I centre this discussion around extended ethnographic research in three villages in Vojvodina Province in Serbia, where I studied understandings and practical effects of state-led and endogenous rural development. Intellectual conceptualisations of rural development and its realisation by state and policy makers have ceased to mean only the improvement of economic and social standing of land users (or targeted groups or individuals), but also imply rather complex planning, goals (Scoones, 2009) or ideology (Sachs, 2009) whose effects tie together economic, social and environmental improvements to all categories of people in rural areas. In contrast, endogenous rural development draws from cohesive community structures and represents both the source of social and individual identity and social obligations within and toward communities. While state- and donor-led rural development projects often fail to achieve their encompassing goals (see Blackburn and Holland, 1998; Mosse, 2001; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hobart, 1993; Chambers, 1983; Higgot, 1983), this chapter will unpack evidence from my fieldsites that suggests that endogenous rural development driven by local values, in combination with favourable market incentives, may achieve wider effects.

These effects develop for at least two reasons. First, there is a structural difference between state-led and endogenous rural development. Agricultural policies and measures conducted by the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture from 2000 until today, are rudimentary, predominantly
focused on the intensification of agricultural production, and also exclusive, targeting only registered agricultural producers who actively practice agriculture. Endogenous development, on the other hand, spreads horizontally and is more inclusive toward diverse categories of people and individual approaches to agriculture. Second, the ideology of agricultural policy-makers often does not comply with the ideology of producers, as evidenced in numerous agri-environmental and conservation schemes carried out across Europe (Burton et al., 2008; Medina et al., 2017). Within endogenous development, sharing local values and worldviews is in most cases a necessary precondition for an internal realisation of functional household and village organisation.

Some local values in Serbian villages have proven to be resistant to challenges and change, particularly during socialism, and thus remain as cultural patterns that may be regarded as important factors that characterise some rural communities. In this paper, I provide insights into how localised understandings of emic concepts such as ‘hard work’ and ‘dignity’ are maintained as the main drivers of rural development.

Emphasis on particular values that are valorised by the community emerged from the analysis of qualitative interviews. Values around hard work and dignity for the majority who live in the village and work in agriculture are associated with keeping farms and households operative, productive and tidy. Similar to farmers in Vojvodina Province, among farmers in the UK “land becomes essential for the farm family to construct a ‘farmer’ identity, i.e. in a symbolic sense it becomes an integral part of the farmer” (Burton, 2004: 207). The missed opportunity to acquire land, or to maintain and enlarge existing capital is commonly associated with failure. Land enables the functioning of the established system for the display of virtuous behaviours through the role and widespread respect and esteem held for the character of the ‘good farmer’, where ideas around being productive and committed come from (Burton, 2004; Silvasti, 2003). Hard work and dignity are therefore local valorised values. While ‘hard work’ is both a symbolic and productive expression of a farmer’s commitment to agriculture (Burton, 2004; Emery, 2014), dignity is held to be its result. Dignity, in other words, emerges from “honest sweat”, invested effort and time in tillage of owned or leased land (James, 1899: 262, cited in Burton, 2004: 197), and can also be extended to a sense of personal autonomy and liberty common to farmers all over the world (Stock et al., 2014).
Yet the importance of emic ideas about how communities define well-being, and how local forms of ‘thriving’ may be achieved get neglected within bureaucratic ‘improvement’ of the rural condition because of mistaken premises around how change occurs. Policy-makers’ ideas about change in rural areas are first formalised through project plans, laws, and financial institutions (Apthorpe, 1997). Rural development projects are, for this reason, predominantly influenced by a neo-institutional theoretical paradigm, because “institutions (most commonly conceptualised as organisations) are highly attractive to theorists, development policy-makers and practitioners as they help to render legible ‘community’ and codify the translation of individual into collective endeavours in a form that is visible, analysable and amenable to intervention and influence” (Cleaver, 2001: 40). Thus, it is usually thought that further planning, bureaucratic adjustments and new regulations may enable targeted areas to better ‘thrive’. An emphasis on planning does not tell us how rural development in fact occurs, on the ground. This is problematic as in most cases, rural development does not take place in expected, nor in institutionally-controlled, ways.

