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Social actors and environment in local sustainable development initiatives. A case study in the White Carpathians

Anne-Laure Lereboullet

The White Carpathians is a low mountain area (summit: 911m), across the Czech Republic and Slovakia, often unknown by foreign tourists, often known by Czechs and Slovaks for its landscape and sometimes for its apple juice (*mošt*), even if few have actually been there. It is rural rather unproductive area, half-agriculture and half-small industry like there are so many in Europe; and for this reason its case is interesting. The White Carpathians have nonetheless two characteristics: part of an ex-socialist country and cut in two by an international border created in 1992. Since 1989, end of communism, and 2004, entry of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the European Union (EU), changes have been challenging for the two countries: economical restructuring, political change, environmental issues to be taken into account. Between the mid 1990s and 2004, negotiations toward EU accession have also brought their share of requirements and reforms. The recent paradigm of sustainable development (SD) is giving new directions to social actors at different levels. In addition, the EU is more and more present in local negotiations. The existence of the entity “White Carpathians” in itself is questioned by these evolutions. What path are taking local development initiatives in the White Carpathians? Which actors are at stake? How is evolving the differentiation of territories? These questions belong to the main interrogation of how the new European context and sustainable development paradigm are bringing into question the role, at different levels, of social actors and of environmental issues.

We will analyse first the issues and potential assets of a typical marginal rural area. Then we will see how and why environmental issues have long centred local development initiatives. In a third part, we will study the shift from top-down to bottom-up development frames and how it impacts on local development. Finally, we will discuss sustainable development perspectives for the White Carpathians, as an example of other European areas of the same kind.

Issues and potential assets of a typical marginal rural area

Although the White Carpathians appear to be a marginal area from many points of view, it is endowed by two main resources potentially exploitable for local development, landscape and folk culture. But before going into depth about that, it is necessary to clarify what we are talking about with “White Carpathians”.

The limits of the area are not clear and can grow narrower or tighter according to the topic involved. Most often in this paper, I will refer to the Protected Landscape Area (PLA), which extends over the Czech-Slovak border. Nevertheless, if on the Slovak side the eastern limit seems clearly enough embodied by the Váh valley, on the Czech side it is more difficult to define. Indeed, there is a whole area surrounding the western part of the PLA, submountainous and extending further west toward the Slovácko region. It is this intermediary area which is mainly concerned by the folk culture asset, which also benefits the areas inside the PLA. I will often talk about higher lands, which are undoubtedly part of the PLA, and lower lands, which can be at the limit of the PLA or even further toward Uherské Hradiště and Uherský Brod. For the northern and southern limit, I will stick to the PLA borders, as the North/South logic is less relevant than East/West (higher/lower lands, for the Czech side). In

addition, even if the border issue plays a role in the topic studied, I will mainly focus on the Czech side, as the Slovak side of White Carpathians is much less populated and the area is smaller.

We could qualify the area of White Carpathians as politically marginalised and economically depressed (Carmin, Hicks, Beckmann, 2003). This low – mountainous area (“low” especially in comparison with the higher Beskydys north of the White Carpathians) has always been at the margins of different empires, at the margins of sphere of influence, and since 1918 very far from Prague, the main decision centre. It has always been an interface between two regions, and since 1992 between two states, which brought a new lot of considerations and slow-down of concerted action.

Since the 1980s, it is an area mainly known for its environmental asset: a specific semi-natural landscape. In that perspective, it was doubly marginalised, as political concern was not favourable to the acknowledgement of environmental issues by governments, both under Communism and until the end of the 1990s.

The White Carpathians are also in economic difficulties. After 1989 it was hit by a rapid decrease of agriculture with the abandonment of non rentable collective farms. Only the fittest survived, i.e. often in the lower areas. In addition, the small industries dotting the biggest settlements also suffered from the economical turn in the 1990s. The Zlín region¹ has more than half of its working population in the industrial sector. Zlín region’s GDP is only 80% of Czech average, and 60% of EU25 average.

¹ For statistical reasons, I am using results for the Zlín region (Zlínský kraj). The WC are only a part of this region, dominated by the industrial town of Zlín, whose subcontractor companies are located for a part in the WC.

The difficult geographic position of the White Carpathians, too high for productive agriculture and too low for winter tourism, did not help cope with transition to capitalist economy.

