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Éditions Quæ  
RD 10, 78026 Versailles Cedex  
[www.quae.com](http://www.quae.com)

© Éditions Quæ, 2017

ISBN: 978-2-7592-2731-0

Version française : « Des territoires vivants pour transformer le monde »

© Éditions Quæ, 2017

ISBN : 978-2-7592-2654-2

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## CHAPTER I

# Why and how the concept of ‘territory’ can help in thinking rural development

*Patrick Caron*

### WHY THE GROWING INTEREST IN THE WORD ‘TERRITORY’?

The concomitant interest in the term ‘territory’<sup>1</sup> and the expression ‘sustainable development’ is not fortuitous. It has grown due to concerns about the environment and the degradation of resources, increasing inequalities, and tensions and conflicts resulting from hunger, poverty, destitution, migrations, etc. The transformations of rural societies and the risks they face have become issues for intense discussions, passionate debates and preoccupations. They have given rise to reservations of all sorts, on the one hand, and commitments to sustainable development, on the other.

The unprecedented demographic, political, economic and social changes and the intensification of flows and movements through rural areas have rendered obsolete the disciplinary and action frameworks that have been mobilized thus far. These dynamics raise valid and concrete questions about the modes of exploitation, production and reproduction of resources, their appropriation and their use. They call for a relook at the distribution of wealth, the organization of the supply of agricultural products, flows between cities and the countryside, and availability of infrastructure. They call for a revamping of land-use policies and for tax reforms as well as for the reorganization of administrations and services, and of the support of the agricultural sector, etc.

While accompanying the countries of the Global South as they became independent and driven by the goal of helping them catch up economically and socially, the ideology of development was initially based on the paradigm of the welfare state. However, beginning in the 1980s, the watchwords promoted by international institutions within the framework of the Washington Consensus called for

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1. Used here and in the rest of the book in its meaning of the French word *territoire*, which encompasses a broader scope – including that of a social construct – than that normally attributed to it in English. See also Foreword to this book by Camilla Toulmin, Box 1.1 in this chapter and Caron (2015).

the disengagement of States. Justified by the political failures or economic bankruptcies of some States, they were also fed by the ideology of popular participation, coupled with demands for democracy and the need to strengthen civil society institutions. In this context, 'the promotion of local development and the policies of decentralization [...] are based on the hypothesis that relations of proximity will better serve the needs of local populations' (Tonneau, 2003). This is especially true in the case of the management of rural areas, for which an abundant body of literature reveals the benefits of increased involvement of local actors, participants and stakeholders (d'Aquino, 2002; Benoît *et al.*, 2006; de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2007; OECD, FAO, UNCDF, 2016). However, some observers did note the limits of participatory democracy and the risks of its instrumentalization.

The need for new regulations emerged in the late 1990s at both local and global levels. The uncertainty that arose about the future – which had long been assumed as necessarily better – and the multiplicity of centres and forms of decision making forged a new context for action. The risks of imbalances that could result from a sole reliance on an extremely volatile – and supposedly 'self regulatory' – market began raising the issue of other ways of guiding transformations in society and the agricultural sector. Even if it remains a political invention, the notion of the public good seemed to make sense and gained rapid and wide acceptance.

This quest for the public good is being accompanied by a rediscovery of the places and the institutional forms necessary for its promotion, not only at the global scale (e.g., Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development) but also at the local level. At the local level, the State, with its intention of disengaging itself, seeks replacements to stimulate initiatives, guarantee the supply or preservation of public goods, and solve emerging problems. Public action is in search of collective action.

Going beyond the reductive acceptations of 'good governance' and 'good practices', new forms of governance must be invented, based on original ways of regulating fragmented social systems. For example, the management of rural spaces and living resources brings together a set of actors with different objectives in a flexible system that has very little or no hierarchy (Soulard, 1999; Perrier-Cornet, 2002). In this sector as in others, the complexity of the issues involved, the reduction of the means of action and the fragmentation of actors and actions undermine the legitimacy of public actors because of their poor ability to resolve emerging problems. Scientists find themselves in the same boat: the assurance of experts and technicians is belied and gives rise to controversies and criticisms of scientific results (Theys and Kalaora, 1992; Godard, 2001, 1993).

