

# Ecological entrepreneurship: sustainable development in local communities through quality food production and local branding <sup>☆</sup>

Terry Marsden <sup>\*</sup>, Everard Smith

*Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society, School of City and Regional Planning, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff University, Wales, CF 103 WA, UK*

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## Abstract

The paper explores the importance of specialised networks in shaping local/regional responses to the deepening crisis of conventional agriculture in the EU, as well as potentially creating a more sustainable platform for rural development. The emphasis will be on the problem-solving aspects of network creation and maintenance within a broader and not necessarily supportive competitive and regulatory environment. This involves examining, both over time and space, how networks function to shape knowledge and create a competitive willingness to innovate to achieve mutually beneficial goals. Through a process which we call *ecological entrepreneurship*, key actors facilitate sustainable development in the countryside by a combination of fragmentation, specialisation and quality building strategies. We empirically explore these evolutionary and spatial factors through two farming-centred networks—an organic farming network in the UK: the Graig Farm Producer Group; and a regional quality brand in the Netherlands: the Wadengroup Foundation.

The analysis of these two networks is used to examine in-depth the significance and construction of the *social and spatial milieu* for providing the individual and collective capabilities to establish viable problem-solving responses. This raises questions of: (i) how such networks are and can be sustained over time; (ii) the extent to which there are common evolutionary pathways which reproduce and embed problem-solving network building; (iii) how different spatial relations are engendered and (iv) whether such 'local' projects can advance to wider counter-movements in the context of the prevailing political economy.

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## 1. Introduction: sustainability through agro-food?

There is much discussion and critical analysis of the extent to which real progress has been made towards sustainable development during the decade since the Rio Earth Summit. And, whilst at the global level, many voices question the ability of international agreements to

deliver sustainable development, in many localities, patterns of intra- and inter-community relationships have begun to emerge to offer some optimism for a bottom-up approach to the wider sustainability goal. Creating sustainability in rural spaces across the EU is one domain in which local initiatives have been playing an important and encouraging role.

The ongoing crisis in European agriculture, and its links to sustainable rural development, may be characterised as a persistent struggle against stagnant or declining food consumption levels, increasing competition from foreign producers and novel foods, declining

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

*E-mail address:* [marsdentk@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:marsdentk@cardiff.ac.uk) (T. Marsden).

farm incomes and a producer-based ‘cost-price squeeze’ in conventional farming, and increasing public demands for higher quality in food and in the rural environment. Two responses to this plethora of challenges to EU agriculture and rural development have been a sharp increase in organic farming in all EU member states, as well as, more intense communication of quality in production through local and regional brand-building (see Renting et al., 2003).

Our aim in this paper is to examine the importance of specialised food networks in shaping local/regional responses to the deepening crisis in EU agriculture; and to assess whether such locally and regionally-based networks have the capacity to contribute to more sustainable rural development (see Marsden, 2003). As such, the emphasis will be on the problem-solving aspects of local and regional network building; i.e. how networks function and evolve to shape knowledge and create a collective willingness to innovate to achieve mutually beneficial goals (using a combination of fragmentation, specialisation and quality building strategies).

Data collected on two farming-centred networks—an organic farming network in the UK: the *Graig Farm Producer Group*, and a regional quality brand: the *Waddengroup Foundation* in the Netherlands—will be used to illustrate how local innovation and non-conventional thinking can foster sustainable economic, environmental and social development. Special emphasis will be placed on examining the underlying political and economic backdrop that shaped the operating contexts out of which these two successful case studies emerged, and, as importantly, are being maintained. Attempts will also be made to outline past, current and likely future constraints/opportunities to these local/regional initiatives, as well as the likelihood of these particular case studies acting as working examples for other localities.

## 2. The competing dynamics of globalisation and re-localisation

A crucial part of sustainable development is sustainable wealth creation, or what we might regard as ‘value-capture’. This requires that social and entrepreneurial initiatives be merged with respect for ecological, human, social and manufactured capital. This is an identifiable part of ecological modernisation as capacity building (see Lundquist, 2000; Murphy, 2000; Evans et al., 2002; and Jokenin, 2000). It also requires that the disposal of the wealth thus created shows a careful balance between satisfying consumption needs and maintaining re-investment levels that will assure the long-term future of both ecology and enterprises. Overall then, sustainable wealth creation and local economic development within the wider context of sustainable development require new entrepreneurial initiatives that focus on

investing in the local environment, creating/strengthening local institutions, and employing people and their resources. But key questions surround how these new more sustainable models of development can occur and how they evolve.

In the agrarian sphere we can postulate that value-capture at the producer end of food supply chains has at least three potential dimensions. First, it suggests that local producers and their networks attempt to capture more of the *economic value of their products* in a prevailing context when more of this value is being lost to the down-stream sectors (see Renting et al., 2003; Marsden, 2003). Second, it also suggests, as we will outline below, that in order to achieve this it also requires *new innovations in the mechanisms for distributing value* among producers and processors at the local level. This involves new types of entrepreneurial activity which is socio-ecological in the sense that it is based upon distinctly different types of networks and activities. Third, these two types of value-capture can lead to new potentialities with regard to *forging synergies* between agricultural practices and different types of multi-functional activities; such as agri-tourism, engagement in off-farm incomes activities and environmental schemes and projects. As a result, these can also stimulate further, *multi-functional forms of value-capture*. To engender the possibilities for such value-capture to occur, we argue here through our case study analysis, that new local network formation and new forms of what we term ‘ecological entrepreneurship’ become critical; not just in initiating these new valorisation processes, but also in protecting and sustaining them in the context of significant countervailing forces.

Such innovative regional and local forms of development need to be seen in the context of two major countervailing forces, within which local ‘value-capture’ has to fit: globalisation and agrarian (agro-industrial) modernisation. First, against the backdrop of globalisation (for instance, the international pressures for free trade through the WTO), ‘with global companies and global markets accounting for an increasing proportion of production and exchange, the very idea of a local economy may seem anachronistic’ (Ekins, 1997, p. 19). Yet, despite the real threat to economic sustainability, social equity, cultural diversity and ecological integrity that globalisation poses for local communities, many believe that subsumed within this global transition is a strong justification for encouraging the development and strengthening of local economies. Therefore, whilst global competition—through rationalisation of production sites and techniques as well as market operations—offers certain important comparative advantages, the process itself tends to distribute cost and benefits unevenly across different spatial, temporal and social domains. Hence, communities that are not fortunate enough to be located on the benefit side of the global logistics scale,

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