An aging population added to a lack of new working opportunities led to a population decrease. This is a key element in the nature conservation problem. Indeed, one of the two biggest assets of the White Carpathians is its patchwork landscape built by human hand: a patchwork of forest (beech mainly) with high-biodiversity meadows. These meadows focus environmental concern of nature conservation. They were threatened before 1989 by intensive agriculture and after 1989 by land abandonment. Their high-biodiversity (mainly endemic species of orchids, over 40) is obtained and maintained by extensive farming, and requires to be mowed by hand.

The second asset of the area is its folk culture, inherited from the first Wallachian settlers. It is still alive and strong, mainly in the Slovácko region (lower lands). Bigger settlements there (e.g. Hluk) attract tourists by folk representations and selling of traditional costumes. In the higher lands, folk tradition also begins to be used as a tourist asset, such as the *kopanice* or traditional houses, around Starý Hrozenkov.

These two assets, nature and culture as we could say, are both human population depending and more likely to attract tourists or touristic investment than other kinds of economical investments. Therefore, their potential is rather fluctuant and unstable, especially for the landscape which can only attract summer tourists.

Furthermore, it is quite hard for a rural area to clearly specify its assets, competing with other rural areas surrounding. Folk culture seems again to be more specified than landscape. Sure enough, landscape in Central Slovakia or in the Krkonoše could be considered

as more breath-taking and therefore worth a journey. In that sense, the problem of tourist development of the White Carpathians is close to the one of Vysočina region (but this one is closer to Prague and benefits from very touristic urban centres such as Telč and Žďár). We could advance that the lower parts of the White Carpathians areas went further in the specification process than the higher areas, whether because they had more specific resources, because local initiatives were more efficient, or because the starting situation was less critic.

Environmental issues and local development initiatives

If folk culture asset may be a stable tourism resource, it is nevertheless the meadow question that focused the vast majority of protection initiatives since the 1980s. These initiatives, echo of a conservationist point of view toward environmental action, were led by actors at all levels: local, national, European, international. Since the end of the 1990s, new initiatives more “sustainable”, i.e. not strictly oriented toward nature conservation, are more appreciated and likely to be led.

In the 1970s developed the world concern for environmental issues: Earth Day, programme Man and Biosphere of the UNESCO in 1970, Stockholm Conference in 1972 etc... Socialist countries were not impermeable to this new trend. The new concern mobilised populations and indeed, creating several protected areas was an easy compromise with social demands without having to increase local democracy (Depraz, 2005). That is the context when were created several PLAs in Czechoslovakia. The PLA of Bílé Karpaty was created in 1979 on the Slovak side and 1980 on the Czech side, but was not followed by a decrease in damaging practices such as intensive farming. It was a time of “legislative bottlenecks”, when the gap was

widening between environmental legislation and political implementation (Carter, Turnock, 2002) and the inflation of nature protection laws was inversely proportional to the real political concern toward environmental issues (Devaux, 2005).

At the same period was growing the national association CSOP (Czech Association for Nature Protection), whose local branches sent every summer volunteers to the WC to mow the meadows by hand (Carmin, Hicks, Beckmann, 2003), to preserve biodiversity and maintain local ecosystems.

Nonetheless, political legislative hyperactivity was oriented toward protection of nature in itself rather than environment, which is more embracing a notion. This is the result of several decades of appropriation of ecological concern by scientists and for scientific purposes. It is only after 1989 that local initiatives diversified toward more “environmental” protection rather than strictly nature conservation. On the opposite, national action is still more oriented to conservation than local development.

In the 1990s, more local NGOs or local branches of national NGOs such as CSOP and STUZ (Society for Sustainable Living, founded in 1992) were active in local development. The actions were still mainly oriented toward landscape preservation and nature protection, but more and more often local populations were involved. For instance, STUZ led several actions around Starý Hrozenkov, near the border: surveys, creation of a local magazine, association for regional development, and creation of the Information Centre for the Development of Moravian Kopanice. Interactions with farmers were accentuated, environmental education was considered as essential. Other actions of the same type were led by CSOP Veronica in the village of Hostětín. In this small village of 260 habitants in the heart of the PLA, local actors and Veronica built and eco-education centre,

coupled with an organic juice plant and fruit dryer. This SD model developed, funded mainly by EU and foreign partners (Holland). There have been improvements in energy consumption (public lighting) and water supply. The Veronica centre hosts seminars, workshops, school trips, and organises excursions to discover natural specificities of the WC. Even a commercial label, “Traditions of the White Carpathians”, illustrated by an apple tree, was founded. Hostětín’s *mošt* is sold in supermarkets such as Billa. However, Hostětín is a model; it is unique in the WC. This means that these sustainable development initiatives are not so widespread.

