

Regional Rural Development: Has anything changed in the development debate in recent years?

Regional rural development (RRD) has undergone many changes over recent decades. If it has failed to achieve the desired successes, this is not necessarily because the strategies adopted were the wrong ones: very often, incorrect political priorities were set in the countries concerned.



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Every year, the World Bank publishes a World Development Report (WDR) which focusses on a broad issue in development policy. Following reports on “Development and the Next Generation” and “Agriculture for Development” in 2007 and 2008 respectively, “WDR 2009: Reshaping Economic Geography” focusses on the spatial dimension of development.

So how do these World Bank reports impact on the institutions responsible for development? They undoubtedly prompt a debate about the topic concerned, and very often a shift in policy course. They may even lead to the adoption of a new set of funding priorities. Yesterday’s priorities may well be put on the backburner. What politicians and decision-makers want to see on their desks are quick-fix solutions, not problems. But development takes time and patience: there is nothing new about that insight, and it runs through the literature like a red thread.

The rise and fall of integrated rural development

In late 1979, after critical reflection on development policy to date, the Scientific Advisory Council at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) published a comprehensive review entitled *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Kooperation der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD) mit Entwicklungsländern auf dem Gebiet der Ländlichen Entwicklung – Das Konzept der integrierten ländlichen Entwicklung (ILE)* [i.e. Opportunities and Limits to Germany’s Cooperation with Developing Countries in the Field of Rural Development – the Integrated Rural Development Concept]. Anyone browsing through this brochure will be surprised to see that it contains many recommendations, insights and methodologies which are still current in development cooperation today. However, the projects failed to achieve the desired goals of poverty

reduction and fulfilment of basic needs very quickly, and so integrated rural development fell out of favour. As a reform-based strategy which spanned both the economic and the social sphere, the concept went far beyond the capacities of development practitioners. What’s more, the word “integrated” was open to far too many interpretations, ranging from cross-sectoral to institutional and socio-economic integration.

Regional rural development: A people-oriented approach

The guiding principles of regional rural development were formulated by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ – German Technical Cooperation) in 1983, and were intended to serve as a frame of reference. This GTZ publication was the outcome of an iterative process in which academics, staff in Germany and abroad and policy-makers were all involved. It was an effort to harmonise theory and practical experience, the aim being to help improve the quality of development policy. For the first time, a people-centred approach to development policy was being propounded: from now on, people would no longer be viewed as the passive recipients of technology-oriented aid efforts, but would be actively involved in the development process. Aspects of economic geography were incorporated into the concept, and the urban-rural nexus identified as an issue. RRD was seen as a multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary approach to development planning and implementation, aimed at harnessing, utilising and safeguarding local resources in order to achieve sustainable improvements in the socio-economic situation of the region’s population over the long term.

In 1993, based on cross-sectional analyses by the World Bank, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), USAID and other organisations as well as on the findings of evaluations carried out

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by GTZ, the RRD concept was reviewed and new strategic elements were introduced to take account of the changed operational context. The outcome was published as a brochure entitled *Ländliche Regionalentwicklung – LRE aktuell* [Regional Rural Development: RRD Update; Elements of a strategy for implementing the RRD concept in a changed operational context]. It was primarily intended to help policy-makers and practitioners develop broad-impact and sustainable contributions to combating poverty while conserving natural resources. It also aimed to provide answers to the problems posed by a challenging operational context.

A comprehensive review of the complex issue of RRD was undertaken in 1996 by geoscientist Dr Theo Rauch, who published his findings in a paper entitled *Ländliche Regionalentwicklung im Spannungsfeld zwischen Weltmarkt, Staatsmacht und kleinbäuerlichen Strategien* [i.e. Regional Rural Development in the Field of Tension between the World Market, State Power and Small Farming Strategies]. In this paper, Rauch addresses issues which had often been overlooked until then, or had featured only peripherally in the debate; these included economic geography and the socio-cultural dimension, social structures, and forms of governance.

