Changing strategies and stakeholders

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The Contraviesa is a mountainous region of southern Spain which has seen many crises in agriculture over the years. This has led to depopulation and a consequent loss of social amenities. Traditionally the region produced figs, almonds and grapes, though it has never been easy to wrest a living from farming in the area. Some recent initiatives to use the endogenous resources, particularly for wine making, and possibilities for regional specific, organically healthy products have achieved a measure of success. The revival of agriculture is vital in attracting tourism, another possibility for the future.

The Contraviesa in Spain

The Contraviesa is one of the many so-called "marginal" areas in Europe, rural areas that have relative disadvantages over other regions, due, for example, to topography or remoteness. It forms part of what is commonly called the Alpujarra region in the province of Granada in Andalusia, the Southernmost part of Spain. The Contraviesa is a mountain ridge (1,500 m), cramped between the Sierra Nevada mountains in the North (3,500 m), and the Mediterranean Sea in the South. The Contraviesa is intersected by several small gorges, creating a very diverse landscape embracing a complex set of agro-ecological niches.

Farms easily cover 300 metres difference in altitude. Such conditions make the organization of the work on the land and the performance of agricultural tasks difficult, but at the same time do enable the spread of risks and labour throughout the year. Since Arab times, people have cultivated grapes in the Contraviesa that are fairly well suited to the predominantly slate soils, giving a production low in volume but high in quality. Figs have also been a constant element in the local production system. Together with almonds, grapes and figs are currently the main cash crops. Annual crops grew in importance when Christians expelled the Arabs from the area (1570).

Crops are sown in autumn (October) and harvested in early summer (May–June). Annual rainfall averages 450 mm. Domestic animal rearing has always been practised with more or less intensity. The transhumance of sheep and goats was common from the high hills of the Sierra Nevada to the coastal plains until the middle of the present century. All this implied a complex and shifting set of farming strategies. This set continues to change, and with the stakeholders involved (see fig. 1).

Divergent development patterns

Through the years several crisis have afflicted the area, to which people have responded in different ways. Each new situation implied a change in the set of interacting stakeholders. For example, when in 1887, the phylloxera louse destroyed the vineyards in the area, the very big landowners, who made a living on exporting wine, moved out, and with them several of the workers they exploited on their
estates. Population dropped. Gradually the land was divided among the less resource rich families, who started to replant the area with new grape root−stock. The cultivation of annual crops intensified.

A new crisis arrived in the middle of the century. The area became very densely populated again and there was a real hunger for land, much bush and forest land, even on very steep slopes was put to farming, which contributed to some of the environmental problems faced today.

In 1959, a national economic restructuring stimulated the free flow of goods and people through Spain, when formerly these were obliged to circulate in a small geographical territory. This made the rural, unmodernized areas of less interest to big landowners, and at the same time it generated alternative employment opportunities outside these regions for the resource poor. Paradoxically, this resulted in a dynamic period of growth and hope for those farming families who remained. They were now able to get access to land and achieve their ideal of being an independent, autonomous labrador farming family.

The labrador project meant possessing enough land to live on, and if possible, acquiring enough land for the children also to start a farm of reasonable size. The farms they developed typically cover most products needed for self sufficiency and are rich in biodiversity. One farmer, for example, managed 13 species of fruit trees (excluding grapes, figs and almonds), comprising together 33 varieties. The possession of land was the crucial commodity in this development strategy; labour was less valued.

However, nowadays this labrador ideal is no longer a valid strategy. The relative values of land and labour are inverted. Furthermore, the State is increasingly important as a stakeholder, not only as a provider of services, but also as a generator of standardized legal and administrative requirements which are increasingly difficult to meet in the strongly competitive market system.

Social life around farming has deteriorated as schools have closed down and many small farm settlements have been deserted. Infrastructure such as electricity, water, transport and medical services cannot be compared with that in more urban areas. Farming no more appeals to their children as it used to do. The local cultural repertoire seems short of answers to this crisis. However, though a third outflow of people was the main result, I want to highlight the less visible, but for the development of the region much more relevant local strategies developed to cope with the crisis.

Restructuring local elements

Since the mid−eighties, a few farmers have been able, through strong drive and perseverance, to construct a new reality that makes the most of the qualities of local production, in new arrangements of old elements.

