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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a normative and an analytical framework for an actor-oriented conceptualization of the development of rural territories with the aim to inform practitioners' interventions. For the latter, we stress the need for a more realistic and modest positioning vis-à-vis the endogenous strategies of interacting actors in the rural territories. Our normative framework draws on a relational elaboration of Sen's human capabilities approach. We adopt an ethical individualism (each individual's well-being is the criterion for development), but reject methodological individualism (well-being of individuals depends mainly on their own efforts). We argue that power-laden social relations determine outcomes in the multiple political arenas which will open or close collective development pathways upon which the (non)realization of people's desired livelihood trajectories depend. In the second part, we develop an analytical framework that allows us to interpret the emergence of such development pathways in rural territories, which we conceptualize as complex socio-ecological systems with dispersed polycentric governance. For the elaboration of this framework, we draw creatively on insights from the sustainable livelihood framework, development sociology, critical institutionalism, social capital theory, the legal pluralism perspective, the critique of participation and the Latin American territorial rural development (DTR) approach. We also compare our proposal, which is more developed from the perspective of non-governmental development actors, with the public policy perspective of the DTR.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to look at something without conceptual lenses. This also holds true for the way in which one looks at rural development, in particular if one wants to reflect upon strategies to promote more beneficial alternative pathways. This paper therefore introduces a normative and an analytical framework for conceptualizing the development of rural territories. It was developed as a collective effort within the long-term institutional cooperation of the Institute of Development Policy and Management (IOB, University of Antwerp) and its Nicaraguan partner the Instituto Nitlapan-UCA (Universidad Centroamericana) as part of a VLIR-UOS' sponsored project that aimed to support Nitlapan-UCA in its strategy to reposition itself as a university-based service delivery organization within broader rural territorial dynamics. The inspiration for the normative and analytical framework comes from a variety of theoretical sources. These are patched together in order to generate a conceptual lens that provides an actor-oriented, relational view on the criteria to judge development in rural territories which is subsequently connected to a more operational understanding of development as the dynamic emergent outcome of complex interactive processes between a multitude of actors in the institutional realms of ideas, rules and social networks².

We locate our contribution to this reflection in the field that Flyvbjerg (2006), following the Greek philosopher Aristotle, calls *phronesis*. Contrary to *episteme*, which refers to scientific-analytical knowledge (and generates “sure and certain” knowledge), and *techne*, which indicates more practical know-how, *phronesis* is a “true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man” (Aristotle, quoted in Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.370). *Phronesis* is located in the field of human values and social action and interaction, and seeks to contribute to an ethical practice, i.e. to what in moral and practical aspects constitutes what is “good” for human beings. With this ambition, an explicit ethical reflection is needed to develop the framework with which we will try to identify what is “good” for people. This is the objective of the first part of this paper. Starting from the known and renowned human capabilities approach inspired by Amartya Sen’s theory, we develop a relational vision of the capabilities with which to evaluate the processes and results of human development. After this ethical positioning, a second part will attempt to assemble a heuristic framework from different theoretical inspirations that could serve as a prism to analyze and interpret rural development pathways. Faithful to our ethics framework, this prism ought to be a practical one, opening spaces for a different positioning so as to act in interrelation with these processes. Finally, we discuss the consequences for the positioning of development organizations like Nitlapan-UCA in the concluding paragraphs.

[1] The academic development cooperation program of the Flemish Universities, funded by the Belgian Development Cooperation.

[2] Because of the strong influence of the paradigm of ‘Territorial Rural Development’ (DTR according to its Spanish abbreviation) (Scheijtmann and Berdegué, 2004; Berdegué and Scheijtmann, 2008; Munk Ravnborg and Gomez, 2015a, b) in Nicaragua and in Nitlapan-UCA, this contribution dialogues implicitly and explicitly with the DTR-approach to development in rural territories. The main purpose of our contribution is to elaborate and present our own conceptual framework. We do not aim, nor pretend to make a complete review of the contribution of the DTR-approach. At the same time, we are aware but not well acquainted with the broader debate about ‘territory’ and ‘territorial development’ in Latin America and recognize that this might constitute a limitation of the current paper, in particular because some of the more critical contributions seem to be in line with the actor-oriented, power-oriented approach that we propose here (see e.g. Nardi, 2007). In the scope of the present paper, we have however not engaged in a review of these alternative contributions.

2. THE RELATIONAL CAPABILITIES APPROACH AS A GENERAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

This first section constructs our normative framework from the human capabilities approach. This approach, originally developed by the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen as an alternative theory to welfare economics, has gained wide acceptance in the world and earned him the Nobel prize in economy in 1998 (Sen, 1999). His theory, and particularly its emphasis on wellbeing as a reality of multiple concrete dimensions, has nurtured both the new wellbeing index of the United Nations Development Programme's Annual Human Development Report and the list of concrete objectives of the famous Millennium Development Goals, agreed to in 2000 by all the world's governments as targets for 2015. The capabilities approach is thus a key reference in the international debate on development and for establishing the normative criteria by which its progress can be measured and evaluated.

In our framework we start with Amartya Sen's initial ideas, to which we then add ideas from other authors close to that approach. We will then add what in our judgment are insufficiently developed or under-focused elements in applying the ideas of the human capabilities theory, particularly with respect to their political dimension.

The point of departure is Amartya Sen's discussion of 'development as freedom' (Sen, 1999). Here the concept of freedom has a dual meaning, as it refers to 'wellbeing freedom,' i.e. substantive liberties having to do with multiple and heterogeneous concrete achievements, and with 'agency freedom,' which refers to individuals' capacity for and freedom of action. We will emphasize that the freedom to choose alludes not only to choosing to use certain goods and services for specific ends, but also includes a social dimension, and thus the option regarding given ways of living (together). We will then analyze the relationship—not at all simple, and mediated by different 'conversion factors'—between monetary income and human capabilities. After that we will reflect on Sen's 'ethical individualism' and the degree to which we agree or not with his opinion of considering each human being's welfare as a final criterion of development. We also indicate that it must not imply a methodological individualism, which is unacceptable given that each person's capabilities depend on his/her socio-institutional embeddedness³ and possibilities of counting on the cooperation of others. Wellbeing and poverty are consequences of relational processes.

From there we stress that the characteristics of the socio-institutional context are important determinants of access or exclusion, of having a voice or being silenced, and thus of the scope of each person's capabilities to generate the wellbeing he/she dreams of. We will demonstrate that the central aspect of the efforts to reduce poverty and inequity has to be the multiple processes and struggles in the political arenas aimed at changing or maintaining certain socio-institutional conditions that distribute opportunities and limitations. In addition, one of the key variables in the development process is the distribution of the 'political' capacities to influence social learning and negotiation processes about the desired objective, the social identities and the rules of the game.

[3] In this paper we will often use the concept 'socio-institutional embeddedness' or similar terminologies such as socio-institutional 'context' or 'environment.' With these concepts we are referring to the set of rules and regulations in interaction with the social organizations and networks from which people develop and live their life. Further on we will also use the concept 'institution': contrary to its use in common language, it refers here not to formal organizations (such as a ministry) but rather to the "rules and regulations" of the socio-institutional context. In our conceptual framework the former are a specific class within 'organizations' that are part of the social structure ('organizations' and 'social networks').

2.1. Multidimensional wellbeing and agency freedom

Sen's central idea is that development is fundamentally a question of freedoms, i.e. of each person's concrete capacity to choose and actively shape a way of life in line with what he/she values and aspires to achieve. "A person's "capability" refers to the alternative combinations of functionings⁴ that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles.)" (Sen, 1999, p.75).

The first contribution of Sen's vision is that welfare and poverty are multidimensional and have to do with concrete achievements in the different spheres of human beings' lives. Given this multidimensionality, Sen (1984) concludes that:

"Ultimately, the process of economic development has to be concerned with what people can or cannot do, e.g. whether they can enjoy a long life, escape avoidable morbidity, be well nourished, be able to read, write and communicate, take part in literary and scientific pursuits, and so forth". (1983, p.754)

A second perspective of Sen's approach is that, in addition to concrete achievements regarding a person's welfare, freedom is crucial to choose, decide and actively participate in the design and development of the shaping of his/her own life. To achieve human development, the freedom to achieve concrete aspects of *wellbeing freedom* must be complemented with *agency freedom*.⁵ The freedom to choose a level of wellbeing, i.e. to value specific combinations of concrete accomplishments, have to be related to the freedom to choose and give form to a way of life. Neither one nor the other can be seen separately. The assessment of this way of life will in turn depend on perceptions and standards related to the intrinsic importance of specific social structures (Ibrahim, 2008, p.402) and of people's own desired social identities (Escobar, 1995). Thus, illustrating the "quintessentially social character of individual freedom" (Sen, 1999, p.31), choosing a way of life always includes a dimension related to the desired way of making a life together with others.⁶ This idea of a broader and more substantive content within what a person can reach as a desired life is well illustrated by an interpretation of the concept of livelihood trajectories that goes beyond the merely economic or material aspects of human life, as expressed by Wallmann (1984, cited in De Haan & Zoomers, 2005, p.32):

"Livelihood is never just a matter of finding or making shelter, transacting money, getting food to put on the family table or to exchange on the market place. It is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships and the affirmation of personal significance ... and group identity. The tasks of meeting obligations, of security, identity and status, and organizing time are as crucial to livelihood as bread and shelter."

[4] In Sen's words: "Functionings represent parts of the state of a person –in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings that a person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. (...) Some functionings are very elementary, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, etc. (...) Others may be more complex, but still widely valued, such as achieving self-respect or being socially integrated." (Sen, 1993:31)

[5] The word agency is used for 'practical capacity' and the 'power and know-how' social agents have to shape their life and social context through their own actions. It refers to the capacity to be an active subject in the development of one's own life. Some authors also interpret it to mean 'capacity for action' or 'advocacy capacity.'

[6] Although Sen recognizes the social nature of human beings, he always tends to put more emphasis on the individual sphere because his economic science focus leads him to conceptualize individual actors separate from their social setting. (See also footnote 11).

Livelihood trajectories and wellbeing are then a question of both material achievements and social meanings. In other words, ‘development’ is not equal to economic growth or to an increase in income, and both could be very deficient indicators of ‘development’⁷.

2.2. Beyond income

Sen stresses that monetary income is an important means for attaining material accomplishments and social significance, but is nevertheless only one among others. In effect, people’s income levels only partially explain (and sometimes do not explain at all) individuals’ concrete achievements. Sen (1999, p.70-71) speaks of five different sources of variation (conversion factors) with respect to the transformation of income into capabilities:

Table 1: Conversion factors of income into capabilities

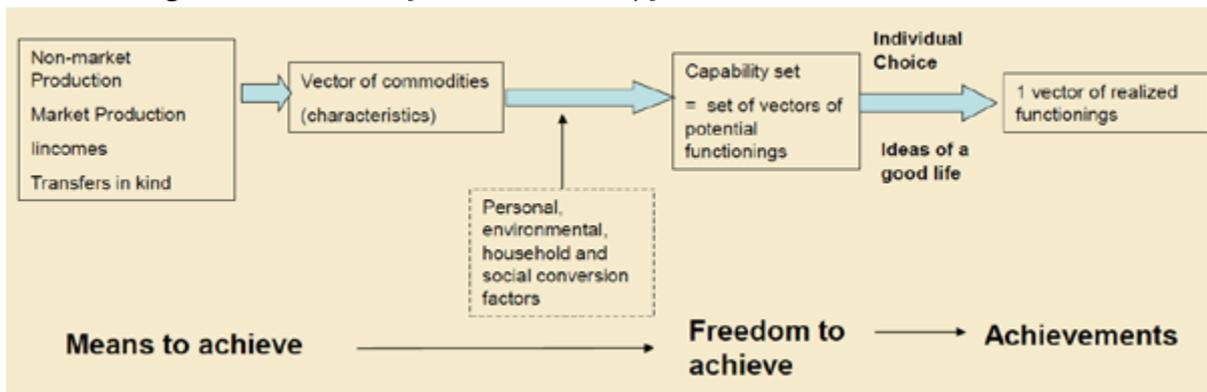
Personal heterogeneities	People have different physical characteristics according to their (dis)ability, illness, age or gender. Such characteristics imply different needs for each person (e.g. taller people need more income to nourish themselves than those of a slight build).
Environmental diversities	Differences in the environment can influence what different individuals succeed in obtaining with the same income level (e.g. people who live in cold climates have to spend more to have the same quality of housing).
Variations in the social climate	Differences in the presence/absence of public goods and with respect to ‘social capital’ (e.g. people with a broad social network or who live in a State with a good supply of public services will need less income to gain access to credit or education).
Differences in relational perspectives	Different income levels needed for a person to achieve certain elementary things, such as participating actively in community life (e.g. when norms of attire for appearing in public without embarrassment prevail).
Distribution within the family	The rules followed in resource distribution within a family can create major differences in the concrete achievements of each family member (e.g. when the male adult and children always eat before the females, even before the mother or sisters).

