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The evolution of a negotiated territorial development approach

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Abstract – The need for further discussion on territoriality in the context of rural development, driven by the political forces of globalization and the economic and social transformations within nations, comes as no surprise. It arises from the necessity to adapt methodologies, instruments, and activities to meet the new demands imposed by these changes and their unintended consequences. Ultimately, it fosters a fresh perspective on territorial issues, actively involving rural populations in the formulation of novel development outlooks. This article retraces a journey embarked upon over two decades ago by a group of individuals operating under the auspices of the FAO Rural Development Division. Their aim was to transition from traditional rural development approaches towards an evolving paradigm centered on dialogue, negotiation, and territorial collaboration. A multitude of factors converged to lay the foundation for the initial discussions surrounding the concept of territory. This included a consideration of ecological and gender dimensions, which placed heightened emphasis on power dynamics and prompted a reflective analysis of the conventional role of "experts." This shift redirected focus away from being mere proponents of technical solutions and toward embracing a new role as facilitators of social processes. Ultimately, the critical question at hand revolves around the very concept of "development", originally formulated and imposed by the Western world at the conclusion of the Second World War. According to the authors, it necessitates a profound revaluation.

Keywords: Territorial development / negotiation / participation / gender equity / social innovation

Résumé – L'évolution d'une approche négociée du développement territorial. La nécessité d'approfondir la réflexion sur la territorialité dans le contexte du développement rural, sous l'impulsion des forces politiques de la mondialisation et des transformations économiques et sociales au sein des nations, n'est pas surprenante. Elle découle de la nécessité d'adapter les méthodologies, les instruments et les activités pour répondre aux nouvelles exigences imposées par ces changements et leurs conséquences involontaires. En fin de compte, elle favorise une nouvelle perspective sur les questions territoriales, en impliquant activement les populations rurales dans la formulation de nouvelles perspectives de développement. Cet article retrace un parcours entrepris il y a plus de vingt ans par un groupe d'individus opérant sous les auspices de la Division du développement rural de la FAO. Leur objectif était de passer des approches traditionnelles du développement rural à un paradigme évolutif centré sur le dialogue, la négociation et la collaboration territoriale. Une multitude de facteurs ont convergé pour jeter les bases des premières discussions autour du concept de territoire. Il s'agissait notamment de prendre en compte les dimensions écologiques et de genre, ce qui a mis l'accent sur les dynamiques de pouvoir et a suscité une analyse réflexive du rôle conventionnel des « experts ». Ce changement a permis de ne plus se contenter de proposer des solutions techniques, mais d'adopter un nouveau rôle, celui de facilitateur des processus

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sociaux. En fin de compte, la question critique qui se pose tourne autour du concept même de « développement », formulé à l'origine et imposé par le monde occidental à l'issue de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Selon les auteurs, il nécessite une profonde réévaluation.

Mots-clés : Développement territorial / Négociation / Participation / Égalité de genre / Innovation sociale

1 Introduction

In this article, we examine the evolution initiated two decades ago by a collective under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Rural Development Division. This evolution marked a paradigm shift from a conventional, expert-driven model of rural development towards an approach that prioritizes the engagement and empowerment of local communities. Central to this approach is the emphasis on dialogue, negotiation, and collaborative action, wherein experts assume a facilitative role rather than a directive one.

In the last decades, the top-down, supply-driven nature of most technical assistance projects had become evident to many practitioners and researchers (Peemans, 2018; Chase and Wilkinson, 2015; Maketho, 2019). Interventions were defined by sectoral issues (agriculture, natural resource planning and management, soil and water conservation, etc.) and were only partially reflective of the constraints and potentialities of the territories where they were implemented. Therefore, they were rarely adapted, nor adaptable, to local contexts.

