

Veska Kozhukharova

The Necessity for Local Initiative in the Sustainable Development of the Bulgarian Village

Globalization and sustainable development

Analyses of the present-day Bulgarian village and society would hardly be fruitful if they did not consider the global context of development and the variety of emerging, sometimes contradictory, processes. Bulgaria, the Bulgarian village and the rural household are inseparably linked in the network of global interdependence nowadays, not only as objects, but as active subjects of global relations.

Although we cannot discuss them at length, we should briefly mention two or three prevailing paradigms concerning the nature of developments which are currently structuring the social interactions on our planet in specific ways between various kinds and hierarchies of subjects and objects (persons, material things, facts, information, relations, etc.) and striving to regulate, control and orient the concrete development of the separate social units.

We could hardly discuss the Bulgarian village as something outside the imaginary unity of mankind within its global village. Hence, we cannot look for the social causes and variants of our development without considering the two widespread ideas, **globalization** and **sustainable development**.¹

These two concepts seem to be placed within a controversy: they correspond to different, contrary types of views, but are essentially part of a **dialogue**, in which small countries (or at least countries which are neglected, disregarded, marginalized) and peoples are mere listeners expected to applaud.

We have certain misgivings, anxiety and doubts about the "new world order" we hear so much about, when from global tension things proceed to

¹ Cf. some of the basic interpretations: D. Harrey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989; A. Giddens, *The Consequence of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990.

rearranging the figures, to a new positioning of forces guaranteeing a global policy of dictation for building united, perhaps identical, economic and social models and infrastructures, an integral cultural and information code, and ultimately an integral system of values (perhaps even an identical style of thinking and evaluation), passed without right of appeal and regardless of the means.

If there is a **globalizing strategy**, it is not clear who is dictating it. Only certain vague elements in the enormous mosaic suggest that great interests are at stake in this global game, and no heed is given for the price to be paid.

The notion of **sustainable development**, which has become widespread since the world conference in Rio de Janeiro, seems to contain signs of sobering alarm at the threat of boundless globalization, unlimited in its ambitions. In fact, this notion is voiced as a wish and has no clear definition or concrete objects. Its general definitions contain various and perhaps mutually complementary connotations whereby ways are sought to pass from mythical thinking to clear formulas about the development of humanity as a whole, rather than of separate countries and peoples. We should mention the principle of leaving an **inviolable heritage** for future generations (in terms of natural environment, resources, culture, economy), providing living conditions which will be no worse than those of present generations, in connection with the principle of "zero growth" in the future. We are, of course, immediately confronted with the consequences of maintaining the status quo of **present-day** inequality between regions, countries, nations and their differing types of social formations. This question leads us once again to globalization concepts, which however, basically imply the increase of dissymmetry in the process of **transmitting** ideas, cultural patterns, economic models, technologies, lifestyles, etc.

Somewhere between the two paradigms we may try to locate the future prospects of the Bulgarian village, considering its potential by the end of the 20th century. Our reflections raise questions concerning the preservation of **Bulgarian identity** amidst the advance of globalization and with a view to maintaining the current sustainability, which, however, is sometimes thought to be connected with economic disruption (or at least stagnation and depression) and with demographic unbalance and disruption in certain regions of Bulgaria.

We could treat **sustainable development** as a concept referring to the preservation of the Bulgarian village as a specific social formation. In sociological terms, this means that the village must preserve its **necessary and sufficient potential for reproducing itself while maintaining certain dimensions of its rural character.**²

² On specific features of rurality and its connection with local development, cf.

Sustainable rural development that preserves **rurality** is a precondition for the sustainable development of society as a whole and, as a negative implication, rural **non-sustainability** provokes social instability in cities and in society at large.

The long prevailing **myth**, set forth at the dawn of industrial society, that the future of mankind lies **only** in an entirely urbanized world was already being sceptically reconsidered in the 1950s in the most developed countries, which first became aware of the ambivalence of accelerated industrial development. Societies with the highest material standards first perceived the **problematic situation**, the clash between sustainable equilibrium of the cultural and natural environment and the constant technological improvement in processing and consuming natural resources; this clash of interests corresponded in a new way to the eternal opposition and difference between **town and village**. From this debate a conclusion emerged that the equilibrium between the natural and the human, between the rural and the urban must be preserved.