Source: Authors’ own elaboration inspired by De Herdt & Bastiaensen (2008).

As these different conversion factors affect the relationship between income and capabilities, Sen (1999, p.70-71) argues that individuals with the same economic income level do not necessarily share the same level of wellbeing. Figure 1, which is an adaptation of Robeyns (2005), summarizes these relations between income, means for reaching concrete achievements, freedom to reach them and, finally, the concrete achievements themselves. On the right-hand side are the ‘means to achieve’, i.e. different sources of income (like market and non-market production) and transfers in kind. These constitute a vector of commodities which after mediation by the social conversion factors translate into a capability set comprising a space of potential functionings from which individuals will choose one based upon their ideas of a good life, thus leading to a particular vector of realized functionings.

[7] These ideas can also be related to the idea of ‘good living’ (*‘buen vivir’*) promoted in Latin America by circles belonging to what is called the ‘new Left’ as a socio-culturally specific indicator of wellbeing beyond mere economic growth and the accumulation of commodities, also expressing potential preferences for non-capitalist forms of economic-social organization (e.g. Farah & Vasapollo, 2011).

Figure 1: Relationship between means, freedoms and achievements



Source: Adaptation of Robeyns (2005, p.98).

2.3. An ethical and not methodological individualism

Sen's capability approach expresses a fundamentally positive appraisal of each human being's freedoms and personal achievements: development is essentially the result of individual agency freedoms and each individual's concrete wellbeing achievements. It is not about the freedoms of some collective entity, such as for example the nation, community, social group or 'territory,' as Deneulin (2008:107) expresses it:

“Despite the crucial role of social arrangements in the construction of individual freedoms themselves, Sen is very reluctant to approach development with a supra-individual subject. Even if social arrangements or institutions are seen as very important elements in enhancing or impeding individual freedoms, they are still to be investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals (Sen 1999a: xiii)”

In the same vein, De Herdt and Deneulin (2009), referencing Sen (2002, p.85), comment that

“For evaluative purposes, the ultimate moral concern for assessing states of affairs remains the individual human being, for ‘the intrinsic satisfactions that occur in a life must occur in an individual’s life’, even if ‘in terms of causal connections, they depend on the social interactions with others” (p.179).

Although we will underscore below the importance and inevitable political dimension of socio-institutional processes, we tend to share this ethical individualism as a final criterion to evaluate levels of wellbeing: the development of a rural territory must be judged in terms of its inhabitants' freedoms and concrete achievements⁸. In any case, we do not consider it appropriate to sacrifice the criterion of individual wellbeing in the name of some abstract collective

[8] The success of Sen's approach among the dominant development circles—few of whom are inclined to address the inevitable political dilemmas explicitly—could be due in part to the fact that it serves to cover the inevitable political dimensions of the socio-institutional processes that condition individual freedoms. Although Sen (1999) emphasizes the need for political decisions, he tends to situate the options in terms of prioritizing objectives rather than institutional ways of achieving them. This implies the risk that a selection of concrete poverty reduction objectives could in the end justify the means to achieve them (e.g. evicting peasant families from the land and their ways of life to transform them into workers and/or recipients of social programs in a 'modernized' business economy). Nonetheless, as we demonstrate in this first part, a more careful reading of Sen's theory teaches us that the wellbeing and agency freedoms of the actors involved cannot be replaced with a list of predetermined objectives imposed from outside.

wellbeing. Unquestionably, individual wellbeing has a lot to do with social relations and forms of collective organization, but while the nature and the quality of each individual's relationship with others are part of his/her individual wellbeing, they do not replace individual wellbeing as a development criterion. From an instrumental perspective, collective socio-institutional processes are a key determinant of individual capabilities, but precisely due to their instrumental role they do not substitute the criterion of each person's wellbeing (see also Box 1).

Box 1: Debate about the criterion of individual wellbeing

Considering each person's wellbeing as a criterion for measuring the results of development was intensely debated among the co-authors of this chapter. Several identified the risk of adopting a perspective that is too individualist ('neoliberal,' as some would say), denying the important social and collective dimension of both the processes of achieving people's wellbeing and wellbeing itself. For this reason we emphasize that our position reflects an ethical individualism (each person as a final criterion) but not a methodological one (the collective dimension is crucial to achieve and define wellbeing). As we have argued, each person's wellbeing is evaluated according to the values he/she has regarding what 'a good life' is, which includes an appraisal of the different 'ways of life' and of life in society together with others, which goes beyond achievements with respect to the consumption of goods and services. Taking each person's wellbeing as a criterion also inevitably leads us to an assessment of different ways of socio-institutionally organizing the economy and society, although it may be through the individuals' own assessment.

In this context reference was made to the concept of 'good living' (*'buen vivir'*), originally developed from the resistance of Latin America's indigenous cultures, which give priority to 'community', in which the whole of society is more important than its parts (the individuals). Nonetheless, precisely due to the content of social values within the criterion of individual wellbeing, we do not believe our position has to lead to prioritizing the individual over the collective. What it does imply, however, is that in the end it will correspond to individuals to jointly decide what makes up the social-collective organization they consider most adequate and desired.

Another problem with this criterion is the interests of the future generations, which are not seated at the current learning and negotiation tables. On behalf of these generations, one could very rightly argue that the people of the future would have to be included, although the large margins of uncertainty linking our current actions with the future obviously make it unclear in advance how to do it. Finally, from a more radical perspective, this criterion's anthropocentric perspective—centered in the interests of humans—could also be criticized, arguing that non-human nature also has inalienable rights and that our 'speciesism' is unjustified (e.g., Singer, 2009).

Nonetheless, this ethical individualism must not be confused with a 'methodological individualism,' which would imply that concrete achievements and functioning must be exclusively explained in terms of individual choices and actions (Alkire, 2008; De Herdt & Deneulin, 2009; Ibrahim, 2008). As we indicated in the previous quotes, Sen himself recognizes that social arrangements are decisive elements that encourage or impede both human agency and substantive individual freedoms. "Agency is not a tabula rasa, but itself the product of certain structures of living together. (...)" (Deneulin, 2008, p.119). Individual choices cannot be explained without making reference to the social significance they have beyond the individual who makes them. Taking up Sen's words (1999):

“(…) individual conceptions of justice and propriety, which influence the specific uses that people make of their freedom, depend on social associations – particularly on the interactive formation of public perceptions and on collaborative comprehension of problems and remedies.” (p.31)

Deneulin (2008:220) quotes Evans (2002) when he comments that this implies that

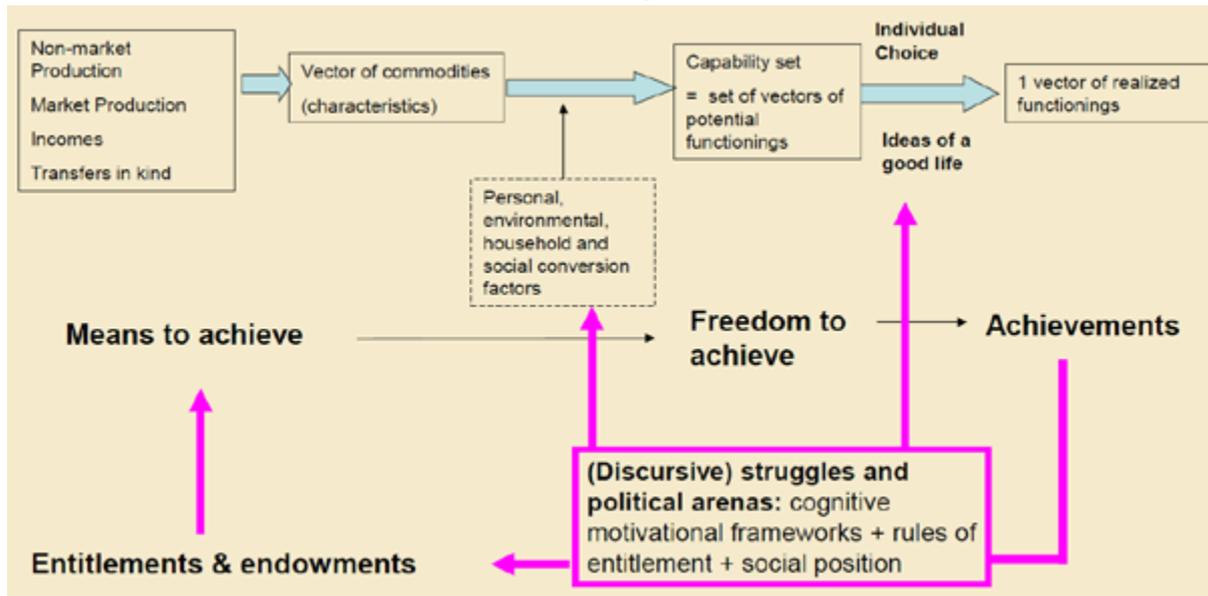
“(…) my ability to choose the life I have reason to value often hangs on the possibility of my acting together with others who have reason to value similar things. The capability of choosing (and acting) itself maybe, in essence, a collective rather than an individual capability.”

Given this interactive nature of individuals’ agency, freedom cannot be attributed to isolated individuals; it is rather the result of social relations. In other words, it is the way of living and acting together with others that enables or restricts the possibility of leading the life individuals value.

2.4. A relational approach to poverty and wellbeing

Our interpretation of the capabilities approach suggests that social arrangements and socio-institutional factors make possible or impede individual actions (Figure 1), particularly with respect to the influence such elements have on the social conversion factors and on the conception of what a good and valuable life is (aspects that intervene in individual decisions). To identify the social spheres that impede or make possible individual actions, we must complete Robeyns’ static scheme and pay explicit attention to the individual endowments and access rights that are at the origin of the means to attain concrete achievements and at the same time are partially the result of the socio-institutional processes in movement and of people’s (relative) ability to influence them (see Figure 2). Key to this reworked scheme is the presence of feedback arrows, whereby actors through their achievements exert agency in (discursive) struggles and political arenas around socio-institutional factors affecting collective cognitive motivational frameworks, rules of entitlement as well as their and others’ social position.

Figure 2: Connection among means, freedoms and concrete achievements: the role of socio-institutional feedback



Source: Adapted from Robeyns (2003, p.12).

There are three areas in which these socio-institutional factors intervene:

1. The definition of people's access rights to resources and opportunities to exchange goods and services;
2. The interaction between social conversion factors and economic income, which molds people's real capabilities;
3. Individual ideas about what a good life is, as they inspire and condition the individuals' decisions with respect to the life—and way of living (together)—that they value.

