understanding of Rural Development – ETUDE

Project Objective

This project aims at an improved understanding of the real nature of regional rural development processes. It equally aims at the elaboration of effective policy proposals

Project Funding

Sixth framework programme
– €713.000

Project Duration

February 2007 / February 2009

Project Partners

- Institute for Rural Development Research (IfRLS), Germany
- University of Perugia, Department of Economics and Food, Italy
- Cardiff University, School of City and Regional Planning, United Kingdom,
- MTT Economic Research, Finland
- Baltic Studies Centre, Latvia
- Wageningen University, Rural Sociology Group

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Jan Douwe van der Ploeg currently holds the chair for transition studies at Wageningen University. He was involved in both the Cork and the Salzburg Conferences on Rural Development. Previously he coordinated a EU research programme on the 'socio-economic impact of rural development'. With Terry Marsden he is co-editor of *Unfolding Webs: the dynamics of regional rural development* (van Gorcum, Assen, 2008).