In proceeding with our reasoning, we could also conclude that **to a great extent rurality holds the key to sustainability** (providing it is an authentically preserved rurality). It could then be said that the responsibility for preserving and reproducing the village is a responsibility towards humanity, towards human communities and the variety of their identities.

The Bulgarian case

Although corresponding to world tendencies, the Bulgarian case has its specific features based on regional particularities, past history, the belated course of urbanization and industrial development of the country as well as the concrete social and economic situation of Bulgaria during transition. A belated post-paternalism was maintained here as late as the middle of the 20th century and it corresponded to many of the principles and norms of socialism, which determined the ambiguous development of the Bulgarian village. Paternalistic traditions of rural collectivism were reshaped in a special way into the collective attitudes of cooperative farming, despite the initial collisions and psychological shock for the Bulgarian peasant. The rural migrant to town and the industrial worker largely kept their connection with the village, would try to do some small farming, and lived in search of a new identity somewhere between their rural roots and their urban daily lives.

The planned economy society built stereotypes aiming not so much at collectivism but at the feeling of security that someone else would bear the

Locality and Rurality: Economy and Society in Rural Regions, edited by Tony Bradley and Philip Lowe, London 1984.

responsibility for decision-making, leaving people free to be critical of people higher up in power. Rural initiative, which had once been decisive in promoting institutions such as the village school, the cooperative, the village cultural club, which changed the classical syncretic pattern of traditional life, was increasingly diminishing under conditions of central planning, where rural life was regulated from outside and included in national initiatives, imposed as national programmes. Such were the campaigns for nominating "model villages", "model homes", "model cultural centres", inclusion in local and national folklore festivals, organizing local holidays and jubilees, building local cultural and economic projects. Existing institutions at local village level (state and civic, such as the cultural centre) defined the field of activity for local social actors. The initiative essentially came from the rural level of central state institutions. Even in cases of calamity and tragic events, action was initiated by them. In order to be implemented, every local initiative had to explicitly or implicitly receive approval from higher institutions, and this included financial support. Every **spontaneous** idea was subjected to institutional regulation. Well-perfected mechanisms were used for accomplishing local initiatives.

The social change in the late 1980s cast doubts on everything that had been built and organized over the previous decades, created a void in the system of values, often bringing about an inversion of values. In this new social situation, the complete system of local initiatives (which were often chiefly cultural initiatives aimed at supporting local identity and nourishing the feeling of belonging to a native village in the mind of the urban migrant) nearly destroyed itself in the course of political changes, although it was not itself political by nature.

Of course, political intolerance played its part in this, abolishing activities and values and fundamentally shaking the foundations of the previous collectivism, which had been rooted in paternalistic tradition. Mute dissent, negative attitudes, previously unvoiced social criticism came forth in unexpectedly sharp collisions, making impossible the normal course of local initiative as a form of legitimization of the united village community.

The reordering of the political mosaic would probably not have had such a strong impact on local activeness, regardless of the institutional means and the change of social actors, were it not for the enormous economic disturbances, which the Bulgarian villager, for all his practicality, was unprepared for, and were it not for the overly optimistic mythical discourse set forth at the start of the transition.

The economic collapse of the state led to severe unemployment in villages, mass impoverishment, social insecurity, marginalization and deprivation of large parts of the rural population: one third of the people of working age are unemployed, and not more than 2 to 3 per cent of rural families consider that they live better now than in 1989.

Concurrently, central state support for villages decreased sharply, and the rural communities were left without protection to cope with the very complicated social situation. They were filled with feelings of insecurity, hopelessness and bleak prospects for the future.

The catchwords "**rapid change of the system**" (with its vague connotations) and "**structural reforms**" created a specific field of moral energy, which was supposed to restructure the positions of social actors in society.

Let us begin by listing some of the basic formulas at the start of the transformation processes related to the image of **change and transition**:

— The call to limiting the functions of the state, having "less statehood" in all spheres of social life (especially in the economy, but not only there), changing the image of "the state as a mother to the people";

— Opposing collectivist attitudes, collectivist behaviour, replacing them by individualism and opportunities for self-expression of the separate person as a unique individual striving by personal efforts to fulfill his/her potential and interests;

— Affirming the idea that wealth can easily be achieved through personal efforts.

Initially, these claims seem reasonable, confirmed and usually proven effective in developed Western industrial states (more so in the USA, less so in Western Europe). But Western models, transplanted to Bulgarian soil, have proven both unusable and incomprehensible.