This analysis goes beyond just an evaluation of the possible concrete achievements of people who live in rural areas, as it focuses on the socio-institutional processes that produce the conditions from which people gain concrete achievements. In particular, we are seeking an analytical framework that can guide us to an evaluation and a critical analysis of the development processes of rural territories, as well as their linkage with external interventions. For that reason we add a dynamic and recursive dimension to the capabilities approach, as Ibrahim (2008, p.402) argues when he says that “the two-way relationship between individual capabilities and social structures needs to be emphasized.” This aspect is represented in Figure 2 by the socio-institutional feedback arrows, which are the result of continuous (explicit and implicit) processes of joint creation, as well as of discursive struggles and practices in a multiplicity of political arenas.⁹ These constructive and/or conflictive creative processes have to do with three

[9] We adopt here the concept of ‘political arena’ defined by Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1998, p.240). For these authors, a political arena is any “place of concrete confrontation between social actors interacting on common issues”. The use of this definition emphasizes that negotiation processes are not implemented only within the official policy bodies designed to fulfill this function, such as for example parliaments or municipal commissions, but rather

strata of the institutional context: “the ‘social structure’ (organizations, networks, social relations); ‘rules as institutions’ (State and non-State) and ‘culture’ (customs, traditions, perceptions and identities)” (Bastiaensen, De Herdt, Vaessen, 2002, p.10).

The socio-institutional framework, with both its facilitating and restrictive role, largely determines people’s capabilities and hence the livelihood trajectories attainable by different kinds of people within society. Wellbeing, conceptualized as having certain capabilities, and poverty, defined as a relative privation of capabilities, must both be understood as resulting from relational and institutional processes occurring in a multiplicity of political arenas. These political arenas condition the opportunities and obstacles that influence the emergence of concrete development pathways. According to De Haan & Zoomers (2005), development pathways correspond to

“patterns of livelihood activities which arise from a co-ordination process among actors. This co-ordination emerges from individual strategic behavior embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations and institutional processes, both of which pre-structure subsequent decision-making.” (p.43).

Given that both individual agency and capabilities depend on relational mediation processes, the emergence of these collective pathways either facilitate or restrict the setting in motion of certain individual livelihood trajectories.

The initiation of successful individual trajectories is thus not only a consequence of some heroic individual entrepreneurial spirit and disciplined perseverance. Nor is poverty the consequence of a mere lack of spirit and discipline of isolated individuals. Although people’s individual characteristics can play an important role, success in implementing one’s own desired project depends on the existence of a catalyzing context that emerges from collective processes and makes it possible to get the project on track. By the same token, failure to realize a project is often the result of the lack of a favorable context. In addition, the socio-institutional context also produces and limits individuals’ perceptions of possible desirable, feasible and realistic adjustments in their livelihood trajectories. As Appadurai indicates (2004, p.63), the consequence of this is that some of the poorer social groups can also be deprived of their ‘capacity to aspire’, i.e. to imagine more valuable livelihood trajectories. This privation of the imagination erodes their motivation to make an effort to achieve ‘better’ trajectories.

In this conceptualization, the ‘poor’ are thus individuals who cannot live the life they value because they “are those human beings who, for one reason or another, almost systematically end up at the losing end of the multiple bargains that are struck around available resources and opportunities” (Bastiaensen, De Herdt & D’Exelle, 2005, p.981). In other words, they are ‘relatively’ deprived of their capabilities because the institutional context and the political arenas in which they are immersed are not propitious for putting into effect the adjustments they might desire in their livelihood trajectories. This is largely the consequence of the fact that their social, political and cultural capabilities are weaker, which limits their capacity to make themselves heard and therefore to have a voice in the processes that produce and reproduce enabling or restrictive ideas, standards and social networks.

within any social sphere where ideas, rules and organizational processes are discussed.

3.1. Negotiations and voice to achieve institutional changes

Upon reading the capabilities approach from this perspective, what stands out is the crucial importance of individuals' negotiation capacity in the institutional processes of continuity and change that determine the opportunities and limitations that affect their capabilities.¹⁰ Sen's approach does indeed not allow us to determine one single aggregated criterion for the development level of a country or a particular territory. Since all individuals will have their own criteria for evaluating the 'life that they have reason to value', it is up to a political process to negotiate the desired development outcomes and the ways to achieve them. Nonetheless, a central problem is that society's poorest and least privileged individuals are precisely the ones immersed in an institutional context that negatively affects their negotiation capacity, which in turn, given its effects on the exclusion and restriction of their capabilities, is definitively the main cause of their poverty. Actor-structure theories, such as the structuration theory developed by Giddens (1984) or the development sociology of Long (2001)¹¹ defend the idea that individual agency cannot escape the structural influence, be it enabling or limiting, of an inherited institutional context constructed from historical correlations of forces.

Nonetheless, the nature and degree of determination this context has on the agency of poorer actors is still being debated. Giddens and Long argue that the structure must not be seen as an inflexible repertory that does not allow changes. On the contrary, it has to be understood as a framework of general orientations that always needs to be reinterpreted and recreated in light of the situations, and always leave certain degrees of freedom, even for the most oppressed. This creates opportunities to change the structure through agency. Nonetheless, for this change to be effective and socially viable, sufficient individuals need to be convinced and grouped together, both in quantity and in quality (in other words, important individuals to achieve the change in the socio-institutional surrounding that empowers and limits capacities).

Institutional change is therefore a question of aggregate collective action. Cleaver (2007) sees the positions of Long and Giddens as very optimistic, and notes various socio-institutional factors that clearly limit the capacity of poor actors to exercise effective agency with respect to the negotiations on the socio-institutional rules.¹² She calls attention to:

1. The limiting role of certain visions of the world that are prejudicial for poorer actors because they deprive them of their 'capacity to aspire.' One example might

[10] The idea of 'negotiation' is useful and powerful to highlight processes of domination and exclusion, but it also entails the risk that it will be equated with the 'negotiation of individual actors in market spaces,' where there are few win-win opportunities and the gains of one are almost always the losses of the other. Our reference to the concept of 'negotiation' should not be understood only from this conflictive perspective but should recognize the possibility and desirability of the negotiated construction of initiatives of common interest and of a sense of 'joint stewardship' of the human-ecological heritage.

[11] These more sociological theories differ from Sen's approach. As De Herdt & Bastiaensen (2008, p.345) argue, "Ultimately, however, (Sen) fails to step out of the economists' way of thinking which neatly conceptualizes individuals as separate from the environment which impacts on them (Townsend 1983: 668; Zimmerman 2005). Although the capability approach refreshingly complicates the concept of the 'set of constraints' in an attempt to allow for a more accurate understanding of the different circumstances each individual is facing, it continues to frame the 'individual' and the 'circumstances' as stabilized and analytically separable entities. However, once we understand and accept the quintessentially interactive nature of the relationship between people and the others, who are part of her environment, this way of thinking cannot but run into difficulties. Individuals in part change in response to 'circumstances' of their own creation, they adapt to them while at the same time continuously re-creating them, and it is precisely in the way in which these two-way interactions occur that one can identify freedom." And this freedom refers to different individuals' capabilities, to their 'ability to act,' together with or in contradiction to others, to reproduce or change the structural circumstances existing in different pertinent political arenas.

[12] The contribution of Cleaver (2007) is focused on agency and the negotiation processes around natural resources, but nothing prevents her argument from being applied to what happens in other political arenas (for example, within value chains).

be the internalization, among the less privileged strata, that social organization ‘naturally’ requires a top-down and authoritarian leadership, which inhibits them from insisting on transparency and accountability as well as active and democratic participation in the organizations. Another well-known example is the reproduction of sexist ideas by women themselves, which self-limits them in their personal ambitions.

2. The existence of exclusionary social practices, which are a source of exploitation. Discrimination by race, age or gender are clear examples.
3. The negative impact of clientelistic dependence of the poorer actors on the more powerful ones. Being directly dependent on ‘patrons’ with resources, contacts, capacity to both threaten and protect, which are crucial to the survival of the poor actors, inevitably limits their possibilities of openly questioning the views of the ‘patrons.’
4. The existence of unjust social rules and regulations that imply unequal negotiation abilities. Here, for example, one could think of the standards of modesty and of respect that young women have to observe toward their elders, which impede them from expressing their ideas in public.

The perspectives of Cleaver (2007) question the potential of open, explicit negotiations among multiple actors in public arenas to expand the socio-institutional spaces for poorer groups. As Scott (1990) indicates, the generation of a genuine alternative by the dominated groups, particularly in more closed situations of domination, requires the accumulation of new ideas, motivations and concrete projects over a long prior period of mostly clandestine and only occasionally open responses and resistance.

4.1. The paradox of development interventions

Independent of the level of optimism or pessimism one might have with respect to actors’ room for maneuver to be able to effectively exercise their agency, this analysis generates a paradox and a basic methodological dilemma with respect to strategies and interventions aimed at reducing poverty. The paradox is in the fact that poverty is, by definition, a relative lack of capabilities, essentially of negotiation capacity. This means that the less privileged actors cannot emerge from poverty by themselves.

As a consequence, many development organizations turn to strategies of empowerment in order to augment the actors’ capabilities so they would be able to rise out of poverty by themselves. The problem is that empowerment is not something that can be handed out the way one would provide seeds, food or books, in other words as tangible goods. In effect, a development mode in which external actors who know how to simply deliver capabilities—what Long (2001, p.89) calls ‘the delivery mode of development’—cannot increase the autonomous agency of actors with limitations; on the contrary, it disrespects and rides roughshod over it. Long (2001, p.89) calls this the “central dilemma of development planning: “no matter of how firm the commitment to good intentions, the notion of ‘powerful outsiders’ assisting ‘powerless insiders’ is constantly smuggled in.”

In line with the presented framework of relational capabilities, we can say that while it is possible to provide services and resources to the actors—as government, as donor, as

NGO or as church—it is not possible to automatically ‘take development to them’ under a top-down transference scheme—whether of resources, know-how or power— if indeed the final objective is poverty reduction. The theoretical slip here lies in conceiving of power as a ‘thing’ that belongs to a given actor, and not as what it always really and inevitably is: a social relation. No one is totally without power, nor does anyone have it all, and no power is secure. We see no other alternative for actors with little capability than gaining greater agency and more autonomy for themselves, even with respect to the ideas, norms and well-intentioned social networks promoted by external actors of development.¹³ In effect, those external actors are inevitably part of the continuous struggles over ideas, norms and organizational rules, and they must explicitly involve themselves in those struggles. Starting from this central idea, Long (2001) highlights the need to focus on practices in the social interface between local and external actors:

“The concern for intervention practices allows one to focus on the emergent forms of interaction, procedures, practical strategies and types of discourse and cultural categories present in specific contexts. It also enables one to take full account of the ‘multiple realities’ of development projects (by which we mean the different meanings and interpretations of means and ends attributed by the different actors), as well as the struggles that arise out of these differential perceptions and expectations.

From this point of view, then, planned intervention is a transformational process that is constantly re-shaped by its own internal organization, cultural and political dynamic and by the specific conditions its encounters or itself creates, including the responses and strategies of local groups who may struggle to define and defend their own social spaces, cultural boundaries and positions within the wider power field.” (p.72).

For those who opt to support different vulnerable and excluded groups, the challenge consists of two complementary issues: 1) understand the production of exclusion and stripping away of capabilities (Casolo, 2011), and 2) respond to nascent creative and effective alliances that allow actors to discover for themselves the most beneficial changes in their livelihood trajectories, increase their social negotiation capacity (including with the development agencies) and thus generate conditions that allow them to increase their agency and generate a more satisfactory life.

