

Editorial

Sustainability and Development: From Agrarian Development to the Paradigm of Sustainability

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In post-industrial societies, the new ruralities represent scenarios of diffuse socio-spatial frontiers that overflow the classic rural/urban dichotomy [1,2]. The expression “new ruralities” is used to characterize diverse areas that intermingle realities that could be discerned more clearly during the period of industrial development but which, today, represent an almost indiscernible continuum, due to the socioeconomic transformations these areas have experienced and the permanent mobility and disengagement from them of significant parts of their populations [3].

In this context, where it is difficult to define what is urban and what is rural and to clearly demarcate the physical and socioeconomic boundaries that currently separate rural from urban areas [4], the new ruralities appear as meeting places in which the characteristics of the traditional poles of rural and urban converge. In the past, these poles were usually well-delineated, unlike the heterogeneous and complex mixtures that frequently characterize today’s rural scenarios.

Today’s ruralities have experienced profound transformations that have provided fertile ground for the development of new scenarios. Analysis of these requires the creation of new heuristic elements. In this context, the social sciences dedicated to the study of these ruralities have come together from various perspectives to analyse their inherent complexity and dynamism [5]. Just a few years ago, the rural was inexorably linked to tradition, stability and upholding ways of doing things that had stood the test of time. But today’s ruralities are laced with ingredients that were, until recently, alien to them, such as innovation, science, breakneck social dynamics and continuous changes in the characteristics of the population that they harbor.

Rural landscapes and territories are continuously mutating. This makes them very difficult to analyze when we try to study them. This is occurring at the same time as public policies and discourses are emerging, and increasingly taking hold, that seek to empower and involve the social actors in the new ruralities [6]. This is in tandem with forms of development of these new ruralities that are not solely based on increasing agrarian production, as was the dominant trend until the final decades of the 20th century. Rather, these are concerned with the ecological and demographic sustainability of these rural areas, conceived as spaces where diverse socioeconomic activities take place, such as rural tourism [7] and localization of certain industries and services.

The new ruralities have changed from being considered places with conservative ways of life and traditional values [4], to territories with ever-increasing and more intensive connections to urban areas. This offers numerous possibilities for the modernization and transformation of these rural areas. In Europe, these areas and their populations are increasingly merging with urban spaces and realities. These ever-increasing interconnections between rural and urban environments—if that distinction remains valid today—are producing significant influences between rural and urban areas. This is a two-way relationship that generates a dual ruralization-urbanization and urbanization-ruralization process, through the development of characteristics traditionally considered urban in rural



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environments, largely thanks to new information technologies (ICTs). But we are also seeing the acquisition of some patterns of behavior characteristic of rural environments in large cities, such as green spaces and areas dedicated to the small-scale production of organic crops, and other forms of self-production based on creativity when making use of homes and other socially shared urban spaces.

In such circumstances, where the development of many rural areas is linked to consumption by urban populations, one of the research challenges is to analyze the influence of the interrelations resulting from this encounter between local rural populations and new residents, due to increasing migration from urban to rural areas and the ever-increasing number of tourists visiting rural areas, etc. Researchers should also be interested in the incessant search for the “natural” in urban spaces [5] e.g., plots dedicated to growing plants, vertical and community gardens, etc. This represents a sample of the transformative capacity of “the rural”, which is continuously being reconstituted. This is taking place in a scenario where the classic distinction between rural and urban—as specific and frequently conflicting conceptualizations—has been overtaken by the emergence of a rural-urban continuum [6] providing a basis for the disappearance of conflicting characteristics between the rural and urban poles. As a consequence of this continuum, both poles have tended to become established as points in an ever less differentiated reality in which the urban-rural and the rural-urban appear as more or less diffuse or hybrid units of analysis.

At the same time, analytical conceptions and practical situations are emerging, increasingly vigorously, that highlight the pertinence of non-agricultural uses of ruralities, associating rural territories with other industrial and more wide-ranging uses. This enables economic diversification and multi-functionality in ruralities, opening up new possibilities that would not previously have been possible.

Every type of activity in nature, and every other environment, now has to consider the principle and approach of sustainability, as this cuts across every spectrum. There is a very close relationship between sustainability and rurality as they link the principles inherent to the ecological and environmental equilibrium that underpin our existence. It could be argued—without fear of being wrong—that sustainability is the guiding principle of land management. This is even more true in the case of rural territories [7]. The sustainable exploitation of resources, and the preservation of our rural heritage for future generations, are now clear lines of action in most development programs and other policies affecting rural areas.

Sustainability is a core concept. It provides the foundations on which almost all new environmental proposals are developed and on which the most optimistic studies of the outlook for economic development and preservation of the environment are based. A number of international summits on environmental issues have been held since the 1970s. These summits can be considered the starting point for the internationalisation of the concept of sustainability, which brings with it a new perspective that goes beyond economic production to seek to safeguard our natural and environmental resources and heritage, and the vitality, balance, and demographic and socioeconomic dynamism of these areas. A priority objective in this search for sustainability is enabling a balance between the necessary economic growth—and, above all, development—and preserving the planet’s natural and environmental resources. The ultimate purpose of all this is to ensure quality of life and well-being for the global population from an inter-generational perspective [8].