Bulgarian paternalistic and capitalist traditions had not prepared people for the transition of the 1990s, had not enabled them to decipher the models of foreign traditions. Bulgarian capitalism, as it had developed until the 1940s, had many common features with state capitalism. All main fields of social life providing accelerated development of Bulgarian society were under the direct surveillance, management and financial support of the state. Education in the first 7 years of schooling was obligatory and free of charge; many forms of free health control and care (e.g. obligatory and free immunization of children). The postal system, roads, railroads, cultural institutions were all maintained by the state or local government. The village municipality nourished the collectivist traditions of collective discussion, decision-making and control with regard to rural problems. The poorly industrialized country relied mainly on the village and agriculture (in 1946, 75 per cent of the professionally active population was occupied in agriculture). Paternalistic, capitalist (before 1944) and socialist traditions were all in some sort of mutual correspondence, but none of these influences functioned at the pace of what was happening in Bulgaria at the end of the 20th century. This largely accounts for the jolting effect on society. If we add the disorientation in values, we can perceive the unusual situation in which social actors find themselves in Bulgaria.

While in the 1950s the catchwords were **building** and **constructing**, at the **end** of the century the slogan became **deconstructing** the system, **abolishing** cooperative farming, etc. The so-called **liquidation committees** were emblematic in this respect. The sociological survey "Bulgarians and Agricultural Labour", conducted in 1994, showed that 50 to 90 per cent, or in some places 100 per cent, of the material assets of the former cooperative farms were destroyed or unusable. We are not counting what was plundered. Both the partial and the impartial observer nowadays feels shame at the ruins and the weeds overgrowing the once flourishing fields. Unfortunately our moral system is also weed-grown. This ruin gives no opportunities for creative impulses. Moving away from collectivist models, Bulgarians can hardly find new positive models of individual self-fulfilment. The urban unemployed as a rule (with very few exceptions) have not sought realization in private farming and in the models of paternalistic morality, involving collective responsibility and control.

The village is closing in on itself, becoming isolated. Moral incentives and ideal goals of activity for the good of the community are decreasing in influence. Social factors which urge social activeness come through with increasing difficulty.³ Local initiative cannot find ways of adapting to the new conditions.

The village cannot solve its problems outside an integral national strategy for the balanced development of city and village. This would include improving the moral situation, seeking transition models which could be effective in the Bulgarian case, rather than copying models from an abstract conception of industrially developed states which have covered their road of development for centuries and in other geographic areas. We cannot even be sure those are the soundest models in themselves.

Instead of trying to overcome the crisis by turning to modern patterns of living and working the land, we see the villager withdrawing into a shell of passiveness, maintaining himself no higher than the point of survival.

— Rural people were disappointed by the expectations proclaimed in the early 1990s.

— The patronage of the state has been lost and basic social gains and access to them are slipping away, if not already gone.

³ The following conclusions are based on surveys that the author participated in since 1990: *Collectivization and Its Alternatives* (1992); *Economy of the Rural Household* (1994); *Bulgarians and Agricultural Labour* (1994); *Man and His Social Environment* (1996); *The Potential of the Rural Household* (1999); *The Private Agricultural Producer in Central Stara Planina* (1999). As a basis of comparison, we have used data from the nation-wide representative survey "City and Village — 1986". Although hardly any empirical data are cited in this discussion, our generalizations are based on empirical survey and the author's field work.

— Unemployment and the poverty that goes with it are paralyzing social activeness and villagers are withdrawing into their isolated worlds.

— Village infrastructure is crumbling and there is no money to maintain it.

— Villages continue to lose the best members of their populations (the young and educated).

— Villages inevitably fall into a state of crisis when the entire nation is in crisis.

81 per cent of rural dwellers are afraid of insecurity, 75 per cent of poverty and unemployment, 81 per cent of material hardship. 47 per cent of rural households live at the level of physical survival, while 21 per cent are constantly growing poorer. Only 6 per cent can be assessed as successful. Approximately 2 per cent of the rural households live better than in 1989. But the prevailing passivity is also a true aspect of the situation. The village and its community leaders previously relied on the state, looking to it for solutions to their local problems. They are waiting for the state to become stable before the village does so as a result. The stability of society at large is expected to guarantee the stability of the village.