One of these strategies is using the local grape varieties that are typically grown together in one parcel. This facilitates the manufacturing of the local wine, which is a blend of these different varieties, and very much appreciated on the local market, although of a heterogeneous quality. However, other markets can be captured by making wines of selected varieties and a different elaboration process. The variety mix in local vineyards hampers this, as the volume of the varieties that would qualify is limited and dispersed. But the vineyards are also gene pools, where varieties of unimaginable qualities can be found. In some parcels there are as many as 15 of the 25 found in the area as a whole. Local experimentation led already to small successes, as is the case of the Vigiriega wine.

The particular and region−specific taste of local products is furthermore strengthened by their ecological quality. This is another local characteristic that is being used as a development strategy. The use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers has had a very low profile in the area. The quality of the products is likewise almost organic, and opens perspectives for the recent urban demand for "health food". Farmers
Sustainable production has a lot to do with proper soil conservation and again local resources offer the means. Traditionally, the ‘moruna’ (Vicia articulata Hornem.) has been used as a green manure in diverse crop rotations and crop associations, and is now being employed by some farmers to enhance quality, especially in almond and fig production.

However, this legume has been almost completely ignored in the agronomic literature. It constitutes a tragic example of the growth of ignorance in science, as the importance of this plant was such that historically the whole Alpujarra and neighbouring areas derived their sustainability from this green manure. This indicates the importance that marginal areas potentially have for the ecological reconstruction of modern agriculture, not only as a gene pool, but also as a pool of agronomic techniques.

The farmers that elaborate these strategies abandon the old notion of creating a big farm as a means to face future problems. Instead, they opt for a farm that is just big enough to be worked by themselves and their family members, without the need to employ additional labour. The size of a farm may vary; some try to restructure cropping patterns to make them more apt for ploughing with a tractor; others insist on the need to continue working with mules.

**Distant neighbours**

The revival of agriculture is crucial for the area, as it determines its attractiveness for tourism, which is the other important development alternative. Farmers shape the landscape, maintain it, and create products that convey important elements of local identity and historical rootedness, arguments that are very important to present day Western post–modern and uprooted citizens.

This brings us to the need to address properly the problems in linking two worlds – the rural and the urban – that have developed very different strategies for coping with present day problems. When urban citizens are in need of "nature", rural dwellers have this in abundance. Theoretically, this could give a perfect economic match of supply and demand. In practice this does not work out so easily since Contraviesa people have historically experienced that "things and people from outside" must be regarded with due mistrust. This attitude has often been qualified as "backward".

However, it responds to a defence strategy aimed at survival, which IS essential to the labrador project. Mostly outsiders were there to collect, rather than bring. But local people also need to receive, not only visitors, but also recognition for their work, consideration for their particular circumstances, and access to urban commodities and culture. However, in practice, external support often works out in a different way.

For example, all State efforts to develop the area, no matter how well–intentioned, are accompanied by legal and administrative conditions. These do not respond to peasant and "artisanal" production conditions, but are aimed at an industrial type of production, and challenge the local informal type of economy. In this way they threaten economic survival of the farming families. At present, this is a crucial issue in the definition of rural development strategies in Europe.

Although agronomically it may not be too difficult for traditional agriculture to switch to ecological production, it is organizationally and socio–culturally much more problematic. They are each others "Distant Neighbour". In this respect, "outsiders" are very important, not only to facilitate the interaction between the different actors (e.g. farmers, government officials and merchants), but also as ‘stakeholders’ themselves. But they can only be effective intermediaries when they take a stance in the
process.

For example, they may, as newly settled urban farmers, recognize the potential economic value of traditional products in urban markets, and initiate experiments as was the case with the Vigiriega grape variety. They are able, as farmers who have returned to their homeland after a period of migration, to bring local people together to defend joint interests. This is necessary, because the labrador development strategy is focused on individual survival and cannot cope sufficiently with powerful EU development proposals that do not take farming in marginal areas seriously.

Outsiders can, as researcher, or agricultural extensionist, make the local way of thinking acceptable for policy makers. Local people, even the most enthusiastic entrepreneurs, need to exploit in full their room for manoeuvre to sustain and strengthen their development initiatives. They must, so to say, actively use the fissures produced in the clash between them and the Administration and between "local" and "global" spaces that are not yet cramped with rules and control. Endogenous development of marginal regions in Europe then is a real struggle for power.

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References