Civil society and non-government organizations (CSOs and NGOs) increasingly became aware of the gaps left by these large projects, and therefore promoted bottom-up approaches and the use of participatory methods (Bonnal, 1995; Chatty *et al.*, 2003; UN-ESCAP, 2009). These new approaches accounted for the real needs of local populations but were translated into projects limited in scale and not easily replicable when successful. The major limitation is that civil society and NGOs did not (and still do not) have the capacities to integrate local action into national and international governance contexts.

Since territories are open systems, they influence and are constantly influenced by external forces.

In fact, environmental, social, economic and political global processes, regional changes, national adjustment and development policies, they all influence dynamics and functioning of rural areas, even those that are remote (FAO, 2005). In the sense of a "social construct", the territory emerges as an essential element of new modes of action resulting from the weakening of hierarchical coordination. The changes observed within territories are the result of the advent of new actors, of the evolution of the State's role and of the tensions resulting from confrontations between actors (Caron *et al.*, 2017).

The analysis of development challenges necessitates a comprehensive consideration of the multifaceted and unpredictable dynamics characterizing the interactions between local and global contexts. Adopting the territory as the foundational system of reference, coupled with acknowledging the emergent proactive engagement of civil society, stands as crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of these transformations. Furthermore, these steps are instrumental in redefining the parameters governing rural development, thereby facilitating a more resilient and adaptive approach to addressing these challenges.

At the heart of this discourse is the compelling evidence derived from fieldwork, which posits territories as fundamentally arenas of power dynamics. Consequently, the advocated for—and critically necessary—engagement ('participation') of local stakeholders, alongside the enhancement of their capacity to advocate for their rights and make sustainable livelihood choices, necessitates examination across several distinct dimensions. Firstly, there is the potential for the instrumentalization of such participation by the usual entities, including well-meaning external experts. Secondly, the notable presence of power asymmetries, characterized by influential policy-makers and landowners, presents significant challenges in initiating and sustaining meaningful dialogue and negotiation. Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge that territories do not constitute the focal point of an intentionally directed process of action and control, as suggested by Caron *et al.* (2017). This framework underscores the complexity of facilitating genuine participatory processes in the context of rural development, where power dynamics and unintended consequences must be carefully navigated. The diversity of actors, their values, and the interdependencies between them often lead to conflicting interests causing the improper use and inefficient management of local resources.

2 The research question and the first steps of a methodological transition

By the second half of the 1990s, an open group of colleagues from universities, NGOs, governments, and FAO, who were collaborating on several projects in different countries, began a reflection on the limitations of the classical rural development as highlighted before and getting into the forthcoming "territorial" debate.

The starting point was that territorial diagnostics had to be seen as a means to promote dialogue between pluralities of actors. The final aim was to reach (if and when possible) a negotiated agreement on the specific activities that allows the realization of the actor's environmental, social, economic and cultural projects and recognizes them as promoters of these processes. The question of a wide participation was central for all of us, and the emerging question became how to avoid manipulation and how to include powerful actors with low interest in dialogue.

In other words: we knew what we did not want anymore (classical top-down approaches), and we did not want to follow the spatial physical approaches that were predominant particularly in Latin America (Arcia *et al.*, 2023), but we had not yet a clear idea about the final product we wanted to elaborate. The approach we had in mind assumed an inbuilt

learning process with the objective to increase social cohesion, strengthen the bargaining power of the marginalized, increase people's and institutions' organizational capacities and improve their access to information and channels of communication, and their abilities to use these for their own development.

After some fieldwork done in Bolivia (Warren, 2000), a meeting was organized in 2001 in Higuerote in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, where some of the key points of what would shortly after become the Participatory and Negotiated Territorial Development approach (PNTD) (FAO, 2005) were set out.

The first point concerned overcoming the traditional distinction between rural and urban areas by treating them all as part of a common "something", a space inhabited and transformed by many people with different interests, sometimes conflicting and sometimes not. We call these spaces, shaped by long periods of human interaction, territories, defined as historical intergenerational products, resulting from the interaction of many different actors with natural ecosystems, in which a different set of cultures, values and interests for each group of actors and for each region was promoted. Territories were therefore areas of biodiversity and heritage and permanent negotiation arenas between the various parties involved.