These people forget that society is a system whose basic subsystems are the city and the village, and that society actually exists through these two subsystems, through the complete and vigorous **“life of each village and each city”**. In other words, this system of communicating vessels can only function when each vessel functions well. Here we should remember that, although dysfunctions at the top affect all the components, it is also true that every component, being a relatively independent organism (each separate village), should look for stability, seek concrete solutions, first defining local problems and then seeking an algorithm of solutions. Therefore, sustainable development will require the contribution of the entire village potential.

When assessing all the current social consequences of unemployment, we must point out that moral erosion may leave lasting marks even after the economic crisis is overcome. Inclusion of the rural unemployed, a third of the adult village population, in socially significant village initiatives would be important for the social preservation of the personality and would enable the individual to identify with the village community as a whole.

Economic stabilization cannot be achieved by Bulgaria without an economic strategy for the country and a clear economic-geographic plan for locating resources. Bulgaria is not large enough to be able to neglect the economy, hence the demography, of entire regions. That is precisely why these problems cannot be left to the mercy of a completely liberal market economy. There is still no clear strategy of economic development, inasmuch as the publicly proclaimed national objectives of privatizing and increasing foreign investments, as well as the short-term task of Euro-Atlantic inte-

gration carry no strategic potential for the essence of a future integral individuality of the Bulgarian economy.

Since the economic transformation will take a long time and current tendencies leave no room for optimism about the future of unemployment, I believe it is necessary to propose new forms of **social activeness** for the rural unemployed. It is well known that unemployment often leads to social exclusion. The rural unemployed person is rarely altogether excluded from activity, but it is important for him/her to take part in the general social activity of the village. The largest and most important national civic associations, Bulgarian cultural centres, could probably be useful in this respect by promoting local activeness. Through collectivist forms of traditional rural activeness, ways may be found of surmounting the social exclusion of unemployed villagers.

The activity of the unemployed and the socially weak can be made more meaningful through special programmes that envisage concrete fields of activity (e.g. concrete results from the work of social relief receivers who are obliged to put in 5 days of socially useful labour). This is above all the responsibility of the rural mayors and local government, but the expectations and interest of local society towards the rural unemployed in marginal positions are also important.

It seems that the rural environment offers greater opportunities for including the unemployed in the responsibilities and duties of social life. But this is the responsibility of society itself, ranging from the small village community to the entire nation. There lie the mechanisms whereby generations can unite to achieve the social prosperity of the village and of each individual.

In search of solutions

Paradoxically, although the stimulation of local development is a key to the stimulation of national development, local communities are the very ones that are isolated, financially unstable and their activity is dying down under the impact of a liberal market which is cruel to agricultural producers.

Amidst economic stagnation, the basic mechanism for stimulating local development is still local initiative. But the latter requires above all identifying and defining the problems of each concrete local community and formulating the basic orientations of activity in each area of social life. It is important to overcome the prevailing statist attitudes and promote the search for independent local solutions.

Identifying local problems can be achieved above all by local social actors engaged in seeking local avenues to prosperity. This involves clarifying the questions as to:

- the forms of local initiative;

— the possible agents of local initiative.

Pinpointing local problems is a basis on which specific forms of activity can be concretized and priority projects can be chosen, regarding:

- socio-economic development;
- the infrastructure;
- stimulating cultural life and preserving the local cultural identity;
- protecting the ecological balance;
- local communication problems and inclusion in the world communication net;
- scientific study of concrete communities, etc.

The potential agents of local initiative work at different hierarchic levels and may be of various social status. In the specific Bulgarian context, they are located at two levels:

- those who live and work within the local community;
- those who come from the local community, but live in various urban communities.

The latter group includes people who are not natives or residents of the concrete local community but have personal or professional interest in it.

Active promoters of local initiative could be representatives of:

- local government and management structures, in the vertical and horizontal aspect;
- non-governmental organizations and other local structures that have some share in solving local problems;
- private and state enterprises, organizations, etc., relevant to the basic problems of the local community;
- the formal and informal local leaders or separate personalities who could spark initiatives for action;
- scientists, researchers, cultural figures, local initiators, etc.

The most important thing for a concrete local community is to **provoke** local initiative and create conditions for attracting the efforts of a large part of the local population, which should thereby gain confidence in its ability to solve important problems **by itself**. This requires identifying the major problem of the community, around which people can consolidate; but this is a problem which should be solved in a comparatively short term. So far experience has shown that it could be a situational matter: e.g., preparing the commemoration of some local historical event, taking part in a national folklore festival, cleaning the local cultural centre. When the task covers a longer period of time, the perseverance of local actors may run out.