This fragmentation of stakes and powers calls for increasingly complex mechanisms of non-hierarchical coordination and arbitration, whether to solve problems of health, the environment, local economics, or those resulting from exclusion, etc. We move from a goal of government of rural spaces by a single authority to a set of governance processes in which all the actors involved exert a part of this now-shared authority, one that is therefore difficult to grasp. Power relations seem to be supplemented, and sometimes replaced, by new forms of negotiated solidarity (Godard, 1993; Lascoumes,

1994) (professional, territorial, of neighbourhood, of class, of user communities, of common interests, etc.). The territory appears to be an eminently suitable field of application of these new processes of governance.

## **THE TERRITORY: A USEFUL NOTION BECAUSE OF ITS CAPACITY TO ACT ON REGULATIONS?**

The territory makes it possible to understand sustainable development in an appropriate way (Zuindeau, 2010). Irrespective of its size or scale, it promotes the integration of different stakes and activities. The territory and territorial development, understood as the 'capacity of the actors located in a territory to exercise control over its changes and its future' (Deffontaines *et al.*, 2001), are being widely promoted today. It is even surprising to see this reading of the term, much broader in scope than its conventional and specific meaning in English (Caron, 2015), emerge in certain studies in English (Quan, 2008), sometimes via a detour to studies by Latin American colleagues (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2004; Sepúlveda *et al.*, 2003) who came to it from literature in French (Box 1.1 'Landscape' – E. Torquebiau).

In the sense of a social construct (Brunet *et al.*, 1992; Lévy, 1999), the territory – endowed with a historical root, reflecting the identity, including the symbolic identity, of a group (Lévy and Lussault, 2003; Di Méo and Buléon, 2005) – 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.

Furthermore, and thanks to the ambiguities inherent in the interest it evinces, the territory imposes itself as framework for coordination between multiple and fragmented actors in situations of asymmetry and with divergent interests. It is a space for harmonizing various objectives (Gumuchian *et al.*, 2003), local as well as global. For some, it is an arena of sustainable development because of its capacity to coordinate multiple actors to define together the orientations to pursue. It is also a space for negotiation (d'Aquino, 2002) for finding coherence between the dynamics of local development and public policies. New forms of governance can thus be invented and tested in a territory: coordination between producers and users of a shared resource, and linkages and synergies between different users of the same space. From a sectoral point of view, the territory makes it possible to link the expectations of a social group and the ability of agriculture to respond to them. As for its economic aspects, thanks to the proximity to and types of social capital that constitute it, the territory can also be a form of organization that can internalize certain transaction costs, minimize economic risks, facilitate learning processes, leverage traditional know-how and knowledge, and ensure quality control of a product or a form of production. These characteristics make it a veritable asset of the production process (Angeon *et al.*, 2006; Pecqueur, 2004; Gumuchian and Pecqueur, 2007; Courlet and Pecqueur, 1992; Boucher, 2004). Indeed, the territory itself becomes a resource. And territorial dynamics themselves become factors of change, modifying social processes and actor

behaviour, for example, as in the case of geographical indications for agricultural products. They lead scientists to renew concepts and analytical frameworks in a way specific to each discipline, such as for agronomy (Caron, 2005).

But is the territory just a portion of space demarcated by its boundaries? A framework for action? A space for organizing production? A marker of past evolutions or a set of resources? The term conceals a diversity of objectives and intentions, encompassing both the administrative territory and the administrative action that takes place in it; the territory promoted or decreed by the State as the site of a project to be built; and the territory constituted around a collective action and to which a sense of identity is attached (Antheaume and Giraut, 2005).

Going beyond this convenient polysemy, most authors agree in emphasizing the feeling of identity expressed by a territory's inhabitants and the existence of institutions that ascribe it with meaning and provide it with governance. Vanier (2009) thus defines it as a 'set of processes undertaken by systems of actors [...], by social and political organizations, by *ad hoc* mechanisms and procedures, by power relations and generated tensions, by economic and structural determinants, by existing generic configurations and/or specific emerging configurations.' It becomes a processor of change. A territory is well and truly governed. That is what makes it a territory: there exists a set of coordinations to regulate a fragmented social system and to act or react to the transformations taking place. The governance of a territory thus makes it possible, or not, to debate the ways and means of sustainable development, of which it is, at the same time, both the vector and the consequence.

Furthermore, emerging territorial forms can be regarded as the beginnings of new organizational models capable of providing answers to a particular problem and able to be leveraged, potentially from a perspective of sustainable development, on a wider scale. These various elements make the territory into a regulatory entity (Boyer, 1986), in the same way as the State or the market, at the interface between collective action and public action and linking local dynamics to global ones (Caron, 2011). It can stimulate local initiatives in a perspective of development, including at more encompassing scales and with impacts at a global level, drawing inspiration from elsewhere or involving the territorial actors in wider initiatives. In an essay calling for the conception of inter-territoriality, Vanier (2008) describes the territory as a 'space socially constructed and appropriated to the point of constituting, at the same time, an identity referent, a regulatory framework and a delimited arena for public action.'