From this general normative conclusion, we now turn to the development of a heuristic framework applied to the issue of rural development and the promotion of rural poverty reduction. This framework can serve as a conceptual lens for our analysis of the emergence of rural development pathways and the efforts of institutes like Nitlapan-UCA to rearrange its ‘development strategies’ regarding the processes in these territories.

We start with the concepts of complex socio-ecological systems and polycentric governance, which allow us to focus on the feedback dynamics between actors and structure; interactions which lead to a reality that ‘emerges’ from such processes. We then analyze the three levels of the socio-institutional context: the social structure, the institutions or rules of the game, and the ideas or culture. We underscore their constant interaction with each other

[13] We must not fall into the trap of an artificial ‘dichotomization’ between poor (supposedly local) and non-poor (external). The supposedly poor are not necessarily poor in all aspects: they may lack certain resources and capacity, but they have others. And depending on the circumstances, the dichotomy is not between local-external, but, for example, between men and women; old and young; indigenous, white and mestizos; urban and rural, cattle ranchers and farmers, etc.

and with the ecological surroundings. This theoretical reflection then leads us to conceptualize rural development as the emerging result of these complex interactions in human territories, moving to the crystallization of certain development pathways that open or close life trajectory opportunities for different groups.

In this framework we also reflect on what is called the ‘rural territorial development approach,’ promoted among others by the Latin American Center for Rural Development (RIMISP) network (see further below). We share various ideas with this approach, but we also try to complement it in some aspects. We end by emphasizing the key role of the actors, particularly the people and households that, based on their livelihood strategies, try to develop and improve their particular trajectories over the development pathways in the rural human territories.

5. RURAL DEVELOPMENT AS AN EMERGING RESULT OF COMPLEX TERRITORIAL PROCESSES

From this general normative approach, we move to construct a heuristic-operative framework that can be used in the interpretation of rural development processes. This framework must be seen as the lens through which we look at rural reality, concretizing the general principles presented up to now. To apprehend¹⁴ the processes that generate the development pathways¹⁵ that open or close opportunities to different social groups, a certain simplification is inevitable given the number of variables and interactions that impact on them. Our interpretive framework avoids an exaggerated simplification, although we recognize in advance that by definition the totality and complexity of the changing reality cannot be covered. At the same time, through its specific perspective, this framework attempts to inspire actions and is thus a co-constituent of reality per se.

We conceptualize the rural development pathways in given territories as the result of complex interrelated socio-institutional and physical processes that take place in a given socio-ecological space. These processes are the translation of specific correlations of forces that operate at multiple levels and cross different time and space scales which, in turn, are found in ongoing interaction.

5.1. Two pillars of the heuristic framework: socio-ecological systems and polycentrism

To construct our interpretive framework we start from a general characterization of rural territories as complex socio-ecological systems (SES), and from their polycentric governance as dependent on a set of decision-making centers at different levels with no clear predefined hierarchical order.

5.1.1. Conceptualizing rural territories as complex socio-ecological systems

While our interest lies in analyzing human development processes, we cannot look at human beings without looking at their ecological setting. A large part of human activities in rural areas depend on the characteristics of the natural resources available within the ecosystems. But at the same time, these activities exert a determinant (and growing) influence on

[14] We use the term ‘apprehend’ to indicate that it is more than just ‘learn’ or ‘understand.’ It has the dual meaning of ‘understand’ and ‘appropriate’ or ‘internalize’, and implies ‘grasping’ and ‘giving meaning.’

[15] This key concept will be detailed in the following pages.

the ecosystems through numerous interchanges of matter, energy and waste (Limburg, O'Neill, Costanza & Faber, 2002; Martínez Allier, Kallis, Veuthey, Walter & Temper, 2010; Martínez Allier, 1999). This leads us to conceptualize rural societies as socio-ecological systems in which the human and natural aspects are deeply intertwined and in continuous interaction (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Folke, 2006; Ostrom and Cox, 2010, Liu et al., 2007). Rural reality must then be understood as the historical result of interactions, from different time and space scales, among the human behavior, the socio-institutional context and the physical processes of the natural ecosystems.

A key aspect here is human and natural dimensions do not exist by themselves independently; on the contrary they only exist in interaction with each other and cannot be analyzed separately (Hukkinen, 2014, p.101). It is impossible to disconnect the human realm from its interactions with the ecological one. By the same token, it is no longer possible to disconnect the ecological and human patterns, given that the great majority of rural landscapes have been co-produced by human activity, and therefore can be considered 'cultivated ecosystems,' as Mazoyer and Roudart (1997, 2002) have rightly argued in their theory of agrarian systems.

Another important aspect is that this view highlights the fact that these socio-ecological systems—seen from a specific physical territory—are not isolated from other systems beyond the geographic territory considered. As we will see further on, any socio-ecological system is always open and permeable, with multiple and important interferences and interactions with external systems. If we accept that the territory is a socio-ecological system, delimiting it—in terms of what is inside and outside of it—is always problematic, both conceptually and operationally. Territories are always 'plastic' dynamic entities, different according to each person's perspective and purpose. Thus the definition of its limits will always inevitably be challenged and negotiated (see the complex characteristics of socio-ecological systems further on).

The complex nature of the evolution of socio-ecological systems needs to be underscored here.¹⁶ In fact, 'complex' is not the same as 'complicated' (Martin & Sunley, 2007, pp.577-578). An airplane is a complicated system: it has kilometers of cables, a multitude of mechanisms, electrical and mechanical components and systems, motors, tanks, tubes, communication apparatuses, radars, infrastructure for preparing food and seating the passengers, etc. But for all that complication and the voluminous nature of its printed operations manuals, it is possible to describe the airplane right down to its last detail and predict with a high degree of certainty how it will respond in each situation. Although it requires a team of engineers to understand and manage it, it is nonetheless coherent and predictable machinery.

A rural territory as a socio-ecological system, in contrast, is complex. In other words, given the permanent interaction among multiple interconnected variables through their diverse components it is impossible to isolate the function of one of its elements from the other elements with which it interacts. And the interaction of a given element with other elements in varied configurations can cause it not to act always the same way. As in biological organisms, degrees of uncertainty, disorder and indetermination emerge. The interconnection of everything with everything and the unpredictable effects that can occur through unexpected interactions with a changing context make it difficult to disaggregate the system into isolated and controllable fragments¹⁷ (Chambers, 2010; Ramalingham, 2013). As a consequence, the system's behav-

[16] This analysis of the complexity is based on the synthesis of Martin and Sunley (2007, p.578).

[17] It is known that this is the cause of the logical framework's inoperativeness in development management, because the assumptions about the context are almost always deficient or are unmet, producing feedbacks that causes multiple unexpected effects and is hard to incorporate into the 'results-based management of development' and its bureaucratic logic (Giovalucchi & Olivier de Sardan, 2009).

ior is more than the simple sum of its components. It also implies that its evolution is at least partially uncertain and unpredictable, such that the ways in which its issues and causalities are actually framed inevitably entail a political dimension and dependent on the relative power of different actors to make their views and interests prevail (See e.g. Leach, et al., 2010).

5.1.2. Polycentrism

The social processes that are at the base of the evolution of these socio-ecological systems, and thus of rural development in general, do not arise or are localized in ordered hierarchies with clear decision-making centers. Rather they tend to be intrinsically chaotic and characterized by polycentrism. By polycentrism we understand the existence, at different temporal and spatial levels and scales, of multiple relatively autonomous decision-making centers (Ostrom, 2010). These decision-making centers are characterized by different impact levels in a multiplicity of social fields and are associated with political arenas around access and use of the resources for development.

These processes are neither necessarily nor automatically coherent; in fact they may demonstrate the presence of contradictory social realms. At times they express high levels of consensus and cooperation, but at others they show tensions and conflicts around perspectives and preferences that give rise to varied and at times contradictory interests. Further below we will indicate that the capacity to generate a shared vision as a base for a more effective collective action by the different actors is a key factor in the emergence of development pathways. We will also see that apparent consensuses are really expressions of a cognitive hegemony by dominant groups that have the power to manipulate discourses and conduct efforts and resources toward development pathways that are in their strategic interest (Blaikie, 1998; Leach et al., 2010; Long, 2001, pp.19-20; Young, 2006, p.5).

5.2. The three key realms of the institutional context that characterize the social dimension

5.2.1. The social structure

In more concrete terms, the polycentrism of economic-social governance—i.e. of the decision-making authorities that generate actions regarding rural development pathways—covers a large array of actors⁸ in different social fields and in ongoing interaction. To begin to identify the diversity of actors we will mention the following categories:

1. Households, which we can characterize as complex arenas of cooperation and conflict among individuals of different sex and age (Sen, 1990) with a variety of possible parentage or other relations, differentiated interests and aspirations, social roles assigned by gender and generation, and diverse forms of overlapping or separation such as ‘production unit’, ‘consumption unit’ and decision-making unit’, partially related to the social fabric of the nuclear or extended family or possibly of lineage.
2. ‘Communities’ or ‘localities’, i.e. ‘organic’ human spaces with repeated ‘face-to-face’ interaction among its inhabitants (Uphoff, 1993, p.609), recognized

[18] The concept ‘actor’ refers to all entities that have agency, i.e. ‘practical capacity’ or ‘power’ to shape their life and social surroundings based on their own actions. It can be an individual actor or a social-collective one.

as a pertinent reference by both the local inhabitants and those outside, but which are at the same time contested heterogeneous spaces impregnated by relations of power beyond the locality itself¹⁹ and of its governance structures, whether they are of state or non-state origin (local municipal representatives, local leaders, formal or informal judges, mediators, etc.).

3. Certain 'communities of practice' that do not share a long history in a given area compared to the 'communities-localities', but rather are formed around a shared interest that requires an intense interaction. An example of such communities of practice are the sets of market actors (profit or nonprofit enterprises, merchants, producers, certifiers, [micro]financing institutions, NGOs, lawyers, etc.) from the local to the global scale that sustain and give life to the exchanges in the markets and to the value chains.
4. The national territory's formal authorities of public administration, including both political and administrative authorities (national and regional governments, municipal mayor's offices, ministries and related executive authorities, the police, the judicial system, etc.).
5. Civil society interest groups, whether formally structured and organized or not (groups of parents, youths, women, political or religious groupings, cooperatives, sports clubs, etc.).
6. Supra-national entities (such as ALBA, IMF, etc.) and external ones (multilateral, bilateral and NGO donors) with local influence.
7. Local nongovernmental development organizations, whether civil organizations or nonprofit service enterprises, often connected to their national and international networks (of donors and allies for the work).

We must make no mistake in interpreting these categories and levels of actors. We are not talking about a well-ordered whole that combines categories of clear and delimited actors. It is rather a 'plastic' reality in ongoing movement and interaction (among actors, levels, etc.) in which the actors and their very nature express the emerging territorial dynamics. In addition, as Long indicates (2001, p.17), the capacity for action of both individual and social actors mentioned here always need to enroll others into their project, at least partially. This has led various authors to study and underscore the importance of such social structures, referring to them as both collective and individual 'social capital'.

A large part of the literature on social capital,²⁰ above all that which was promoted by the World Bank, essentially focused on economic growth.²¹ From this perspective, Narayan and Pritchett (1997, pp.3-7) related the local social structure to ex-ante (due to their effect on information and knowledge flows) and ex-post (due to their impact on confidence and fraudulent behavior) transaction costs, the quality of the collective action, the informal mutual aid

[19] Mendoza (2012, p.259) argues that the concept of 'community' must be understood from a global perspective. He indicates that communities are inevitably contested spaces with internal conflicts, but rejects dualistic conceptualizations—local communities/global factors, local elites separated from transnational actors or from local dimensions—and recognizes that communities are local spaces that both shape and are shaped by globalization.