In the present-day Bulgarian context, in which pessimism, apathy, resignation, and passivity prevail, the important thing is to stir the common interest to consolidation and united action by provoking the local feeling of significance. For Bulgarian rural communities it is very important to overcome the **mere survival strategy**: the desire for greater prosperity must be

awoken. This could be achieved by a leading personality formulating ideas about forms of local activity and the course for purposeful pursuit of that objective.

Conclusion

How should we envisage sustainable development in the context of contemporary rural Bulgaria? "Zero growth" is hardly the answer, nor maintaining the status quo amidst a continuous social and economic crisis. A different view of sustainable development is possible: sustaining each separate village as a specific cultural and ecological niche, in which the balance between nature and human culture offers opportunities for maintaining the identity of the rural locality and developing what is unique in the rural region.

This does not imply breaking down the national cultural and natural space into small specific localities, but enriching the whole through its unique or different components, thereby perhaps contributing on a wider scale to the flourishing of a colourful planet.

Preserving local variety is not the opposite of the integral development of the world. Although there are many signs that the Bulgarian village is closing up and, due to growing poverty, is foregoing the modern attainments of civilization, there are also convincing data showing inclusion in the global tendencies of opening up to global processes. In our survey of 1996, we traced the rapid spread of personal computers in the everyday life of rural residents. Villages today are using Internet, email, automatic telephone connections with the world, mobile phones, etc. Rural people are informed about world events through radio and television, they comment on them and have their opinions. In a sense they feel included in global processes. But they are understandably sceptical because of the threat to their identities and their helplessness before the unlimited liberalization of the agricultural market and the pressure on Bulgarian production (a situation where 1 litre of milk is bought at three times less than the price of 250 ml of Coca-Cola).

The village bears the responsibility of preserving its local variety, including local breeds of farm animals and plants, its culture, behaviour stereotypes. This aspect of rural identity is evident in the efforts of local actors to promote initiatives for development. Appreciating one's local significance is important for surmounting the passivity, isolation, rigidity bred by fear for one's survival.

Nevertheless, there are also signs that villages are adapting to the changing conditions of post-planned economy: The work of village cultural centres and local NGOs is sometimes oriented to projects using financial support from foundations and national NGOs. Local non-profit organiza-

tions are looking for new mechanisms for stirring local initiative; action plans are being elaborated. So far we see signs of activity mostly in the field of culture, but it is a step towards extending the range of local activity. NGO activities such as the Bulgarian Association for Ecological Agriculture, the Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism, which tries to provoke local initiatives, are examples. About 5 to 6 per cent of local residents say they are willing to work for rural tourism and ecological agriculture; more important, in certain villages the beginnings of such activities have been set.

Apart from the "should" and "must", when discussing how to stimulate the development of local communities we are asking ourselves **how to unlock local initiative**. Great hopes are placed on the local intelligentsia, which could articulate the ideal objectives of collective action. The category of people who could be defined as rural intelligentsia is comparatively stable, about 7 per cent. This group, the one most open to social activity, has been affected in its work by the closing down of some important rural institutions, especially schools. In the last 5 years about 200–250 schools have been closing down each year in Bulgaria due to lack of school children. The closing down of rural hospitals is part of the same problem. A possible reserve for compensating this demographic tendency is the return of "young pensioners" to villages, which would raise the intellectual potential of the village. A large part of the Bulgarian intelligentsia has rural roots and maintains permanent ties with the village. Collective decisions, collective action, and collective control were important characteristics of rural communities in the Balkans in pre-modern times. These traditional traits are hard to find in Bulgaria nowadays. But through local initiative they can be revived and adapted to the new social context.

The purpose of activating local development is to achieve economic stability in the region by preserving the ecological and cultural specifics of the village communities.

Through united efforts of individuals and NGOs, and with the financial support of local business people, cooperatives and the state, ways could be found of achieving local prosperity and finding a place for the community in the national economy. Economic security would support and revive the past traditions of cultural identity of the village community.

Preserving the economic, cultural and natural characteristics of the separate rural regions is exceptionally important for maintaining the variety of our planet and achieving a colourful variety in global development.