The actors of these inhabited spaces defined the changing limits of these territories, but similarly the territories (for geographical, historical or economic/ecological reasons) defined the actors in turn. In short, there was no singular territory with its actors, but a plurality of territories with a plurality of actors. We therefore had to learn to swim in this diversity and try to find meaning in it.

In short, between actors interested in favouring an agricultural use and others interested in promoting an industrial use, or those who pressed for ecological preservation, what should be supported as a priority and why? It was no longer a question of proposing improvements to an agricultural production system based on microeconomic analyses of marginal profitability, but of having to choose between different uses/management, perhaps opposing ones, which when looked at individually, were all valid.

This dilemma inevitably led us to favour the opinions, choices and decisions of the actors themselves. It was necessary to start from their consciousness and historical knowledge, which simultaneously required us to redevelop our role as "experts" in this exercise, something to which we will return later. It must also be said that the sphere in which we moved, and continue to move, is made up of countries which for the most part have weak institutions, are subject to corruption, are poorly equipped, and often lack a vision for the national space, both regional and/or local. In today's language, we would say countries with weak "governance".

3 From participation to territorial negotiation

The decentralization policies promoted in the 1980s and 1990s did not achieve their purpose (Cabral, 2011; Giordano, 2013). The best efforts made to decongest decision-making centres, without devolving power to the local level and without providing the lower administrative levels with the necessary financial and human resources, have led to serious shortcomings in the performance of state functions. This inefficiency on the part of public institutions (partially filled by CSOs and NGOs) created and still creates serious obstacles to the realization of actors' projects and causes a general decrease in the credibility of the Public Administration in the eyes of society. In turn, this lack of credibility limits the ability of the Public Administration to enforce public order, redistribute welfare, collect taxes, and provide basic services.

Making a decision to prioritize knowledge, consciousness, or some other logic over another was beyond the limited management capacity of the institutions responsible for making critical, a priori choices. It therefore became necessary to come up with a method to facilitate the encounter between these different visions, and thus try to arrive at an acceptable synthesis.

But acceptable to whom? For the large development agencies, external donors, or, above all, for the players in those territories? The choice, from our point of view, was quite obvious: the actors of those territories had to be the first to be convinced of the validity of the final choices, which would take the form of Socio-Territorial Agreements.

This therefore required the direct involvement of those actors in the process, giving rise to the "experts" on the one hand, and a variety of actors with their interests and visions on the other. The experiences of various members of the group (Biancalani *et al.*, 2004; FAO, 2008; González Mejía *et al.*, 2009; Sarmento *et al.*, 2009) led us to a factual critique of the participatory processes that were popular at the time, leading to coining the neologism *participulación*; that is, manipulated participation. This was what we wanted to avoid, namely arriving at a final result obtained through the manipulation of the will of the participants. At the same time, it was also evident that the (limited) "knowledge" of the experts could not direct the process and indicate the paths to take (as was normal in traditional "development" projects, in which the experts provided the recipe to be followed).

The search for a balance between a diminution (and rethinking) in the role of the international (or national) expert and an increase in the weight of the will of local actors was one of the objectives. The choice fell on the use of a word borrowed from the lexicon of the business world: negotiation. No more generically participatory processes, but negotiated processes, so that it was clear to everyone that the various actors had concrete wills to defend interests, rights, and visions. Negotiating between different positions (and perhaps antagonistic ones, *i.e.* with people who initially did not even accept the presence of the other party), inevitably led to thinking about the new role that the old experts had to play: the role of facilitators/mediators.

But in order to initiate this kind of process, it was necessary to lay the foundations for an initial dialogue. Only by agreeing to sit around a table, even with bitter "enemies", and talk to them, could one hope to open a negotiation towards some kind of result.