[20] Examples of studies that have tied 'social capital' to economic development are Putnam (1993) in Italy; Narayan and Pritchett (1997) in Tanzania; Bebbington (1997) in the Andes; Grootaert (1999) in Indonesia; Krishna and Uphoff (1999) in Rajasthan, India; Uphoff and Wijayaratra (2000) in Sri Lanka; and Maluccio, Haddad and May (2000) in South Africa.

[21] From the multidimensional perspective of this paper, we do not equate human development with economic growth, but that does not prevent the latter from having its place within a development promotion strategy.

mechanisms (due to their relationship with reciprocity and solidarity) and the ease of achieving synergy with key external actors.

To this list, Collier (1998) added that social capital also affects the distribution and diffusion of knowledge about the world (e.g. technology). Some relevant characteristics of the social structure in this perspective are:

1. The constellation of existing local organizations and the borders between them;
2. The density of the networks and local social interactions;
3. The nature of these interactions (for example, segmented or crosscutting networks, 'strong ties' with relatives and friends or 'weak ties' with people with no direct emotional relationship);
4. The types of networks (for example, web or dyadic; horizontal or vertical).

The tendency in the literature is to attribute best economic development results to social structures that are more horizontal, denser and of a web type rather than vertical structures limited to 'strong ties' of a dyadic type.

Nonetheless, the complexity of the mechanisms attributed to social capital does not permit clear cause-effect relations to be identified or the components of social capital and their interactions to be detailed. It is not clear in advance how this mix must be to achieve economic growth (much less broader human development), nor is it known to what extent we must consider it an independent explicative factor, operating outside of its interaction with other forms of capital (human, financial, etc.) (Portes, 2000). Nonetheless, it is clear that the nature of the social networks is an important dimension of the socio-institutional systems, but following our vision of rural development as a dynamic emerging from complex processes, social capital can most likely not be considered to work separately.

As we said before, the characteristics of the social structure are not only a collective resource, but also determine the social position of the different groups of actors. This position and these characteristics will determine the groups' access to information, their networks of reliable, loyal or solidary people, their capacity to generate collective action for their priority projects and their links to key external actors. Not all actors will occupy the same positions with respect to the networks in which they are involved. Some will be better connected than others and—perhaps more importantly—will occupy key positions in strategic nodes of the vertical and dyadic social networks. Such positions permit them to control and manipulate information, contacts and collective actions. Generally, these actors will not be very interested in promoting denser networks (of a web type), or those that are more horizontal and of the 'weak ties' type, but rather will tend to work hard to maintain top-down, clientelistic, excluding and exploitative social structures, based on personalized and loyalty-dependence relations rather than those based on clear and transparent mutual obligations and rights.

4.2.1. Rules of the game or institutions

The quantity of actors in diverse social fields is by itself determinant in the complexity of the rural processes, but quantity per se is added to a multitude of regulatory and normative

frameworks. These are always incomplete and in perpetual, partially complementary evolution, and often also in mutually contradictory and constant interaction. In fact, when trying to determine what normative framework is governing and regulating the relations and transactions among the actors, one discovers that different frameworks are operating at the same time in the diverse social fields and even within a single one. For that reason it is necessary to adopt the perspective of ‘legal pluralism.’²² We refer here to the existence of multiple normative frameworks generated in different social fields where people interact and form social networks through which the normative rules are legitimized and effectively applied (Moore, 1973). Examples of social fields that can generate and impose their normative frameworks are the family, religious organizations, community systems, ethnic lineage, the international community and transnational networks, and also of course the national State (Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002). In other words, almost all social categories mentioned above to describe the social structure generate and execute rules and regulations to govern relations within and beyond their reach.

The theory of legal pluralism not only stresses that there is a multitude of social fields that generate rules and regulations as well as mechanisms for their fulfillment and sanction; it also emphasizes that actors inevitably belong to multiple social fields and are consequently governed via multiple normative orders at the same time. Very much in consonance with our perspectives on polycentrism, it also affirms that there is no strict hierarchy among the different social fields. On the contrary, these regulatory frameworks, very often in contradiction with each other, coexist through interactions among the actors in negotiating the modalities of their application in concrete cases. The existence of incoherent and contradictory rules and regulations is not considered a problem²³; what really matters is the mobilization and mutual recognition of the rules of the game by the members of the social fields in the cases where they are applied. In these processes the actors, in belonging to different social fields and their varied entities, strategically exercise their agency to be able to choose from among the different legal orders those that best correspond to their interests, a process also known as ‘forum shopping’ (Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002, p.15).

Obviously this perspective contradicts the legal centralism approach (and many of the common and current visions inherited within our collective imaginary) in which the formal law of the State is considered the supreme law, above all other laws which, due to their subordinated position, must be adjusted or they lose validity with respect to the most important State norm (Griffiths, 1986, p.3). In this perspective it is presumed that the law is, or at least should be, uniform, coherent and complete. There is no place for the existence of contradictory rules and regulations (Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002, p.7). This perspective squares with the State’s vision (and often pretention) as a capable and coherent entity that is watching out for the common good and the interests of all. Nonetheless, as Migdal (2001) argues, states are

[22] Initially, it was Griffiths (1986, p.1) who defined legal pluralism as “the presence in a social field of more than one legal order”, and from that it is often thought that legal pluralism means the simultaneous presence of the law of the State and the common law of indigenous communities. This latter is frequently conceptualized as an alternative framework of State law that comes from another historical time and/or is applied to another ethnic group, and depending on its position must be subordinated, incorporated or renegotiated with the current law of the State, or must replace it. Our conceptualization of legal pluralism, however, is different; it refers to the permanent and universal interaction—something not typical of developing countries where indigenous legal frameworks exist—between State and non-State laws to produce the ‘rules in use’ in concrete contexts.

[23] In fact it is considered that incoherencies and contradictions are nearly inevitable and are also found within the different legal frameworks, even the formal State one.

“a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory, and (2) the actual practices of its multiple parts.” (pp.15-16).

In other words, the State and its laws are not necessarily either homogenous or coherent. There is often a huge gap between image and practices. In fact, as an entity that interacts with the rest of society, the political arenas within the State are made up of multiple actors who respond to different groups and interests outside of the State, thus making way for possible internal struggles with their consequences regarding variations in the definition, interpretation and implementation of the laws (Merlet & Bastiaensen, 2012, p.16).

Insofar as State interventions lack internal coherence and respond to diverse interests in society—generally those of the well-off groups with easier access to their parts—they can be (partially) questioned and their laws and regulations rejected or adjusted by other social fields.²⁴ The legal pluralism perspective does not consider that the different social spheres, including the State, are autonomous isolated realms. It rather speaks of semi-autonomous and mutually constitutive social fields operating through the complex interactions among all the constitutive fields of society. These interactions are produced through the exchanges and negotiations among the actors belonging to them and affect the social fields themselves as well as their norms (in a dynamic perspective). In Moore’s words (1973, p.720): “The semi-autonomous social field has rule-making capacities, and the means to induce or coerce compliance; but it is simultaneously set in a larger social matrix which can, and does, affect and invade it [...]”. What really matters is not the State law per se, or the rules developed in other social fields, but rather the emerging rules generated from the interaction and negotiation of the actors through their practices.

Various authors have highlighted this importance using terminologies such as ‘rules in use’ (Ostrom & Cox, 2010), ‘hybrid legal form’ (Von Benda-Beckmann & Von Benda-Beckmann, 2006) or ‘practical norms’ (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). These rules that emerge in practice are influenced by various normative frameworks at the same time and are always the result of the power relations among actors belonging to different social fields. As the norms and their implementation are socially constructed, the capacity of social actors to present their perspective and ideas or values—legitimizing certain rules and regulations—as the only concrete and valid perspective obviously affects the visibility of other actors’ perspectives.²⁵ For this reason, Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan (2002, p.5) argue that “laws are only as strong as the institution or collectivity that stands behind them”. It implies that the selection of the ‘rules in use’ will largely depend on the relative power of the actors negotiating their execution in particular cases. It also implies that they are quite dynamic—certainly more than the formal rules, which usually evolve slowly—and that changes in the correlation of forces, for better or for worse, can also have a decisive impact on them.

[24] For this reason it is observed, for example, that many formal legal contracts that attempt to define clearly and transparently the rules of the game of certain deals end up being adapted and reformulated in accordance with the evolution of the context and their interaction with other rules sustained in social fields other than that of the State (as guarantor of laws and contracts).

[25] In his analysis of the struggles over development pathways in the territory of Las Segovias (Nicaragua), Mendoza (2012) amply illustrates how the groups in power succeed in ‘naturalizing’ the framework of interpretation and sustaining collective actions that generate development pathways that open possibilities for beneficial trajectories for them while closing opportunities for others. In this context, Long (2001) speaks of ‘black-boxing,’ i.e. the capacity of the dominant groups to hide that which is not at all ‘natural,’ but rather expresses many ‘interests’ in the biased forms of presenting reality. Flyvbjerg (1998, p.319) indicates that this capacity to hide is the essence of power: “(...), power defines what counts as rationality and knowledge and thereby what counts as reality”.

4.2.2. Culture

Finally, besides the ‘actors in their networks’ and the ‘rules in use’, a third level of institutional environment that complements a triad of dimensions in interaction can be discerned. This third level is that of the ideas, perceptions, knowledge and meanings that underlie, legitimize and motivate the actors’ aspirations and actions, their ways of organizing and relating to each other and the rules of the game they negotiate and employ. In this regard, sociologist Norman Long (2001) underscores the importance of what he calls the actors’ lifeworlds. This ‘world vision’ and the knowledge that originates in it inform what the actors consider gives validity and meaning to their life. In congruence with our vision of complexity, Long states that “(k)nowledge is a cognitive and social construction that results from and is constantly shaped by the experiences, encounters and discontinuities that emerge at the points of intersection between different actors’ lifeworlds.” (Long, 2001, p.70-71).²⁶ The interacting actors assemble and construct knowledge from their respective cultural repertoires, which are never finished or coherent, but in constant evolution (Long, 2001, p.18). Evidently, the contents and dimensions of this knowledge in interaction and evolution are nearly interminable. It is very important to stress that these processes feed the reasons actors have for valuing or not certain achievements and ways of life reached (see above our elaboration of Sen’s approach) and in this way are constituted as a source of guidance for their actions.

To illustrate this, we can think of rural actors’ concept of what constitutes the ideal of a ‘successful farmer.’ For example, it could be that success is conceived of as being a ‘cattle rancher-farmer’ with a lot of land and cattle, who supervises his ranch hands from astride his horse; or a ‘diversified peasant farmer’ proud of the results of his arduous and tenacious work on land fertilized through intensive agro-forestry practices; or an ‘owner-businessman’ who, going with the flow of the new opportunities, changes land and cattle for capital to invest in buses, construction companies or hotels and restaurants.

A concept that captures the influence of ideas about actors’ practices is the concept ‘*habitus*’ of the French sociologist Bourdieu, (1990, pp.66-67), who includes all dimensions of what constitute permitted or prohibited, desirable or undesirable actions and practices. Another important dimension is the ideas that circulate regarding gender, which define what is expected and required of women and men, an aspect also interlaced with age, social position and marital status. It also inspires perceptions about who is reliable and who is not (for example, the extended family, or ‘my boss’), and in this way exercises a determinant influence on access to and the reach of networks of exchange and mercantilization. The ideas that circulate about ‘normal’ forms of organization and relations are in fact broader than this issue of confidence. What prevail in Nicaragua’s rural society, for example, are top-down, clientelist and authoritarian organizational forms and relations that Marchetti (n.d.) has called local despotism. The whole of such ideas constructs a framework that decisively helps generate and legitimize the rules that produce the—largely informal—social regulation of social and economic processes (Harriss-White, 2010; Johnson, 2012).

