

Regional sustainability transitions:

Countryside Consumption

Introduction

This cluster relates to the emergence of new management forms in small scale farms, through lifestyle farming: farming undertaken not as a primarily income generation activity, but mostly for recreational purposes or as a determinant of rural lifestyle, close to nature and to healthier consumption and life habits.

From the three cases considered, there is one formally organized, from Bulgaria, and two which correspond to spontaneous processes, in Scotland and Portugal. The Bulgarian case is the Trinoga association in the village of Zhelen, 50km north of Sofia, integrated into the Solidarno project, a formally organized initiative at national level, which since 2005 has been promoting the idea of community supported agriculture and locally grown food. The Scottish initiative concerns lifestyle farmers in Aberdeenshire: households living on and managing land holdings of less than 10ha for recreational and life quality purposes. The Portuguese case concerns small farms in the surrounding area to Montemor-o-Novo, 100km from Lisbon in the region of Alentejo, increasingly being occupied by lifestyle farmers who are often new residents with an urban background.

Background to research

The main goal of this cluster is to grasp the leading motivations of these lifestyle farmers, the changes they introduce in their management in relation to commercial farmers, and mainly, how they are accepted by the farming community, by the rural community, and how much their management options are considered, accepted, and even explored, within the agricultural sector.

In the three cases, the innovation is concerned with a new way of understanding and relating to the countryside, from the land owners' perspective and at the scale of the farm units, one that goes beyond the conventional (pre-modern) rural production functions and is therefore linked to the notion of multifunctional rural transition. Changes going on in the rural space and the way society relates

to this space, lead to the emergence of a variable mix of consumption and protection values, contesting the former dominance of production values. This is leading to greater complexity and heterogeneity in rural occupancy – what also relates to novel land management paradigms. Lifestyle farmers have other priorities than income generation in their land management, and may therefore represent an opportunity for the maintenance or enhancement of the amenity and environment related functions nowadays expected from the farming landscape. At the same time, lifestyle farmers are residents of rural areas and impact on social structures within their rural communities.

What changed?

The temporal scale of the three initiatives is not the same, with the Scottish case dating from the 70s, the Portuguese from late 90s, and the Bulgarian only from the last 5 years. The spatial scale is also distinct: a small village in Bulgaria, a surrounding area to a small town in Portugal, and the whole Aberdeenshire in Scotland. The processes are thus in different phases and have different relevance. Nevertheless, it is observed that there is a change in the sense of expansion of the lifestyle farming, in number of farms, and also in the acknowledgement of this new type of land management, by the local communities. It is a different management, as motivations are much different from those



Traditional small scale farming in Zhelen, located 50km from Sofia in the Balcan mountains, Bulgaria

of commercial farmers, ranging from life quality to proximity to nature to a search for healthier food.

Furthermore, the three initiatives: a) are largely bottom-up processes, b) have little or no formal organization (no formal organization in Scottish and Portuguese cases, some level of formality in the Bulgarian case); c) may derive in new ways of managing the land and create new forms of agriculture; d) provide little emphasis to marketing or create a direct link with consumer (in a type of post-productivist rationale), although lifestyle farmers are likely to use their purchasing power in rural areas; e) refer to a relatively new local form of rural occupancy; and f) create new types of social relationships amongst the initiative-related actors (regarding the local context) and between these and other local actors (urban or rural) and g) primarily involve 'new entrants' to land management, but are not considered themselves 'farmers'. Lifestyle farmers are usually highly educated (although not always in agriculture), with the income capacity or personal wealth to enable purchase of a small farm.



Two of the lifestyle farmers inquired in the Paião-Reguengo case study area. On the top, José, who is originally from the town of Evora, has no background in farming but has settled as an organic farmer already 30 years ago. On the bottom, Bruno, Italian, with an urban income and living in the farm for 11 years now, producing his own organic food.



An overall view of the Paião-Reguengo landscape in Montemor-o-Novo, in the region of Alentejo, Portugal. This small scale landscape, found in the surroundings of small towns and cities, is highly contrasting to the large scale latifunda with extensive silvo-pastoral use, that dominate the region

Key lessons learned:

The main driver for this changing process is the generalised demand in society for environmental, nature, health and well-being values. Lifestyle land management is also facilitated by the increased accessibility of rural areas and mobility of individuals, coupled with IT advances that make working from home more feasible. The impact in terms of area, in the physical landscape, is limited, but the maintenance of a living landscape in areas that otherwise would be prone to abandonment or simplification, should not be underestimated. Further, there is a strong impact on the rural communities, as new people and new ideas come in and create new dynamics and networks, often more informed and aware of new society trends, than the locals.

The growth in lifestyle farming, in the Portuguese and Scottish cases in particular, is an example where change has occurred in the absence of a formal 'movement' or policy initiative. The agriculture sector does not appear to recognise this approach, and as such, it is growing without regulation or monitoring by agricultural policy-makers. A change which has the potential to impact on the care for the physical landscape, environmental awareness in rural communities, the introduction of innovations, the social dynamism, is left un-addressed and thus undervalued. In contrast, the housing sector, mainly the real estate market, is well aware of this process and is treating these small scale farms as highly valuable residential properties. This further reduces the likelihood of the properties being purchase for commercial use. Lifestyle farms are protected from commodity price fluctuations and other risks associated with commercial

agricultural production, but are more vulnerable to changes in the housing market and economy in general.

For further information

See the FarmPath project web-site:

www.farmpath.eu

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