Dialogue and Negotiation thus became two cornerstones of our journey. Slowly we began to replace the word participation with negotiation in our speech and documents. It took time, also because our leaders had an almost emotional bond with the "participatory" terminology, so even when we published

the first FAO document, we had to agree to start with the P of participation. Only about ten years later we were authorized (by a new FAO Divisional Director) to adjust the title of our proposal (Green Negotiated Territorial Approach, FAO 2016), so better clarifying the contours of the proposal. Different visions, interests and rights that must be respected and combined in some way to find a satisfactory result for all.

Since there are so many possible interests at stake, and since we can no longer count on the safety net constituted by our studies in the large Western universities, it was also necessary to accept and clarify with the interested parties, that there might NOT be a final result, given that this depended on the negotiating will of the parties involved. We all have before us examples of territorial conflict between different entities, at different scale, that fail to progress in dialogue towards an acceptable solution.

This served to clarify the limits of what we were proposing and to further relativize the role of outsiders in the process. The main weight lay on the parties directly concerned.

We could have worked to create conditions for an initial dialogue, put technical elements on the table to support the negotiation process, possibly even facilitated this process, but in the end, it was the parties that had to agree to reach a pact that was socially legitimate.

4 Socially legitimate territorial agreements

Based on these initial elements, a discussion started with an open group of interested colleagues and friends (FAO and beyond). The horizon we had in mind was that of the countries of the Southern Hemisphere. We were all working with countries where the institutions were weak at local level (community, village, *aldea*), if not close to non-existent and with limited credibility.

Addressing the question of terminology also took some time: the "territorial" theme was still not very common in the intellectual and/or political debate in the early 2000s and the few references used the words "*ordenamiento territorial"* (in Latin America) (Montes Lira, 2001; Sanchez Ulloa, 2001), "land use planning" (in English-speaking countries) (FAO, 1993) or territorial planning (in Italy) (Franceschetti and Tempesta, 1993). The closest intellectual/methodological debate was taking place in France, and we do recognize its influence in our own journey.

The French case is particularly relevant because the emergence of these evolving concepts (initially "*gestion de terroirs"* and, later, "local development") paved the way for our initial thinking. We all agreed on considering with a critical eye the productivism that was dominant from the 60s on, with a logic of "technological package" supposed to foster an increase in agricultural production and thus in the overall economy (IRAM, 1991; Ministère de la Coopération & CFD, 1994). The initial trial of the "*gestion de terroirs"* dates back to 1984 in Burkina Faso, although similar but isolated experiences were tested in Niger, Senegal and Mali well before (Berthomé and Mercoiret, 1992). The latter "local development" approach widened the diagnostic to the entire agrarian system, underscoring the importance of environmental aspects and, mainly, being based on grassroots requests and no longer top-down intervention (Ministère de la Coopération & CFD, 1994).

From our analytical perspective, it was imperative to transcend the conventional framework of 'projects', which inherently positioned Donors at the forefront in determining the strategic direction. Instead, we advocated for prioritizing the diverse (and occasionally conflicting) roles of various stakeholders in the processes of definition, negotiation, and, hopefully, consensus on the necessary actions to be undertaken. This approach underscores the importance of inclusive engagement and shared decision-making in shaping developmental initiatives. As a result, even the role of the "experts" had to radically change: not provider of the solutions but facilitators of this possible dialogue.

Different languages convey different concepts, and our multicultural and multilingual group found it difficult to agree on the words (and concepts). Eventually, we came-up with "negotiated territorial development" which served to remind us that it was not a matter of management or planning (the natural or economic resources guided by external experts), or even of putting things in order, as the Latin American schools indicated.