These initiatives intensified after 1998 when Slovak and Czech governments became more favourable to environmental concern (the change was also worldwide). At the same time, international funding dried up while EU’s increased, with pre-adhesion development programmes (PHARE, SAPARD). Since 1997, the Czech government also resumed funding for organic farming, which had been stopped between 1993 and 1997.

Organic farming appears to be a main trend in sustainable development choices in the White Carpathians. Indeed, agriculture is the heart of social questions, with its impacts on economy, society, environment, landscape and local development. The number of organic farms boomed after 1997, and in 2005, the Zlín region was number 2 in Czech Republic (right behind Karlovy Vary region), with 11% of organic farms with only 5% of the national territory. In comparison, regions of South Moravia and Vysočina have less than 5% of Czech organic farms each. This choice of organic farming appears to be an ideal one. It meets the needs of nature protection (landscape and its unique ecosystem with extensive farming) and the need of economical survival, not to say development, of agriculture in this area.

However, organic lands sold are at 80% grasslands (Veronica, 2006). The 20% remaining are mainly fruits or fruit juice, essentially apples. The farming system of the White Carpathians is very little diversified and highly dependant from exogenous commercial partners: input of nitrate nutrients, which would be ideally provided locally in a mixed farming-arable land farm system, and need to sell the forage. In addition, the White Carpathians are in competition on this point with the Beskydys, also farming oriented, but rather toward milk production. This organic system is thus a part of a commercial stream which goes past regional borders. The system is maintained by subsidies from the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, which encourages farmers to keep grassland rather than create arable land, in the idea of maintaining the landscape. It seems more to be a “gardening” which requires high and constant funding (Rey, 1996). New agriculture opportunities seem to be hindered by the wish to preserve the landscape. We can thus wonder whether landscape protection in the White Carpathian is compatible with long-term sustainable organic farming which is expected to generate local development.

In the lower lands, the situation is a bit different. Land collectivisation and the present form of cooperatives led to a much more homogeneous landscape. In the higher lands, and this is a common characteristic with North-Eastern Moravia, private small parcels quite well resisted land collectivisation. Indeed, they are not very productive, and can they? Landscape/agriculture relationship, which used to be collaboration, is now a pending problem.

From top-down to bottom-up development framework

The shift of concern from strict conservation of nature to more embracing projects has been followed (and

encouraged) by a shift from top-down to bottom-up development approaches.

National action used to be, and still mainly is, top-down like: creation of a PLA, adhesion to the Man and Biosphere programme (implemented in 1996), governmental subsidies to maintain grassland areas. However, it is always difficult to know where the money exactly comes from while analysing NGOs budgets.

The sustainable development paradigm implies not only environmental protection but also economical development and social concern, and thus the development of local democracy or governance. This process also took place in the Czech Republic from the mid-1990s. Local NGOs actions were facilitated by state budgets, but also, and not the least, the EU took -and still does, more and more into account incentive to local bottom-up initiatives. Civil society was already active in the early 1990s, but the bottom-up approach implies that there is also an “up”! It must be a dialogic form of development with cooperation between the “up” and the “bottom” (Bell, 2002). The EU appears to be an alert “up” cooperating with local actions to promote sustainable development.

To measure the implication of the EU in local initiatives, one of the easiest ways is just to look at notice boards promoting a local action, such as tourist boards. Often appear the logos of the EU flag and of Interreg programme.

Several EU funded programmes focused on the development of rural areas. Since 2004, PHARE and SAPARD have been replaced with the LEADER and now LEADER + programme. This programme offers funding to projects led by local actors, on sustainable development issues and at least one project about agriculture development. It also promotes concerted action between

municipalities, a national weak point. Indeed, to be receivable, a territory of project must have between 10 000 and 100 000 inhabitants and a density of 120 inh/km². This encourages bigger settlements of the lower parts of the White Carpathians to associate with little villages of the higher parts.