The classification of natural resources as heritage, and the declaration of protected natural spaces as biosphere reserves or similar legal constructs, represent milestones in establishing the paradigm of sustainability. Ensuring the future of areas with special protection and applying sustainable usage patterns for local populations have now become generally accepted strategies. This trend is demonstrated by there now being more than two million protected spaces worldwide, covering around 15.5% of the planet’s surface [9].

We could make special mention of the management of water resources [10] as these often provide essential support for various human uses of ecosystems where there is particular difficulty in respecting their balance. Management of these resources from

the perspective of sustainability makes a considerable contribution to preserving these ecosystems [11]. Most of the actors present in ruralities, irrespective of whether they are involved in agriculture, share the opinion that sustainable management of the territory will always contribute to the absence of over-exploitation and to the conservation of natural resources. Deciding on the type of environmental management is a different question, as the social actors involved are faced with a range of options. While some favor production-centric options for management of the territory, an ever more significant number of others would prefer to preserve their natural spaces in the most pristine condition possible. In reality, specific sustainable development strategies have been complemented with actions taken from between these two options for the management of natural resources.

Management of protected areas requires a new approach that enables holistic management of nature and the establishment of systems of protected areas. Protected areas are usually not extensive enough in themselves to maintain the ecological integrity of their ecosystems, as, in most cases, the key natural processes that determine them involve spaces that do not respect administrative boundaries. The administration of protected spaces, therefore, needs a consistent model of global administration that stretches beyond the administrative boundaries in which they are often located under the current, fragmented, management model for protected areas. This needs to be contextualized, based on the natural processes that define these ecosystems [12,13].

In this regard, and in accordance with the criteria of effectiveness in the management of protected spaces, a new form of management has been proposed based on eco-regions defined by geographical patterns and relationships involving the environment and the weather, vegetation, soil, geomorphology and functional connections among the protected areas and the surrounding area. This would consider the ecological and administrative integration of protected spaces in the territorial context [12,14].

This is a realm where we can observe the emergence of sustainability as the guiding principle for public policies particularly clearly. Any measures implemented in a rural area require environmental impact assessments which evaluate the effect of the measure on the environmental balance in the area, and the effect it would have on its sustainability and ongoing existence. This means that public policies are becoming very sensitive to the sustainability of their results, particularly in areas where the environmental balance is fragile. Agricultural activity and the public policies that shape it are clear examples of this. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provides a set of public policies affecting ruralities in the European Union. It regards respect for sustainability as both important and unquestionable, providing a priority principle in the implementation of its policy measures [15]. The CAP emphasizes the diversity of land use, maintaining the activity of populations living in European ruralities and consolidating the principle of sustainability and preserving their resources—both natural and human—for the future [16].

It is a palpable fact that the development of the CAP has been marked by a significant and continuous effort to achieve the socioeconomic and cultural transformation of Europe's ruralities. Multiple policies have been implemented to foster the development of rural areas. Nevertheless, the concept of rural development has undergone a number of changes, evolving from a production-centric perspective focusing on agrarian modernisation, towards an increasing focus on the overall sustainability of rural areas. This evolution has happened at the same time as the principles of sustainable development were emerging and taking hold with overwhelming importance, in both rural and other socio-spatial contexts and conditions. In the field of agrarian production, the shift towards sustainable development has basically sought to foster balanced coexistence between agricultural production and preservation of the environment [17].

A new market niche based on green marketing has emerged as a result. Green marketing is defined academically as activities designed to produce the exchange of goods and services that meet human needs through management and protection of the environment [18]. This is a form of marketing employed by companies to market environmentally-friendly

products [19,20]; i.e., products that are more environmentally responsible than others on the market and that are based on innovation and foster new lifestyles [21,22].

This new perspective of sustainable development is clearly exemplified in European Union policies characterized by support for economic diversification in rural areas and no-holds-barred commitment to strategies of integrated production and recognition of the organic production of a range of products through labeling. This is where we can clearly see the connection between environmentally friendly—in the widest sense—and sustainability. The best guarantee for the continuity of European ruralities in the future comes from the European commitment to a paradigm of sustainable agricultural production (through the principle of environmentally-friendly production), local production (promoting the establishment of protected geographical indications, Regulatory Boards for protected geographical indications and similar [23]) and maintaining the populations of rural areas. We need to consider the principles of sustainability, food sovereignty, protection and promotion of organic agriculture, and sustainable development to be the four pillars that will support these ruralities in the near future. One of the key challenges for these ruralities is to increase production through the development of technologies that are eco-efficient in terms of their consumption of natural resources and respect for the environment. Andalusia's rice fields provide an example of this. They are using technology to enhance production methods, which is increasing efficiency (increasing the volume of production from a smaller number of fields compared to other parts of the country), combined with an environmentally respectful production model (fostering a system of integrated production). In this area, adjacent to Doñana National Park (a protected natural space), a symbiotic relationship has been achieved between the protection of natural resources and development. This development is not just limited to the production of rice. It also includes electricity generation from renewable resources through the installation of solar panels, together with fish farming and promoting sporting activities and bird watching. This is all helping to retain the rural population in the area [10,24].