We put a lot of effort into disseminating these reflections and the first methodological guidelines within our organizations, FAO and external governmental institutions. In the case of FAO, we were aware that for decades it had favoured a technical top-down approach based on soil characteristics according to the possible crops that could be grown and/or microeconomic analysis of farming systems performances. The emphasis was on the natural resource, and not on the people responsible for the actual work. In fact, although it was claimed that the farmers' knowledge was taken into consideration, in reality it was the technicians who gave the final recommendations, with maps of potential or indicative use of the portions of land, on what to produce or what not to produce. In short, we remained within the agricultural world, without real consideration either for the actors or for the institutions and even less for what was happening in the "territory" beyond the agricultural uses themselves. Changing this way of thinking was, and remains, a very long and complicated task.

The first publication of our works came out in 2005, with the already mentioned title of PNTD. International comments were positive to the extent that the PNTD was cited at the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) (Sachs, 2006) held in 2006 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, as being one of the new and interesting initiatives carried out by FAO, as well as providing inspiration for the newly Territorial Development Policy of the Brazilian Government of Lula (Barbosa Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2014). Although the principles seemed founded on solid experience, the continuous fieldwork was essential to test them in reality; there was certainly also a need for substantial refinement.

There were many aspects left to be explored, starting with the new role of the "expert" in the process of dialogue, negotiation and concertation. What qualities were needed for the different stages of the process? Was one person enough or was it preferable to have a team, offering different roles for the different steps? And, last but not least, how to convince colleagues with a very specific technical background, dedicated to "land use planning", to relinquish some of the exclusive nature of their role to allow their knowledge to be more readily available and useful for other actors in their (and not our) process of dialogue-negotiation?

5 Confidence and credibility

Other critical considerations arose when we started our land programmes in Africa (Mozambique and, later, in Angola): how to create a climate of confidence and gaining credibility with local populations with whom we were working, whilst being mandated by an Organization (FAO) that responds primarily to Governments (that had, in both cases, little credibility in the view of the local populations).

Confidence and credibility are variables that determine the fate of entire organizations. When they assume a negative meaning, they can destroy in less than no time any human organization, preventing functionality, effectiveness and ultimately undermining the very *raison d'être*. This is why we had to find a way to disentangle this and the following concepts (d'Errico *et al.*, 2023).

Creating a climate of confidence in an environment means to structure it so that the expectations of a person with respect to the behavior of others can be confirmed. Trust/confidence is closely tied to the expectations of what the others will do under certain situations. Credibility comes from belief. A person, a group, an institution is credible if they can align over time different trustees' outcomes; *i.e.*, they possess a credibility capital built in the course of their history. Here the emphasis is often placed on the coincidence between words, actions and outcomes of the actor: a person who says A, acting on B and gets C effect, inevitably sees a drop of his/her own spendable capital of credibility in the public space.

In our work in those two countries (considered at the time by FAO as examples of "protracted crises") confidence and credibility had to be seen as a continuous building process. We can consider it as a "*shadow of the future*", a long shadow that will affect the future relationship (Axelrod, 1984). Something difficult to make it ponderable but certainly an issue that influences the difficult task of facilitating a dialogue and negotiated approach.

To some extent, the identification of these problems, which arose particularly in the first years of the intervention in Mozambique, contributed significantly to a critical review of our way of intervening in the countries of the South. The issue became more pressing as a result of the emerging land rush that led, particularly in Africa, to land insecurity. The customary systems of land management, which contrary to ours were not based on titles and maps, but were sufficiently flexible and easy to understand for local populations, came under fire from the new philosophy advancing from Washington that was linked to the development of land markets (Deininger, 2003). With this neoliberal doctrine the intention was to confirm the superiority of a land management system based on laws and institutions borrowed from the Western world, thus relegating the traditional systems on which practically the whole of Africa was based, to the margins of legal and juridical non-recognition.

So we began to work increasingly hard on this issue to come up with an approach, based on legal recognition of customary practices, that would reassure both governments and local communities. Thanks to the connection with FAO Land Reform journal, we took advantage also of other R&D examples in other African contexts that served to complement our internal thinking (Lambert and Sindzingre, 1995; Mushala *et al.*, 1998; Kisamba-Mugerwa, 1998; Chauveau, 2002; Colin, 2004; Blanc-Pamard, 2004).