Another important bottom-up realisation and part of municipalities cooperation process is the creation of microregions. These microregions are the result of local initiatives and will to establish links between villages. It takes into account economical and social links, and historical features (traditional links between two areas even if separated by other villages for instance). The map of these microregions is fuzzy, as it does not fit the national framing of regions. In reality, most of tourism initiatives point out the belonging to a microregion such as Bojkovsko or Luhačovicko.

That points out the fact that the PLA White Carpathians entity is rarely used by local initiatives. Thus, a shift from top-down to bottom-up also brings into question the relevance of such an area of White Carpathians. Local inhabitants don't seem to feel a sentiment of belonging to a White Carpathians area, but rather to a microregion. We could wonder what is the role of the "WC" image in local development: only a commercial label, like "Traditions of the White Carpathians" to sell apple juice? The gap is wider between lower and higher lands, whether or not they belong to the PLA, than between the PLA and the rest of the region.

Sustainable development perspectives for the White Carpathians

Even if the White Carpathians might only be a commercial or top-down denomination, it is important to keep an eye on what are the sustainable development perspectives for

this area. We already saw that organic farming is not the ideal solution. Could “White Carpathians” promote tourism or green tourism? Here again, we will see an East/West gradient of insertion in tourism systems.

Leisure activities are often promoted in rural areas with a low natural rent. It could be also the case of the White Carpathians area, with development of a green tourism (contact with nature, hiking...), if not eco-tourism (oriented toward environmental education and preservation).

The question of measuring tourism in this area is not the easiest one. Based on statistics, we have only figures for the whole Zlín region, and this does not take into account non-declared activities such as family pensions. These regional figures are not encouraging: stagnation of bed capacity at 5% of national capacity between 2000 and 2007, decrease of Austrian, German and Polish tourist overnight stays, stagnation of Czech overnight stays.

Three types of leisure centres could be identified in the White Carpathians area. First, Luhačovice, which is a specific case as it is a thermal station. It is crowded with accommodation opportunities, but does not participate really to a “White Carpathians effect”. Second, a PLA village such as Bojkovice, Rudamov or Starý Hrozenkov. These use the microregion network to promote their own resources (which do not vary much: landscape, traditional housing, and hiking trails). Third, a town like Uherské Hradiště, which uses both folk culture and wine festivities to attract tourists.

Green tourism in the PLA is season-limited: from May to August. In this summer season, tourists can be accommodated in family pensions often on the black market. Outside this season there is no tourist activity. We can observe a few signs that there is indeed a tourist development: information boards, new hiking signs, and

even a brand new road in Zitkova, a small village north of Starý Hrozenkov, advertised for its traditional housing of *Moravské kopanice* (which are hard to distinguish): Rather a hamlet, it is quite remote, at the top of a hill. There is a brand new road leading outside the village toward the other side of the hill. It is a dead-end only providing access to a hiking trail start. This shows that there is a change going on, but certainly not complete and still in its infancy.

To develop green tourism, a starting asset, such as a farm, at least a guesthouse, is needed. People taking care of it all-year round and people who would come (back) to invest are necessary too. Furthermore, the success of such a green tourism strategy is not sure: competition is harsh between rural areas.

One option of development could be a tighter cooperation between lower and higher lands, all the more that there is a good railway system in the area (Hostětín is accessible by train directly from Brno), likely to transport tourists. Both higher and lower lands could promote the other's assets to attract more tourists on the overall, to offer circuits including wine path, folk culture and discovery of the landscape by hiking. This cooperation strategy is still at its beginning and has to overcome traditional reluctances. It would imply for local inhabitants to use the entity "White Carpathians" as a whole, as a tourist object, and push forward initiatives through barriers of localism.

Conclusion

Local sustainable development initiatives come mainly from grassroots activities strengthened by EU help and incentives, and more or less by-passing the national top-down tendency. New sustainable development paradigm

trend tends to overcome the strict nature conservation view which was prevailing until the mid-1990s. To be more efficient, initiatives could be more oriented toward an increased cooperation between municipalities and tighter high/low lands links. They could rely on and promote the brand “White Carpathians” in itself, to build a promotional territory. Because it has been some kind of an empty shell imposed from the top in 1980, it therefore has more opportunities to diversify activities.

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