The contributions in the Special Issue on "Rural Sociology, Agriculture and Ecological Territorial Development" address various important aspects for the analysis of the reality of rural areas today. We start with "Constructing Organic Food through Urban Agriculture, Community Gardens in Seville", which provides a thorough study of community gardens and their organic management. Jordi-Sánchez and Díaz-Aguilar (Contribution 4) undertake comparative qualitative research into urban agriculture, its connections with organic production and the social bonds it generates.

The article "Gender Differences in Knowledge, Use, and Collection of Wild Edible Plants in Three Spanish Areas" takes a similar approach but focuses on non-urban environments. In this work, the authors, led by Acosta-Naranjo (Contribution 1), study the collection of edible wild plants that are prized by the local population in Doñana National Park, the Sierra Morena in Extremadura, and the Sierra Norte of Madrid.

In their article "Andalusian Organic Farming Plans (2002–2016): Themes, Approaches and Values", Jiménez-Díaz and Collado-Campaña (Contribution 2) analyze the content of political action plans and how these affect areas involved in organic production in Andalusia. The authors conclude that the parties involved in preparing and implementing these plans have prioritized production and technocratic-centric approach at the expense of approaches focusing on sustainable, local, agro-organic communities.

The contribution by Escobar-López, Amaya-Corchuelo and Espinoza-Ortega (Contribution 3) also addresses the sustainable development of rural communities. Their article "Alternative Food Networks: Perceptions in Short Food Supply Chains in Spain" investigates distribution through alternative organic-production channels. They apply a mixed methodological strategy to analyze the question of food distribution through short supply chains and potential strategies for extending these.

Sustainability is addressed in a different way in two contributions focusing on rural development and socioeconomic conditions in two areas very distant from each other—an area of Andalusia and a rural area in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. In "Potential for Sustain-

able Development in the South-eastern Spanish Region of Guadix”, Álvarez-Lorente and Entrena-Durán (Contribution 5) investigate the implementation of development plans in the Guadix region. Their study concludes that, given the scanty success of the development programs implemented to date, these programs require greater local involvement.

With regards to Mexico, the authors, led by González-Félix (Contribution 6), apply qualitative techniques to research socioeconomic conditions and traditional agricultural practices in rural areas of the state of Sinaloa. The authors conclude that the two positive economic effects they identified (consumption of own production and marketing) can be promoted to improve production and family finances, fostering self-employment and preserving family agricultural traditions in rural communities.

We finish with the contribution from Muñoz-Sánchez and Pérez-Flores (Contribution 7) which offers bibliometric results on the connection between environmental values and organic production in the context of publications in the journals of the international scientific community. Content-analysis techniques supported by software are used to generate a pattern of lines of research into these issues and diagnose the research fields and strategies at the start of the 21st century.

List of Contributions

1. Acosta-Naranjo, R.; Rodríguez-Franco, R.; Guzmán-Troncoso, A.J.; Pardo-de-Santayana, M.; Aceituno-Mata, L.; Gómez-Melara, J.; Domínguez, P.; Díaz-Reviriego, I.; González-Nateras, J.; Reyes-García, V. Gender Differences in Knowledge, Use, and Collection of Wild Edible Plants in Three Spanish Areas
2. Jiménez-Díaz, J.-F.; Collado-Campaña, F. Andalusian Organic Farming Plans (2002–2016): Themes, Approaches and Values.
3. Escobar-López, S.Y.; Amaya-Corchuelo, S.; Espinoza-Ortega, A. Alternative Food Networks: Perceptions in Short Food Supply Chains in Spain.
4. Jordi-Sánchez, M.; Díaz-Aguilar, A.L. Constructing Organic Food through Urban Agriculture, Community Gardens in Seville.
5. Álvarez-Lorente, T.; Entrena-Durán, F. Potential for Sustainable Development in the Southeastern Spanish Region of Guadix.
6. González-Félix, G.K.; Guevara, V.M.-P.; Peinado-Guevara, H.J.; Cuadras-Berrelleza, A.A.; Herrera-Barrientos, J.; López-López, J. de J.; Guadalupe, Z.-E.N. Backyard Agricultural and Farm Activity as an Option of Socioeconomic and Food Improvement in the Rural Towns of the Municipality of Guasave, Sinaloa.
7. Muñoz-Sánchez, V.-M.; Pérez-Flores, A.-M. The Connections between Ecological Values and Organic Food: Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Review at the Start of the 21st Century.

Author Contributions: F.E.-D., V.-M.M.-S. and A.-M.P.-F. carried out all the stages of the paper: conceptualization, conception, design, research, analysis and conclusions, writing, and final review. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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