In Mozambique the work started after the end of the Civil War in 1992 and little by little, in response to the local request, a new national policy (1995) and a law (1997) on the land rights that clearly responded to the dilemma mentioned above was designed. However, this lacked the practical field test; that is showing how to recognize the limits of the "territories" managed by the local communities and transcribe these rights into a "Western" system, with maps and titles. It took a few years of practice to perfect the method we called participatory land delimitation (Tanner *et al.*, 2009), which was also included in the Technical Annex of the land law in Mozambique considered as an exemplary process of dialogue and public participation (Boche *et al.*, 2013). A similar process was also carried out (end of 1990s) in Angola (Groppo *et al.*, 2003), where we could take advantage of the confidence and credibility built in Mozambique, a "brother" country with whom both Governments as well as NGOs/CSOs (and Donors) had frequent exchange.

Our work there included a progressive expansion of the intervention from the participatory titling of the territories of the settled communities to the work of training local cadres, extending the intervention to the issue of public policies necessary for the family farming sector (based on the experience in Brazil where we played an instrumental role in defining the new *Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar* [PRONAF] policy) (Groppo and Guanziroli, 2014) and, more recently, dealing with the problem of nomadic pastoral communities, with an even higher level of complexity as regards the creation of a climate of trust that would allow the establishment of a mechanism for dialogue-negotiation and consultation (FAO, 2018).

The land works also highlighted another problem. The multiplicity of actors operating in a territory is not only made up of people or groups with different and perhaps conflicting productive interests, but also of people who, within smaller units, communities and/or families, worked not only in the productive sphere but also in the reproductive one, with little or no actual recognition. Thus, the women's issue gradually emerged, which would later become a gender issue affecting not only women but also men. Whilst being part of the problem, men were to become part of the solution.

To put it bluntly, it is still an open issue that requires continued pushing both for study of the theme (Groppo *et al.*, 2023), but also in carrying out ground interventions (Bicchieri, 2022) and in lobbying work within the organization to raise awareness of other technical units.

As we delved into discussions of dialogue and negotiation, drawing from the ongoing experiences in Mozambique and Angola (countries with a turbulent history of internal conflicts), and the action proposal crafted for the potential post-conflict period in Colombia (Proderpaz) (Reyes, 2004), our focus naturally gravitated towards increasingly contested territories. These were the areas where, before even considering the prospects of future 'development', the top priority was to establish a modus vivendi that would enable the involved parties to, at the very least, coexist if not collaborate.

This new line of "territorial" work took place in parallel with the intensification of the ecological question within these processes, which, initially, sought territorial agreements in line with essentially productive economic development. Based on work with the San communities in Southern Angola

BOX 1. ***Linking community-based animal health services with natural resource conflict mitigation in the Abyei Administrative Area – Building resilience through dialogue and negotiation in a contested area between Sudan and South Sudan***

The Abyei Administrative Area (AAA) is a contested zone located on the central border between South Sudan and Sudan. Its status has remained unresolved since South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011, and the governments failed to agree on the border division. A United Nations peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), has since monitored the situation. It is entrusted with overseeing demilitarization and maintaining security in the area. Mistrust and lack of dialogue have been critical components of this conflict. FAO has played a key role in initiating and facilitating a process focused on dialogue and building social cohesion at grassroots level, contributing to wider, sustainable peace initiatives. FAO identified a window of opportunity through the technical delivery of community-based animal health veterinary services (embedded in an agricultural livelihood support strategy), in an effort to improve intercommunity relations and contribute to sustaining peace objectives.

