BOOK REVIEW

Karl Bruckmeier and Hilary Tovey (eds), 2008, “Rural Sustainable Development in the Knowledge Society”, Ashgate.

In this review I discuss the book entitled: „Rural Sustainable Development in the Knowledge Society” edited by Karl Bruckmeier and Hilary Tovey. In the first part I focus on its goals, assumptions, and organization. I also describe the most interesting parts of it and some of the results. In the second part I shall be claiming that the weak point of this publication is the lack of information about methodological and theoretical background.

The book is based on the EU-funded ‘Cognitive approach to Rural Sustainable Development’ research project (CORASON). It seeks to problematise the concept of sustainable development. According to Bruckmeier and Tovey this idea has been identified in the mainstream notion of a balance between social, economic and ecological spheres. They called this version of sustainable development wishful thinking, because it assumes: ‘[...] an aspiration to capture and integrate all the problems of development that have never before been capable of integrated resolution in modern societies.’ [2008a:7]. Bruckmeier and Tovey remarked, that the interpretations of the idea of sustainable development were dominated by expert forms of knowledge (scientific and technological). In comparison, the knowledge of local actors was neglected [2008a: 3–4]. Moreover, scientific concepts of sustainable development ‘tend to be rather general, lacking cultural, social and historical specification.’ [2008a: 8] These points raise questions about the types of knowledge that relate to the concept of sustainable development. The context for the interest in knowledge dynamics within rural societies was the idea of a knowledge society. Sustainable development was defined as a knowledge-based set of practices [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008a: 3].

CORASON research aimed to: ‘identify and explain the dynamics and variety of knowledge forms used in rural project’ and ‘encompass the main interpretations of sustainable development held by different actors in rural development – both governmental (national, regional, EU administrations) and non – governmental (community groups, local networks, civil society associations, NGOs).’ [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008a: 2,5]. Within this thematic priority, the authors have identified questions such as: what knowledge is used and how is it used by rural
actors in the rural development process to specify the concept of rural sustainable development. The authors of the book paid particular attention to differentiation among three forms of knowledge:

- expert or scientific knowledge – [...] which is characterized by the logics of abstraction, generalization and universalistic thinking [...] subsequently simplified and pruned of its contextual references so that it can be made to apply in standard ways across all local settings,

- managerial or organizational knowledge – the knowledge of public administrations and governmental bureaucracies, but it also exists outside such institutions,’

- local or lay knowledge – [...] it include[s] traditional skills and practices [...], indigenous cultural understandings of natural and social processes, experimental knowledges built on experiment and observation and even re-localized expert knowledges where standardized knowledge are adapted to the specific features and conditions of a particular local setting [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008b: 268, 269].

The book brings together and compares a series of case studies into rural and sustainable development processes in twelve European countries. It consists of three main parts. The title of the first part is: ‘Diversification and innovation in rural development’. Case studies are presented in six chapters from such countries as:

- The United Kingdom (‘Sustainable Livelihoods on the Island of Skye’)
- Sweden (‘The Non – Agriculture Rural Economy as a Component of Rural Sustainable Development’),
- Poland (‘Diversification and Different Contexts of Knowledge. The Case of Polish Rural Areas’),
- Czech Republic (‘Regional Disparities and Their Influence on Sustainable Rural Development – A Comparisons of Two Different Regions’),
- Italy (‘Practical Knowledge and Institutional Mediation in a Controversial Case of Clam Farming’).

The second part is entitled: ‘Environment and sustainability in rural development’. It consists of research from:

- Ireland (‘Ecologizing Rural Ireland? Conflicts and Contradictions Regarding Knowledge for Sustainable Development’),
- Norway (‘Interpretation of Sustainability Related to Designated Areas’),
- Germany (‘ Nature Conservation and Bio-Diversity in the Northeast’),
– Poland (‘Designing Nature and Resource Management Strategies’),
– Portugal (‘Natural Resources, Sustainability and Rural Development’),
– Greece (‘Knowledge Forms and Sustainable Development’).

The title of the last part is: ‘Comparison and synthesis of CORASON case studies’.

Each was carried out under one of four themes: 1) non-agricultural rural economy; 2) innovative economic development, 3) protection of nature and biodiversity maintenance, and 4) sustainable resource management [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008b:243]. A unifying topic across all case studies was sustainable resource management. Some chapters illustrate the problems of sustainable rural development by focusing on one core issue, for example renewable energy sources or the protection of nature. Some investigated the performance of sustainable development by enterprises, illustrated a special relation between the agricultural and non-agricultural economies, the protection of nature and bio-diversity management, and innovative rural development [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008a: 2, 17]. In most of the case studies, demographic, statistical data provided useful background for understanding important social issues presented in cases.

In my opinion, one of the most interesting chapters is the Italian one. It presents a case from the delta of the Po River that is famous for its unique environment, made up of lagoons and small islands. The problems encountered in this case are interdependence among experts, cooperative and public bodies. The authors described the influence of an unexpected environmental crisis, caused by gaps in local knowledge, to debate about rural development. A loss of oxygen in the lagoon evoked a collapse of clam farming. When that happened, relationships between producers and scientists became stronger. As can be seen from this case ‘[…] a different kind of knowledge mix was able to impose in a short time a non-agricultural activity in a rural areas’; it became very important to find a way to transfer scientific knowledge about sustainable development for everyday issues.

It turned out that a man who worked at the university and lived in the area: ‘[…] was able to understand the potential of clam farming […] to convince a local community where entrepreneurship and trust were very scare resources to join a common project’; thus he was able to support sustainable development [Osti, Silvestri:112–124].