Setting the right priorities

Even as early as the 1970s, however, it was recognised that a successful development process can only be initiated if the state creates an operational and infrastructural framework which empowers individuals or groups to take effective economic or environmental action. This insight dovetails with experience gained in Germany's new federal states, which was summarised by Dr Karl-Friedrich Thöne

as follows at a conference at Timiryazev Agricultural Academy, Moscow, in 1999:

- Development starts where a country's political, economic and academic elites give it maximum and genuine – and not merely rhetorical – priority.
- Rural development is just as important as urban development in achieving sustainable macroeconomic development.
- Strengthening economic performance and creating and safeguarding jobs are crucial for livelihoods in rural regions.
- Policy-makers must define a guiding vision for rural development as a policy programme and operationalise this vision via an integrated development strategy.

In this sense, development requires a radical rethink and changed behaviour on the part of the people responsible for fostering development in rural regions. Perhaps this is the underlying cause of the major problems frequently encountered during implementation, which have to be overcome.

In future, we should continue to discuss the World Bank's very interesting reports and incorporate scientific findings into development practice, but we should not overestimate the importance of theory, and nor should we constantly invent new slogans or concepts which merely encourage academics to spend their time researching new aspects of the same old issue. This simply overstretches the capacities of decision-makers and administrators downstream.

If I had one wish, I would like to see WDR 2010 dedicated to a practical approach to "integrated regional development" whose core elements are economic geography, the next generation, agriculture, the urban-rural nexus and economic and social participation.

Zusammenfassung

Als Ende 1979 das Konzept der „Integrierten ländlichen Entwicklung“ Einzug in die Entwicklungszusammenarbeit (EZ) hielt, waren die Erwartungen hoch gesteckt. Doch das Konzept kam schnell aus der Mode – die Erfolge zeigten sich nicht schnell genug, und der Begriff „integriert“ ließ sich schwer fassen. Wenige Jahre später wurde die „Ländliche Regionalentwicklung“ als Orientierungsrahmen in die EZ eingeführt. Jetzt sollte der Mensch nicht mehr Objekt der Hilfsbemühungen sein, sondern selbst aktiv den Entwicklungsprozess vorantreiben. Erstmals wurden auch Stadt-Land-Beziehungen problematisiert und raumwirtschaftliche Aspekte berücksichtigt. Erst in den 1990er Jahren hielten die soziokulturelle und gesellschaftspolitische Dimension der ländlichen Entwicklung Einzug in die Konzepte. In seinem Meinungsbeitrag erläutert der Autor die verschiedenen Stadien der ländlichen Regionalentwicklung in der EZ und nennt seinen ganz persönlichen Wunsch für den WDR 2010: Ein Bericht, der das Wort „integriert“ nicht nur im Titel trägt.

Resumen

Cuando a fines de 1979 el concepto del "Desarrollo rural integrado" hizo su aparición en la cooperación para el desarrollo (CD), las expectativas fueron grandes. Sin embargo, la estrategia pasó de moda rápidamente – los éxitos no se lograron con suficiente rapidez y el término "integrado" era difícil de entender. Varios años después se introdujo el "Desarrollo rural regional" como marco de orientación para la CD. A partir de ese momento, el ser humano ya no debía ser objeto de los esfuerzos de ayuda, sino convertirse en sujeto activo para impulsar el proceso de desarrollo. Por primera vez se trataron también las relaciones entre la ciudad y el campo y los aspectos de ordenamiento territorial. Recién en los años 90 aparecieron en las estrategias las dimensiones socioculturales y sociopolíticas del desarrollo rural. En su aporte de opinión, el autor describe las diferentes etapas del desarrollo rural regional en la CD y nos revela su deseo muy personal para el Informe sobre el Desarrollo Mundial de 2010: un informe en el cual la palabra "integrado" no sólo aparezca en el título.