In the agriculture and forestry domain, this growing interest in the territory is driven by a preoccupation to take spatial levels of organization into account that are more encompassing than the level at which the domain's practices are implemented, whether or not they concern factors that influence decision making or induced effects, especially environmental ones. This interest manifests in the English literature by the emergence of a similar terminology. We sometimes speak of the 'landscape' (landscape research, global landscape forum, etc.). However, the notion of territory is distinguished, on the one hand, by the potential multiplicity of scales to which it refers and, on the other, by its social and institutional dimension – both visual and ecological. This is what led David Nabarro, adviser to the UN Secretary-General, to refer to the 'peoplescape'.

For similar reasons, the recognition of the notion of territory has accompanied the emergence of new concepts. In addition to that of sustainable development, the concepts of socio-ecological systems and resilience systems are central to the science of complex adaptive systems (Schoon and van der Leeuw, 2015; O'Neil *et al.*, 1986; Walker and Salt, 2006). All these concepts have some aspects in common: they all focus on the interactions between processes – natural and social – intervening at different scales of time and space; they all favour modes of regulation that steer the evolution of systems; and they are all concerned by the capacity of the territory's actors to manage change. The territory distinguishes itself from other similar concepts by the explicit focus on spatial processes as well as on the institutions and governance mechanisms.

### **Box 1.1. Territory and landscape.**

*Emmanuel Torquebiau*

There is a certain similarity between the concept of the territory (in its wider meaning of the French '*territoire*') and that of the landscape. While some favour the term 'territory', a socially constructed space in which actors interact (Brunet *et al.*, 1992), others prefer the term 'landscape', a space where species and ecosystems interact. Which of these terms is used often depends on the discipline concerned (the ecologists usually choose the landscape), the school of thought and the objects being analyzed. Indeed, many ecological interactions occur in a territory, and many landscapes are built by man and therefore reflect social dynamics. Landscape ecology has theorized this approach by explicitly considering space, by recognizing man as an integral part of the ecological system and by emphasizing the spatial and temporal heterogeneity of the studied environments (Burel and Baudry, 1999). Although collective action and governance are explicitly constitutive of the territory, which is not the case with landscape, it is possible, even in this book, for one of these two terms to be used, even if other authors of the concerned domain would have preferred the other term. Moreover, the 'landscape approach' integrates many elements of the French *approche territoriale* (see, for example, Minang *et al.*, 2015, or the Global Landscapes Forum, <http://www.landscapes.org/>, retrieved 20 February 2017), with the term 'territory' usually having generally a narrower meaning in English than in French, especially as regards the social construct.

## **THE TERRITORY: THE LURE OF A PANACEA?**

By focusing on it as a vector of consensus and well-being, we forget that the territory is, above all, a matter of power. It is the stake, the *raison d'être* and the mark of the empire or the conqueror. It has been and still remains the cause and the translation of sometimes irreconcilable (Torre and Beuret, 2012) and often destructive tensions, conflicts (Kirat and Torre, 2008) and wars.

In its more recent uses, it has been observed that the invoked participation of local actors can be disingenuous and is liable to lend itself to the bureaucratic fantasies of a disempowered public actor. Either through cynicism or naivety, the result is sometimes

a mockery or an instrumentalization of participation. In addition, a territory is not always managed, i.e., it is not the subject of an intentional process of action and control. And, except in the case of specific public planning actions or military interventions, the processes that produce it are often not steered by any identifiable intention, and, if they are, are usually far from being controllable. The observed changes are most often the result of numerous and fragmented decisions, and of factors and actors acting at different levels of organization, including global. The common expression 'territorial management' which is often attached to the concept of the territory is therefore obviously somewhat of an optimistic misnomer.

The territory is therefore not free from false attributions! In addition, there is also the risk of an inflexible confinement to the local and of identity-based closure – and consequent exclusion –, and of a rigid enforcement of the boundaries that define it. On the contrary, it is porosity, control of flows and networking that can help the territory play the role that we expect from it in a perspective of sustainable development (Vanier, 2008; Caron, 2011). Thus, between potential and risk, it is a real challenge to take advantage of the polysemy that has marked the as-yet young existence of the term 'territory' in order to make it a conduit of action for sustainable development, and to select one of its many forms to help regulate transformations, local as well as global, and to build a new future.

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