We have already noted that these ideas and knowledge are socially constructed

[26] Long elaborated his argument reflecting on the dynamics of knowledge encounters in the framework of external interventions: “But in intervention situations it assumes special significance since it entails the interplay or confrontation of ‘expert’ versus ‘lay’ forms of knowledge, beliefs and values, and struggles over their legitimation, segregation and communication.” And he continues: “The incorporation of new information and new discursive and cultural frames can only take place on the basis of already-existing knowledge frames and evaluative modes, which are themselves re-shaped through the communicative process. Hence knowledge emerges as a product of interaction, dialogue, reflexivity and contests of meaning, and involves aspects of control, authority and power” (Long, 2001, p.71).

in the interactions among actors. This last element we are adding now is that the visions that emerge from these processes determine the strategies and actions of individuals. Precisely for this reason, they are not innocent, neutral or lacking in consequences. They always reflect certain points of view that tend to privilege certain actions that promote the interests of some groups over others. These processes are inevitably influenced by the relative (discursive) power different groups have to generate ideas that correspond to their interests and make them prevail. We previously indicated that the poverty of certain groups (farmers with few resources, women, youths...) is intimately linked to their relative lack of capacity—due to their lack of voice—to influence these ideas and the action agenda to which they aspire. For instance, the dominant characterization of certain municipalities in Nicaragua as a ‘*Vía Lactéa*’ (Dairy Route/ Milky Way)’ is not objective, nor innocent. It is rather an interested framing that helps produce a dominant cattle-dairy development pathway, mobilizes and articulates efforts of various actors and at the same time induces the invisibility and invalidity of alternative images and development pathways, particularly those that correspond to predominant activities in the livelihood strategies of more than the poorest half of the population (e.g. those related to cacao or red bean production).

Table 2 summarizes the three dimensions analyzed above and introduces elements of the physical space.

Table 2: Key dimensions whose interactions affect the emergence of development pathways

Institutional level	Key contents	Themes for inquiry
Physical space and structural influences	Inherited agro-ecological and infrastructural conditions Trends and disturbances emanated from the global and local levels.	-Soils, altitude, landscape, climate and effects of climate change, ecological resources. -Roads, energy, water, schools, health centers. -Evolution of international markets.
Social structure	Characteristics of the organizations and social networks within the territory and toward external actors (dyadic-multiple, weak-strong, vertical-horizontal, etc.).	-Networks of actors in value chains. -Social interface with external development organizations and with State institutions. -Community organizations.
Rules and regulations	Definition of regulatory frameworks and negotiation of the 'rules in use.' Legal pluralism: How are the multiple and incoherent rules and regulations mobilized and applied? For whom? By whom?	-Social regulation of markets: e. g., exclusion of women from 'male' activities (work that requires strength, in spaces that have not been appropriated) or practices of setting prices and conditions of exchange. -Property rights and access to productive resources (inheritance, real control). -Criteria and modalities of organization and governance (democratic-clientelistic-authoritarian).
Ideas and culture	Knowing: 'knowledge and interpretive frameworks.' Unquestioned inherited practices (<i>habitus</i>). Capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).	-Images of a successful farmer (technified-mono-cropping business owner, or cattle rancher with land and a herd, or an intensified diversified peasant farmer). -'Moral landscapes': pastures with cattle, agro-forestry farms or entire forests. -Models of gender or inter-generational relations. -Models of social organization (vertical or horizontal).

4.1. Complex interactions among the three levels of the institutional context and physical space

It is worth highlighting that the levels introduced into the table above are conceptual cuts that do not correspond to concrete reality, where these levels evolve together. In fact, the continuous interactions among the multiple actors in the three institutional realms of ideas, rules and social structure cause society to evolve as a complex system. Their behavior emerges from the changing and dynamic interactions among the multiple variables and components in the different spheres that make it up. While it is possible to understand in detail the functioning of each component, it will always be impossible to precisely predict the behavior of the system as such. The changes the system undergoes are the aggregate result of interrelated micro-dynamics that result in at least a partially spontaneous self-organizing process without a central-

ized direction. This renders the effects of any conscious planning or design effort in function of new, desired development pathways at least partially unpredictable.

This, however, does not mean that the socio-ecological systems function without intentionality, conscious governance or influence of power. It simply means that no actor will at any point be able to control and guide the entire dynamic of the system as a whole. The need to recognize that human systems are characterized by conscious governance efforts leads Martin and Sunley (2007, pp.586-7) to argue that the models and metaphors of the theories of self-organization and adaptation of ecological systems cannot be imported without taking many precautions. This warning is well advised, but we do not think the presence of intentionality invalidates the pertinence of the idea of emergence. Although we have stated and reaffirmed the role of power in the emerging processes (of dominant ideas and networks with made-to-order rules), we follow the argument of German sociologist Norbert Elias, analyzed by Mowles, Stacey and Griffin (2008, p.812), who holds that “that most significant change is unplanned and unforeseen, and is the result of a web of interdependent actions informed by past actions.” In the words of Elias, quoted by Mowles et al. (2008, p.812):

“As the moves of interdependent players intertwine, no single player or any group of players acting alone can determine the course of the game no matter how powerful they may be.... It involves a partly self-regulating change in a partly self-organizing and self-reproducing figuration of interdependent people, whole processes tending in a certain direction.”

This corresponds to what we above called polycentric governance. Obviously the fact that no actor can control the entire process does not mean that the dice are not loaded and the actors are playing on a level field. Nonetheless, the final result of the process will always be the consequence of the interaction among them, with the dominant ones trying to impose and maintain while those dominated try to resist and change.

This emerging result is not a simple linear addition of the functioning of different components. It is generated by historical nonlinear dynamics that crystalize into given development pathways through feedback and interactions that mutually buttress each other via semi-stable equilibria. We can illustrate this idea with the reflections on rural technological innovation by Andrew Cummings (2005) in his doctoral dissertation on technology and rural development in El Salvador. With good reason he argues that it is impossible to consider technology as an isolated element that plays a neutral role defined by its mere technical characteristics. Technological trajectories are never purely technical, but always entail important socio-political and even cultural options. Cummings (2005:45) concludes:

“Thus, within the context of technological frames, paradigms and specific trajectories, different groups of actors construct positions of relative power and vested interests, related to the maintenance or transformation of key aspects of the technologies. At any one time there may be a diversity of relevant social groups, involved in tense negotiations or conflicts for hegemony in terms of the power to define technological problems and solutions within a given societal context. Participating in this process implies not just accumulating the specific capabilities necessary for constructing a given technological alternative or artifact with certain attributed potentialities for solving a determined set of problems. It also implies those capabilities necessary for the enrollment of other actors to collaborate in the effort to develop the technological alternative (creating novelty) and to support

its emergence (selection) within the market and society as a whole, through given niches or channels of users.”

In other words, the impact of any innovation, whether technological, productive, economic or social, will always be influenced by interactive processes that open and close certain development pathways. These same innovations will also influence the pathways through the opportunities they open for certain actors prepared to promote them.²⁷ The decisive issue here is to achieve a linkage between the ideas and motivations of a critical mass of actors that move in social networks and are regulated by adequate norms that can generate sufficiently stable and solid development pathways in much the same way that an adequate mix of chemical substances, upon crossing a certain critical threshold, can end up crystalizing into solid structures.

Power plays an important role in these crystallization processes. But following our analysis above, it is not enough to understand power in the typical way, as the capacity of certain dominant actors to impose a development pathway on others by force.²⁸ It is not that such power held by some actors, such as the State’s public institutions, is of no importance, but rather that those holding it will never be able to shape the development pathways by themselves, either for good or for bad. Even the most powerful actors will always need the cooperation of others. As Long (2001) noted, even the most dominated actors will always have some room for maneuver to co-shape their reality. Nor can we equate power with imposition by force. As we indicated above, the ability to influence the frameworks of knowledge and interpretation that underpin individuals’ mentalities and practices is another dimension of power.

This power is based on the discursive struggles that produce narratives and knowledge that, by being internalized by the actors, affect their actions and make them to some degree ‘governable’. In this context, knowledge is power (Long, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 2007). When cultural hegemony is successfully exercised, controlling actors’ mind, other actors can be effectively disciplined and governed, and inserted within the projects themselves. For example, many of the State’s actions, and those of the political forces controlling it, are aimed at promoting certain ideas among the citizenry to achieve individuals’ consent to the development plans and organizational forms being promoted by the actors who have power in the State. This is not, however, uniquely a State privilege. Other actors in different social fields can also foment the ideas that seem most adequate to them. Like any other collective actor, the State is an important political arena where diverse social actors compete to make the ideas that correspond to their interests prevail.

Finally, it is important to note that rural development in a given territory will always function as an open system, with diffuse and permeable boundary lines and in constant interaction with its surroundings, making it difficult to determine what is within or outside the system. For practical reasons, researchers or development program officials cannot sidestep the need to

[27] These same characteristics of ‘self-organized’ polycentric governance also generate a decentralized capacity to adapt to external shocks or internal crises, producing a certain resilience of the development pathways. This does not prevent sudden changes toward other equilibria when pathways—as interrelated systems—cross certain critical thresholds. Certain development pathways can lose value with respect to other more interesting ones and drastically change the dynamic in a territory. In other words, the processes of change tend to be characterized by a certain (initial) inertia, but also by rapid, nonlinear changes when some new pathway demonstrates successes and is articulated around the interests and enthusiasm of a certain critical number of actors.

[28] This does not stop this type of traditional power from being a determinant element in specific contexts. We know of places, for example, where small and medium farmers were displaced by the pressure of rustlers in connivance with large cattle ranchers from the area and with the tolerance of the local police, precisely to push these farmers off their land.

demarcate borders in order to determine what is within or outside of the system they will be taking into account, but these boundaries are arbitrary by definition and always subject to possible contestation (Blackmore & Ison, 2007).

From our view of change influenced by the theory of complexity, the institutional arrangements that both enable and limit the setting up of certain development pathways are the emerging and unpredictable result of a set of activities and negotiations among different social actors at different levels and scales. These activities and negotiations are situated in a context of historical dynamics and sustained by polycentric governance processes without a single or clear decision-making center (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1998; cited in Bastiaensen et al., 2005, p.981). No single controllable and coherent system can be identified that pulls everything together. Rather what we have is a multiplicity of ‘human territories’ in constant interaction from which development pathways are generated from social learning and negotiations around meanings and interests and enable or limit the livelihood trajectories of groups and individuals. Although we can define these human territories in conceptual terms, it is very difficult to precisely define them in practice because they overlap, are constantly evolving and often are not even perceived or managed consciously as a social reality, which means that they can cross diverse physical and institutional spaces. They are also permeable and interact with other similarly permeable and dynamic territories.

5. TOWARDS A TERRITORIAL APPROACH TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT: DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS IN HUMAN TERRITORIES

After these reflections, we understand rural development as the dynamic emerging result of complex interactions among actors, the socio-institutional context and the natural resources within a socio-ecological system in a territory. How must we understand this emergence? We already underscored the fact that actors, whether individual or collective, cannot independently develop their preferred trajectories without having the conscious or unconscious support and cooperation of many other actors. In effect, this interaction among actors is what permits the articulation of development pathways around social mobilization projects that adjust such specific trajectories and make them viable. A development pathway emerges in the wake of the creation and maintenance of a set of shared ideas that inspire determined actions by the actors, their organizations and social networks, and the rules of the game that govern the interactions among actors, to generate and expand opportunities for given activities (product categories) that square with types of desired individual development trajectories. The set of ideas, social networks and rules of the game that underpin the development pathways are given dynamic feedback from the trajectories of the actors that reproduce and change them.