Source: https://www.fao.org/3/i7422e/i7422e.pdf

BOX 2. ***The Green Negotiated Territorial Development (GreeNTD) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo***

Since the late nineteenth century, the vast natural resources of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have constantly provoked violent interventions from outside the country and fueled internal conflicts. Population pressure, competition for land resources, mining, forestry and hunting, lack of secure access to land, weak governance and the instability of the institutional framework have caused tension between different actors. Thus, competition over access to natural resources is a structural problem and one of the main factors fueling power struggles in the region.

In the current context of constant insecurity, arable land is under-used, and productivity is limited. Conflicts contribute to a shortage of livelihoods for the most vulnerable rural communities, environmental degradation, and underpin a propensity to use violence to resolve problems. Land disputes represent a serious threat to the development and stability of the country, particularly in the East, where frequent movements of people fleeing conflicts increase tensions between groups, particularly host communities.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has developed an integrated approach to address the multidimensional and multi-stakeholder problem of land conflicts: the Green Negotiated Territorial Development (GreeNTD), a socio-ecological and people-centered approach to the territorial development that is characterized by openness and inclusion.

Source: https://www.fao.org/3/i6258e/i6258e.pdf

(Cenerini, 2008), we began to look more deeply into the question of territoriality in the indigenous context (Groppo and Cenerini, 2012).

This led to a necessary downscaling of economic priorities, always starting from the initial axiom that local actors should decide the future of their territory, be it for production initiatives or environmental protection. We were therefore working to achieve Socio-Ecological Territorial Agreements (SETA), the central element of the revised and expanded version of the methodological proposal (FAO, 2016). In the light of these new aspects (dialogue-negotiation in contexts of conflict), two particularly significant interventions were carried out in the disputed area of Abyei, between Sudan and South Sudan and in the Kiwu region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see boxes 1 and 2).

6 Dynamics of asymmetric power and territoriality

A further step forward was taken in recent years: namely, on the issue of asymmetry of power between the parties involved. Any organization dealing with "development" is generally very reluctant to deal with power dynamics, for the basic reason that it relies on funds from the upper actors (those in power), while the objective of the interventions is directed towards those on the bottom, the powerless. This is why it was important that in our open group we should have representatives of several other realities, in order to increase the negotiating power of our proposal. Failure to deal with asymmetries of power, *i.e.* carrying forward a participatory or negotiating process without trying to change the balance of power (for the better), inexorably led to final results that were even more favourable to those in power. This aspect was very clear if we wanted to not only maintain, but actually increase, the feeling of trust in the external operators we represented (be that a donor, an NGO or FAO), and avoid contributing to an increased feeling of disinterest and apathy that paved the way for any populist political adventure.

So it was that in 2022 we published an article to better clarify our proposals (Groppo *et al.*, 2022), with the intention of increasing lobbying work both within FAO and in the organizations with which we were in contact.

Little by little, the transition from "participatory" towards a "negotiated" approach is gaining space in other sectors of FAO. Proof of that are certain publications like "*Transforming Food and Agriculture To Achieve The SDGs – 20 interconnected actions to guide decision makers*" (FAO, 2018) and "*Strengthening civic spaces in spatial planning processes – A technical guide on regulated spatial planning and tenure to balance societal priorities in the use of land, fisheries and forests*" (FAO, 2020). Particularly interesting is the reference to power asymmetries, an issue that was almost inexistent at the time when we first proposed it in the public

debate. Today it is becoming part of the mainstream, as shown by the recent FAO Science & Innovation Forum, held in October 2023 (FAO, 2023a), or the FAO virtual event on Governance and policy innovation: Country experiences, tools and approaches (FAO, 2023b). Whilst we do not want to take full credit of this change, it can reasonably be said that the internal lobbying done through lectures of the proposed approach, project results presentation, articles, interviews and private conversation with colleagues, have contributed to its emergence.