The Polish chapter is also very interesting. It is entitled: ‘Designing Nature and Resource Management Strategies. Governance, Knowledge and Sustainability: Tree Related Dimensions in Two Exploratory Cases.’ The authors explore the relations among three basic issues: governance, knowledge and sustainable
development in two projects. The first one was called ‘The Preservation of Genetic Resources of the Polish Red Cow’. This project caused important changes in all three dimensions of sustainability, that is: 1) environmental (suiting the cow breed to natural conditions), 2) economic (increasing cow breeding), and 3) social (cooperation of various actors in order to strengthen the position of the whole community). The second project called ‘Integrated Fruit Production’ is an example of ecological fruit production. The project also produced sustainable development in three dimensions: social (cooperation of different actors), economic (some of the farmers created a group that started to sell fruits to one of the markets) and ecological. From this material, the authors suggested that: ‘[...] only in the case of collaboration between different types of knowledges used by cooperating actors could sustainable development occur’. Moreover, they remarked that these projects can be treated: ‘[...] as an example of a situation where a global retail chain has positively influenced both the local ecology and a local economy, as a part of a governance network containing external expert, local authorities, members of local association, some NGO experts and local fruit growers.’ [Gorlach, Adamski, Klekotko 2008: 187–197].

I would like to point out that the editors recognized (and the case studies let them readers understand): ‘[...] how an emergent knowledge society is being constructed and formed within rural areas in Europe as an emerging multi-faced and regionally differentiated social reality’[Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008a:6]. Synthesizing across the findings enabled the editors to develop some general conclusions. One of them is that the initial typology of the three knowledge forms was too simple and produced the need to create a new distinction between tacit and codified knowledge. Most important for practice seems to be key findings related to the success of the project for rural sustainable development. Namely, projects should bring together and combine expert and lay knowledge [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008b: 279]. According to Bruckmeier and Tovey, one of the most significant lessons from CORASON research was that a participatory form of development is needed to open up dialogue between lay and expert knowledge on equal terms [2008b: 281]. The chapters of the book show that the sustainable development idea is unfinished. From the United Kingdom case study it can be seen that: ‘For some people, sustainable development is still about conserving ecology, others would expect the environment to take precedence over the economy and society in the three-dimensional definition, and a further group would expect the three aspects to be threatened equally’ [Talbot, Dargan, Shucksmith 2008:34]. Another important conclusion is that: ‘Local actors need
time, opportunity and a reason to absorb these into their own pre-existing ways of understanding, to test them out and see how they work and whether they are relevant to their own concerns' [Tovey 2008: 147].

The CORASON research presents a variety of approaches and methods, including both quantitative and qualitative. It is worth pointing out, that integration between the research themes was achieved through a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to research. In the book some cases are based on such methods as: interpreting statistical data, documentary analysis, interviews, some also on focus groups interview. However, readers will not find much information about the methodology. There are not any detailed empirical descriptions of the processes of interpreting and shaping rural development. What can be found is a short note that methodological information can be found in the initial country reports under the different thematic work packages (accessible at www.corason.hu) [Bruckmeier, Tovey 2008a: 17]. The perspective presented here limits the possibility of a critical analysis of the case results. The exception is the Norway chapter. In this chapter, more information about the methodology is included. For example, the information that the case study was based on relevant written documentation or interviews was included. The authors characterized this material more precisely than others [Daugstad 2008: 154].

The book does not follow the most popular scientific publication scheme: the theory analysis, then the exemplification of numerous variables (dependent and independent) and hypotheses, and finally the part related to verification. What seems to be the weak point of this publication, is the lack of information about the different meanings and the history of the sustainable development ideas that could be very useful for those readers who are not familiar with the topic. It is worth mentioning that the concept of sustainable development appeared in science in the late sixties [Sadowski 2007: 64]; however, it was at first defined as environmental protection. Most contemporary definitions refer to the approach adopted by the G. Brundtland report in which sustainable development: [...] meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [WCED 1987, Żylicz 2007: 109]. This idea has gained popularity since the United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. As S. Kozłowski remarked, the Global Program of Actions Agenda 21 contains basic documents including the premises of sustainable development [Kozłowski 2007:237]. In literature we can find numerous different definitions [for example: Pezzy 1989, Daly 1990, Van den Bergh 1991, Paszkowski 2001, Dresner 2002, Tainter 2003, Piątek 2007, Papuziński 2007, Sadowski 2007]. The most popular
is: sustainable development meets economic, social, cultural and ecological goals for the present and the future [C. Musters, H. Graaf 1998:127]. At the moment, it is impossible to create any development strategy without obligatory reference to the concept [Żylicz 2007: 109], especially in Europe which is: [...] the only continent that seriously and consistently aims at realization of sustainable development [Kozłowski 2007: 237]. This information strengthens the need of conducting such projects as CORASON.

It would be really useful to have a short description of the knowledge society idea, which is also the theoretical framework for the CORASON research project. The authors do not use the basic concepts of the sociology of knowledge, what means that they do not focus on the conditions of each knowledge type. In my opinion, identification of these concepts would be very interesting and important not only for rural sociology, but also for the sociology of knowledge.

To sum up, rural areas are the key to the social transition to sustainable development. The book shows not only the issues like sustainable development of rural areas, but also presents a broad view of conditions of development in contemporary society. The authors have succeeded in contributing thought-provoking insights on the subject area. ‘Rural Sustainable Development in the Knowledge Society’ edited by Karl Bruckmeier and Hilary Tovey provides in-depth, thoughtful analysis that integrates relevant research and enables readers to develop understanding at different levels. It combines good writing with a thorough treatment of the subject.

REFERENCES


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