These emerging processes define the setting within which the actors—particularly households and individuals—construct their livelihood trajectories. We can conceive of this setting through the metaphor of a network of travelable tracks on which the actors circulate with different vehicles. There are superhighways in this network, constructed with significant external financial and technical support, that receive attention and maintenance and along which repair services exist for the vehicles that develop some mechanical problem. Certain actors on these superhighways have good vehicles and can thus move at great speed, which is why such major highways are considered very important for ‘development’. But not everyone can make the same use of them, nor are they the only travelable ones in this network. For example, taking a superhighway offers no advantage to those who only have beat-up old jalopies, or do not en-

joy speed, or simply are not in a hurry. For these actors it may be just as good to take secondary roads that are not maintained or even dirt roads that can be used only when the rain permits. They may even prefer these lesser, slower and less comfortable back roads. But at times they have no other option than to get on the superhighway and risk sharing it with faster, more powerful vehicles. Obviously there will be moments in which even if they take the secondary roads they will have to move aside to make way for faster vehicles. All these considerations are of little interest to those who have no vehicle at all. What matters to them is that the buses that transport them or trucks that transport their products can use these different highways. They themselves generally go on foot or astride on horseback via shortcuts that cross the network's superhighway or other tracks. In this space there are also 'adventurers' who open new paths and create new trajectories with nothing more than their trusty machete. And at the other extreme there are actors for whom even the best paved superhighways are not enough, so they travel in helicopters along trajectories that are very different from those of the actors who go by land.

All these roads, travelers and vehicles, with their different degrees of interrelations, weave a dynamic of development in the territories. The roads cross and complement each other because superhighways cannot go everywhere but are sometimes indirectly useful even for those who cannot use them directly. The vehicles compete, or cross each other without coming into contact; at times the traffic density forces everyone to slow down; on occasions they crash into each other; and in case of problems they may even support each other. There are rules in this entire process that are obeyed at times, and there are traffic cops to monitor the traffic, firefighters to put out blazes and ambulances to treat the wounded.

Box 2: Conceptual definitions

Development pathway: A set of shared ideas that inspire the actions of the actors, their organizations and their social networks, and rules of the game that govern the interactions among the actors around certain economic activities. This generates and expands opportunities for certain types of individual development trajectories, and dynamically incorporates feedback from those trajectories that reproduce their ideas, networks, organizations and rules of the game.

Trajectory: The path taken by the development of individuals' livelihood strategies based on the opportunities and limitations offered by the development pathways available in the territory.

Human territory: A set of meanings and social relations that link together groups of human actors in a historical period and in given physical spaces.

Physical territory: A given geographic space.

Territorial (rural) development: Interrelated evolution of different (types of) individual development trajectories in the framework of the emergent development pathways in given human territories.

In the Via Láctea in Nicaragua, for example, prosperous dairy cattle ranchers going around in late model pick-up trucks could not exist if there were no dairy industry 'superhighways' and collection centers, a network of milk collectors and transporters, a government that defines policies for promoting the export of dairy products; banks and microfinance institutions that provide credits for this sector 'with potential'; external aid donors that invest in road and collection or processing infrastructure; landless peasants who travel on foot along muddy paths and are willing to work for them; and medium-size peasant cattle raisers who travel on horseback or by bus along secondary roads and with whom they exchange milk, calves, engage in

share contracts for cows and services. The ‘heroic’ cattle rancher-farmers and also the medium-sized peasant cattle raisers would not have achieved what they have were it not for the fact that all these actors aligned to generate a dairy development pathway. Obviously, creating this alignment and the subsequent emergence of development pathways requires—in conformity with the physical territory’s resource potential—creating socio-institutional conditions, i.e. a ‘human territory’ that makes it possible to obtain the necessary articulations of ideas, rules and social networks for the actors involved (at different levels and scales).

5.1. The territorial approach in development practices and policies

We found inspiration for developing our territorial perspective from the rural territorial development approach (DTR according to its Spanish abbreviation) created and promoted in Latin America by the RIMISP studies center (Scheijtman & Berdegué, 2012)²⁹. This approach, directly inspired by European experiences with the approach called LEADER (El enfoque Leader, 2006; Barke & Newton, 1997; Ray, 1998, 2000),³⁰ is aimed at developing a more adequate framework of thinking to replace the failed sector-based rural policies of previous periods, applied in both Europe and Latin America.³¹ Consistent with our conceptualization, this proposal stresses that to achieve better rural development it is necessary to start from a territorial process, which besides a more advantageous integration of the territorial economy in dynamic external markets intends to improve local institutions, i.e. the rules that govern the interactions among local actors as well as with external actors (Scheijtman & Berdegué, 2004, p.4). It aims to achieve rural territorial development through a productive and institutional transformation process in a given rural space designed to reduce rural poverty. (Ibid., p.4).³² These same authors add that

[29] Rimisp, the Latin American Center for Rural Development, is a regional non-profit organization that conducts applied research in support of institutional change, productive transformation and capacity building of actors and social groups in Latin American rural societies. <http://www.rimisp.org/en>

[30] The web site of the European initiative LEADER summarizes its approach as follows: “The acronym ‘LEADER’ derives from the French words ‘Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économique Rurale’ which means, ‘Links between the rural economy and development actions’. The idea was to enlist the energy and resources of people and bodies that could contribute to the rural development process by forming partnerships at a sub-regional level between the public, private and civil sectors. In 1990, when a group of officials at the European Commission came up with the proposal for LEADER, this concept of connecting with people was quite new. The LEADER approach is associated with local empowerment through local strategy development and resource allocation. The main tool for the application of the LEADER approach to area development and involving local representatives in decision-making is the Local Action Group (LAG). (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/leader/leader-tool-kit/the-leader-approach/en/the-leader-approach.en.html> consulted 04/11/2014). There were also attempts in Nicaragua to improve the public interventions from these European experiences, in particular with the Rural Development Initiative promoted by the Central American University in cooperation with Spanish academics from ETEA, the University of Córdoba and Spanish agency for cooperation.

[31] Given our insufficient knowledge of the European debate about the LEADER approach, we limit ourselves in our reflections to the literature and research growing out of the RIMISP initiative, which have promoted the approach on the Latin American continent. The RIMISP networks have also been crucial to Nitlapan-UCA’s entering into a relationship with these ways of thinking.

[32] Scheijtman and Berdegué (2004, p.4-5) indicate that the key ideas of the rural territorial development approach originate in the economic theories about clusters, new territorial districts and local economic development. The most important ideas are: “(1) Competitiveness determined by the widespread expansion of technical progress and knowledge is a necessary condition for the survival of the productive units. (2) The technological innovation that increases labor productivity is a critical determinant for the improvement of the rural poor population’s income. (3) Competitiveness is a systemic phenomenon; that is, it is not an attribute of individual or isolated companies or production units, but is rooted in and depends on the characteristics of the settings in which they are inserted. (4) Demand outside of the territory is the motor force of productive transformations and is therefore essential for the increases in productivity and income. (5) Urban-rural links are essential to the development of both agricultural and non-agricultural activities within the territory. (6) Institutional development has a decisive importance for territorial development. (7) The territory is not an ‘objectively existing’ physical space,’ but rather a social construction, i.e. a set of social relations that both originate and express an identity and a sense of shared purpose by multiple public and private agents.”

“the purposes of institutional development are to stimulate and facilitate the interaction and concertation of local actors among themselves and with the relevant external agents, and to increase the opportunities for the poorer population to participate in the process and its benefits.” (p.4).

The transformation process that makes way for improved rural development is intrinsically linked to the concept of ‘territory’. Although this territory is obviously related to the physical space on which it impacts, it is not equivalent to it. We must conceptualize it first as the “set of social relations that both originate and express an identity and a sense of shared purpose by multiple public and private agents” (Schejtman & Berdegúe, 2004, p.5). In other words, the process of productive-institutional transformation—in our terminology ‘the emergence of development pathways’—will have content and shape based on the human territory. When visions are articulated from the human territory that are sufficiently coherent to motivate a critical mass of actors to make decisions and initiate actions in the same direction, networks and rules of the game may gradually emerge that crystalize in given development pathways round the identified opportunities.

From this territorial-institutional vision, the RIMISP team points out that, with respect to the main objective of reducing poverty, it is necessary for the rural institutionality to be inclusive and for all groups to be able to participate in relatively equal conditions. In their book synthesizing their major continental research project on rural territorial dynamics (RIMISP, 2012), they underscore the fact that institutional deficiencies (concentration of power, weak links with dynamic markets, enclave productive structures with little relationship to the territory, weak or depredating relations between rural areas and urban centers) are precisely what explain why the results of rural development are so disappointing in Latin America. Between the mid-nineties and the middle of the first decade of the new century, only 13% of the territories studied (10% of the continent’s population) simultaneously showed economic growth, poverty reduction and better income distribution, while more than half of them remained without “positive changes in either economic growth or social inclusion and in many of them there are also environmental degradation processes” (RIMISP, 2012, p.22).

We fully agree with RIMISP that the social biases produced by the concentration of power and social exclusion are the central challenge to achieving a rural development with development pathways that not only adjust the habitual trajectories, but also open new ones enlarging opportunities for the poorer groups. And we like the following conclusion by RIMISP (2012), in which they refer in the first instance to the excluded actors:

“If we had to summarize our response to the central question of the program in a single sentence, we might say that the ‘successful’ territories are those where their actors gradually acquire the capacity to act on small cracks of opportunity to widen them in a direction that makes sense for them.” (p.29).

If we want to transform the current excluding pathways, the challenge consists of opening new spaces in existing development pathways that eliminate obstacles to improved trajectories for the excluded actors.

Where our view departs from the RIMISP reflection is in the way it deals with that challenge, as it frames its reflection on the government's role as the public policy guide. We quote its conclusion (RIMISP, 2012) to illustrate its perspective and response:

“How is *agency capacity* at a territorial level constructed from public policy? There is significant evidence that the attempts at social engineering to construct agency usually end in either bureaucratic organizations lacking vitality and influence—like tens of thousands of ‘round tables’, which are the institutionalist version of the white elephants of the mortar and brick era of rural development—or new corporativisms, at best with a progressive content, but no less clientelistic for that. The key seems to lie in the fact that the public policy agents need to be focused on expanding the *political opportunity* and *incentives* for social actors in the territories to interact and begin constructing their forms of collective action with the form, rhythms and objectives they themselves value and are capable of implementing.” (p.29; emphasis added, own translation).

As with its European predecessors, the RIMISP rural territorial development approach banks on a facilitating and catalyzing role of the necessary articulation processes among actors from the State realm. We agree that this type of State action could make a substantial contribution to rural development, but the insistence on the role of the State and public policies risks obviating margins of autonomy for other non-State actors in the territories. In fact, the approach tends to say little about what happens outside of the State's social purview, or about which processes would allow the social actors in defined territories to construct these forms of collective action. Nor does their public policy perspective detail how social processes outside of the State realm exercise influence on the different political arenas within the State. In other words, it does not open the ‘black box’ of the human territories in dispute. As a consequence it does not succeed in explaining well why real States often end up creating ‘bureaucratic organizations with no vitality’ or ‘new patronage corporativisms,’ or why in practice the State often appears more as an ally of the privileged groups than of the poorer groups or of the common good.³³ In practice, the nature of the State as a set of entities that respond partially or completely to the interests of certain influential groups translates into a major dilemma for the territorial approach. With respect to this question, we were also unable to discern clearly how “the development of the territorial actors’ agency capability could have a very important component of positive discrimination toward the poorer and social excluded sectors” (RIMISP, 2012, p.29) in Latin American societies so characterized by “profound exclusions and inequalities of all kinds among the social actors.”