The evolution of the negotiated territorial approach thus begins to have a complete reference framework that questions the role of the external person who guides the local development processes and steers towards the emergence of a new figure, whose role is to bring together a team of Territorial Facilitators (Bonnal *et al.*, 2013). Whilst our work was more field oriented, other colleagues brought this concept at Corporate level of governance discussion, proposing FAO to "facilitate negotiation processes" (Bojić *et al.*, 2022).

Interventions are no longer seen with a view to uncritically transferring our knowledge, but to be thought out and built from below, with local actors assuming a new protagonist role. Then there is the obvious need to attack the existing imbalance of power, aware that processes of this nature may not even lead to results if the parties involved do not accept the logic of dialogue, negotiation and concertation. Finally, through giving equal importance to proposals of a productive or ecologically protective type, and strengthening women-men relationships from a perspective of equality, not only in the productive sphere but also (finally) in opening the discussion on roles in the reproductive (or care) sphere, we arrive at the many dimensions on which we continue to work today. General de Gaulle would have said: "*Vaste programme !"* However, some lights are pointing also there, as the recent evaluation of FAO work on gender has indicated (see for example how the asymmetries in the private sphere are pointed under the heading of "Time poverty" –FAO, 2022) and their translation into the new FAO Policy on Gender Equality (FAO, 2020).

Another fundamental question remains open: Where do we want to go? We all grew up within the model (that of development) which, in reality, is a philosophy elaborated and imposed by the Western world, especially the Americans, at the end of the Second World War. Arturo Escobar explained how the hierarchy between the First and Third World was created, how the concept of "development" was created, and how the way forward, that is to imitate the northern countries as if there was only one possible route, has evolved. A route that the others, the various "Souths" of the world, should emulate and try to copy.

The emergence of new visions, starting from the indigenous question and the knowledge that these nations have brought with them, and the strength that has led them to important recognition at the UN, is a new, more complex and complicated, path to follow.

7 Conclusions

The journey that began more than two decades ago has led us to understand the complexity of the social structures in which we "claim" to intervene in the name of an ideology of "development" that we have forfeited over the years of university study: a complexity that changes over time and space, forcing us to exercise patience and permanent modesty. But these twenty plus years have equally made us understand how the key point for undertaking "territorial" plans, projects or policies that have any hope of being accepted, internalized and then implemented, does not lie wholly on the specificity and/or technical capacity of the person who intervenes. Nor is the full availability of adequate and high-quality information essential. Satellite cartographies or maps drawn on the sand, in-depth diagnostics or "quick" exercises are all necessary elements, but in order to enter into those realities, one must first learn to look within.

We – the "experts" – are the first to have to change, in order to put ourselves in a position that enables us to "go towards the other". In more general terms, nowadays the question of otherness is acquiring ever greater importance. The complex processes of social and cultural change impose an impetus for a new look at the question of *the other*. Understanding otherness means provoking a "fusion of horizons" because truth is not monological but dialogical; it does not reveal a pre-existing situation, but is the result of common understanding and interpretation.

Much has been done in terms of methodological reflection on how to address the territorial issue from a negotiating point of view. The next step is to face the ideology of "development" so as to get out of that industry of "chariness" (mix of charity and business) which has now become international cooperation. José Esquinas Alcazar, the "godfather" of the FAO International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources, helps us devising a possible way through with his call for "dreaming the future beyond the Sustainable Development Goals" (Esquinas Alcazar, 2023).

He underscores the need to provoke individual and collective action to halt the disruption of the delicate ecological balance of our planet and climate change, but also to appeal to the unique responsibility of our generation in the face of a serious situation that requires urgent solutions. A change of attitude and priorities is urgently needed, and to this end it is more urgent than ever to become aware of our power as citizens, and also of our role in society.

Coherent with this way of thinking, a negotiated and concerted vision of a territory must not be thought of as a function of "development" and/or growth, but should be seen in the light of an improved harmony between the actors and the ecosystem in which they live and/or operate. As a popular Spanish song goes, *"caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar"* (walker, there is no path, the path is made by walking).

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