As we indicated above, it does not work to conceptualize the State as a neutral actor, separate from other actors; rather it inevitably operates in interaction with other actors that are trying to attract the resources of its institutions to serve its own ends (Migdal, 2001). Moreover, the State in its multiple dimensions is itself a set of political arenas, so it is not correct to passively expect or ask the State to operate this way. The core question is rather how to form alternative coalitions of actors (excluded and non-excluded) to influence the State and demand

[33] Although it tends to avoid an explicit analysis of these questions, the RIMISP approach does agree with the crucial role played by unequal power relations in the institutional processes that emanate from implementing less desirable development pathways. Referring to Bourdieu's concept of social fields, the main promoters of the RIMISP territorial development approach, Berdegué & Scheijtman wrote (2008, pp.18-19): “Considering the territory as a field, it can be analysed as a rural space ‘where dominant actors produce meanings that allow them to reproduce their advantages’. (...) The dominant discourse maintains such a condition until its claims are not only in clear contradiction with ‘reality’, but that a challenging discourse has been raised by ‘political entrepreneurs’ (North op cit pg 106) that are able to gain the required political power.”

that it operate on behalf of development pathways that expand the opportunities for previously excluded or exploited groups. The key issue, then, is how to get ‘human territories’ to emerge and grow stronger (including interactions within the State’s heterogeneity) so that these transformed or alternative pathways can emerge from them.

With regard to looking at the State, RIMISP’s precise concept of ‘territory’ is also not clear because while it stresses that it is not equivalent to geographic territory and is rather a social construction, it seems almost inevitable that territory coincides with some administrative area (municipality or association of municipalities) for practical reasons and its link to the State. Nonetheless, from our view of complexity, ‘human territories’ are built of the multiple interactions among different actors: they are plastic structures without clear borders, do not appear as a coherent or unified whole, are often disputed by dissident voices and are in constant evolution and definition. For these reasons, it seems to us more correct to think in terms of a variety of ‘human territories’ in relation, partially overlapped and possibly in competition, which fight over attention and resources. In fact, the struggles around these ‘human territories,’ as wholes of ideas-meanings, networks and rules of the game, could be the core of the challenge to combat the negative effects of the ‘exclusion/concentration of power’ binomial given that development pathways are constructed from there. Above all when an attempt is made to apply it in practice, it seems to us that there is not enough space in the DTR approach for an adequate conception of multiple human territories in dispute.

The approach hopes to resolve the problem of the exclusion of poorer actors by advocating for their participation, but there is a risk here of incurring into what has been called the ‘tyranny of participation’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), noted in many critical works on the limitations of ‘participatory development approaches’ in general. Mosse (2001) in particular points out the danger that participatory processes in public arenas (such as concertation tables, for example), almost always generate an apparent consensus that reflects the dominant positions, which tend to correspond to the interests of the most powerful actors (local elites frequently allied with government or outside aid donors). The tyranny of participation occurs precisely because their biased positions now appear as general consensuses, which in turn are useful in mobilizing resources and efforts in support of the development pathways generated from there.

Mansuri and Rao (2011) evaluated the results of the US\$80 billion invested by the World Bank in participatory development projects. In the study it was explicitly asked whether participation can be induced by governments and donors, as is suggested in the DTR approach and as the World Bank thought when investing so many resources in participatory projects. The conclusion of this ample study, while not as negative as the critical authors mentioned above suggest, is also not very optimistic. It indicates that participation in and of itself does not guarantee effective participation by the poorer actors (who demonstrate a tendency to participate only when they perceive concrete direct benefits), that the decisions tend to reflect the preferences of the elites and that there is a great risk that the actions will privilege the already privileged groups, with the exception of cases in which the projects have explicit mechanisms to give voice to the excluded. In addition, these discouraging results would tend to worsen in contexts of inequality, geographic isolation, illiteracy and racial and gender disparities, which are features also found in Latin American rural contexts. They indicate that for this reason the State will—in theory—have to exercise a counter-power against the excluding tendencies in the communities and, unlike RIMISP, they spotlight the need for what they call ‘organic participation’ as contrasted with ‘induced participation.’ This organic participation is that which has been won by social struggles in ‘civil society’, or what we would call ‘human territories in dispute’. Thus

the participatory approach in territorial development, although it runs the risk of introducing and bolstering social biases against the poorer actors, can also generate and expand spaces of genuine participation and even of ‘political’ struggle in the participation arenas promoted by the State and within the State framework. Nonetheless, as both Mansuri and Rao (2011) and Williams (2004, pp.570-573) argue, actively fostering these possibilities requires developing a more political vision of the participation processes and taking seriously the necessary alliances with the excluded and dominated groups to help them articulate development pathways more in accord with their own values and interests and giving them more voice and influence in the deliberation and decision-making arenas.

5.2. Individual trajectories from and within the development pathways

The issue of participation thus takes us back to development actors, who are trying to figure out how to create the conditions to make the improvements in their livelihood trajectories that they consider desirable and appropriate. While a life trajectory is both an individual and a collective process, the actions of individuals in ongoing and inevitable interaction with the ecological-institutional context are what ultimately promote development. In fact, from our relational-constructionist approach, the concrete relations and interactions in the here and now are what interweave the creation of individual ideas and actions with the collective level. As we noted in our first normative part, we situate each human being at the center of the development process as a criterion to measure development and as a protagonist of development in interaction with other actors. A vision of the complex rural development processes consequently does not enter into contradiction with an *actor-centered approach*.

From a practical perspective, livelihood trajectories can be analyzed at both the individual level and the household level (a collective actor close to individuals). It is generally assumed that in the case of rural families, particularly those with lower incomes, the household is the most pertinent unit of analysis, acknowledging that it integrates the production unit and consumption unit. Nonetheless, the household’s internal dynamics are also an important part of the interaction of individuals with the socio-institutional context, in particular the ideas, rules and networks that define and govern intra-household relations. Logically, they merit more detailed attention, as households are made up of different individuals (men and women of different ages), among whom there is a diversity of relations (de facto unions, marriages, family relations, friendship relations, etc.). These households can adopt a large variety of forms that do not always coincide with either the nuclear or the extended family, although these two particular forms are unquestionably the most common. Margins of individual autonomy exist within the household strategy, but so do serious social restrictions for the men and women, adults and young people who comprise it.

It is extremely important not to ignore this intra-household dimension made up of gender, generational and affinity relations among individuals. The image of the household as a *perfect cooperative* directed by a head of family who makes decisions based on consensus is thus erroneous, as is the idea of the head of household as a ‘benevolent dictator’ or merely a dictator. Nor must we imagine that households are necessarily stable over time, because both the flows of the life cycle (e.g. marriages of children, the death or aging of older family members) and the changes caused by migrations, divorces, adoptions or illnesses could weaken or modify the composition of a household. We must thus go back to Sen (1990) who defines the household as a site of cooperative conflict. According to this conception the household is less an unproblematic unit

of cooperation among its members than it is a political arena in which an inevitable internal negotiation takes place over the use and management of each member's resources as well as over the use of the income generated. In general, although not in all cases, women are compelled to fight against the relative devaluing of their contributions (domestic or other) and need to claim enhanced decision-making power over both the resources and strategies of the household and those pertaining to their own personal life.³⁴ In general, intra-household and gender relations are an important socio-institutional dimension and illustrate the way in which individuals, seeking to improve their livelihood trajectories, inform themselves, negotiate and learn (and help others learn) to generate changes in these relations.

Individuals, both independently and from their households, develop their livelihood trajectories according to their vision of what is desirable and possible based on the resources available to them. They do so in conformity with the rules of the game and through the prevailing social networks in the human territories that generate the development pathways that define the setting. In other words, these livelihood trajectories and household strategies are highly co-dependent on the socio-institutional and agro-ecological contexts. The rules of the game and social networks are what will determine the access and access modalities to the key resources (land, credit, family or outside labor force, schools, health centers, highways...) as well as the real opportunities to take advantage of them (modalities of access to markets and value chains, knowledge, membership in cooperatives, etc.).

This context also configures their aspirations and their ideas about what is possible and impossible, desirable and undesirable, normal and prohibited, as has been indicated above. The important thing is that this context, particularly the development pathways that emerge from there due to the interaction of the strategies of multiple actors, opens or closes opportunities for the development of a multiplicity of specific trajectories in a determinant way. Some may use 'super highways' others a 'secondary road in bad shape,' others a stretch of land only passable on horseback, and still others have to open their way through the brush with a machete as they go. Nonetheless, none of these roads is cut in stone; they open and close back up dynamically and unpredictably.³⁵ In fact, households and individuals are continually interpreting, testing and developing ideas, renegotiating rules of the game and maintaining or changing their social networks throughout their livelihood trajectories, and through their successes and failures they keep co-constructing the human territories they belong to and impacting the processes that define those territories' development pathways. In so doing they fully realize their potential to change the development pathways and open opportunities to implement future trajectories.

[34] Youths, above all female youths, also suffer these problems until they manage to achieve their autonomy, which they can do with or without access to their parent's patrimonial inheritance.

[35] We have to keep in mind that livelihood strategies are a *reality in motion*. Indeed, "(l)ivelihood strategies are also a moving target. Any given strategy should be conceived as a stage rather than a structural category" (Zoomers, quoted in De Haan and Zoomers, 1999, p.40).

6. CONCLUSION

In the introduction, we indicated that the framework developed in this paper served the purpose to provide a way to better understand development in rural territories as the basis for a reflection on the positioning of development practitioners with the aim to contribute to poverty reduction, like Nitlapan-UCA in Nicaragua. Our framework most of all highlights the primordial role of individual human actors, including those who are poor and thus relatively deprived in their capabilities, in shaping their own livelihood trajectories and contributing to the collective processes that give rise to the emergence of particular development pathways which open or close opportunities for these trajectories. Organisations like Nitlapan-UCA, or for that matter even the state institutions, are thus not the central protagonist of the development process, despite many of the claims to the contrary that are often made (and indeed need to be made) in the face of unrealistic donor expectations and their demands for impact and ‘value for money’. A key consequence of our normative and analytical framework is to explicitly put the excluded and deprived groups in the rural society at the core of development interventions. In order to achieve that, developmental organizations have to recognize that their actions should primarily look for ways to relate to and support the endogenous learning process of these excluded and deprived groups as well as their struggles in shaping development pathways which better fit their interests. For developmental institutions like Nitlapan-UCA, the challenge consists of working out how to ally adequately and effectively with the objectives and emerging strategies of change promoted by the excluded actors who are seeking to re-balance the current exclusionary development pathways in favor of their preferred livelihood trajectories. This implies that such organisations should look for creative and effective alliances that allow actors

to self-discover the most beneficial changes in their livelihood trajectories, support their social negotiation capacity (with the state and other private and civic actors, including the development agencies themselves) and thus co-generate institutional conditions that allow them to increase their agency and generate more satisfactory livelihoods. This will inevitably imply that such alliances will never be purely technical, but necessarily involve a dimension of social and political struggle at the multiple political arenas in the three institutional realms where the emergent pathways are shaped or buried. Given that relative deprivation and poverty are ultimately caused by socio-institutional processes of exclusion and marginalization, development organisations that claim to work towards poverty reduction do have the obligation to look for and to side with the most excluded and less powerful groups trying to rebalance their relative lack of voice and the neglect of their interests and desired in the co-shaping of the emergent development pathways. Finally, our analysis also argues that there are no a priori indisputable universal goals for development (like economic growth, income generation or even income equality) towards which outside organizations might work in the best possible technical way. These goals are inevitably to be determined and negotiated in a ‘political process’ with the local rural actors themselves, who might have priorities and ideas about the life and the way of life and living together that ‘they have reason to value’ (in Sen’s words) that are different from those imagined or imposed by outside (urban-based) development organisations.

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