By not acknowledging local ideas and understandings of development, life beyond state planning, acts and regulations remains unknown, and the values that underpin the society in question are neglected (Pandian, 2009). “Neglect of the subjective dimension of value makes it difficult to understand cultural reproduction, or, for that matter, change” (Robbins and Sommerschuh, 2016: 6). Explanation of the process of change on the basis of virtues, ethics and rhetoric is a sophisticated endeavour that requires a very committed, grounded methodology (see for example McCloskey, 2006, 2016a). Here I restrict my attention to analyses of how ‘hard work’ and ‘dignity’, as they emerge from committed agricultural work and the acquisition or maintenance of land ownership, may spur local development.

As already indicated, in some parts of the world land and land ownership has played a structural role in identity and personhood formation in rural settings (Burton, 2004; Macfarlane, 1979). The same observation applies to my fieldsites where the importance of land ownership represents a materialistic and symbolic framework for the expression and practice of extant village values.

While it could easily be argued that those without land and capital are left out of definitions of local economic development, I make the case here
that local development is more inclusive in an ideological and practical sense than that driven by the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture, because it is based on the principal application of norms that hold local society together, unlike the selective bureaucratic application of agricultural schemas. Likewise, thriving ‘from scratch’ in the local context is possible and common, unlike the existing Serbian state agricultural schemes driven by administrative mechanisms that predominantly exclude those who do not use or possess land.

Therefore, in this chapter, I investigate how local visions of development are constituted, and dissect them to examine their elements of ‘hard work’ and ‘dignity’ in relation to labour and land ownership. Such a perspective provides an important understanding of the Serbian context as it lies on the cusp of introducing widespread agricultural support, as part of enormous transformations that will inevitably change the social climate in these communities and the sector in the years to come. After the introduction to the research conducted, I briefly explain the state of the agricultural sector in Serbia after 2000, with particular attention to state-led rural development programmes. In the next section, I provide insights on endogenous rural development and explain why hard work and dignity matter in the context of the villages studied, and then I shift to three narratives that illustrate how these values have determined individual achievements. In the final section, I provide an explanation of endogenous rural development and point to why it is structurally different from formal conceptualisations and realisations of rural development programs.

Development through Ethnographic Research

Agricultural producers from the villages of Gaj, Beli Breg and Malo Bavanište make up the core of my investigation. The majority of land users cultivate between 5 and 20 ha, while a somewhat smaller though significant group cultivates 30–60 ha. Only a few informants cultivate more than 70 ha and they represent the wealthiest producers in the villages. During my extensive research, from February to September 2013, with several visits thereafter in 2014, 2015, and 2017, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with more than ninety people of different backgrounds, and observed and participated in daily life within these villages.
My interviews focused on local understandings of development and values and how these related to state agricultural policies (subsidies, leasing of state land, EU pre-accession instruments for rural development) and their effects on the producers and their livelihoods. On different occasions, people often referred to hard work, dignity, self-realisation, or problems in fulfilling these local values (alcoholism, divorce, problematic personalities, laziness, lack of commitment, etc.). These were also seen as drivers and as evaluative criteria for the assessment of others’ work or commitment.

Based on these qualitative interviews and extensive participant observation, I selected sixteen interviews that I evaluated to be the most developed articulations of values in relation to land and farming. Even though the practical influence of these selected cases is difficult to estimate, they nevertheless mirror an identified local trend and worldview of dwellers for whom agriculture is a prime source of income. In this chapter, I examine three individual stories out of this narrow group that share some paradigmatic characteristics of observed endogenous rural development, and reflect a grounded variety of individual approaches to agriculture and motivations that stem from different ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. These stories also reveal the potential of social imitation of locally held values, which when attained, apart from improving individuals’ economic standing, signals a commitment to agriculture and a continuation of the village worldview.

The State of Agriculture and Rural Development

Throughout the twentieth century, Serbia experienced two significantly different agricultural reforms that initiated colossal changes in property structure and agricultural organisation. By the first agrarian reform (1919–1941), the Kingdom of Yugoslavia eliminated any remains of the feudal ownership structure by inaugurating small private landholdings and facilitated capitalist production relationships in agriculture. By the second agrarian reform (1945–1953), in socialist Yugoslavia, unsuccessful attempts at collectivisation and very poor functionality of cooperatives meant that private landholdings were not prohibited but limited to 10 ha, while the cornerstone of agricultural organisation became complex, state-run, agri-industrial systems. Such regulations
enabled continuity of private landholdings throughout the socialist period including a variety of informal strategies for acquiring additional land (Dikovic, 2015).

In 1991, the Law on Restitution initiated a new phase in the rehabilitation of private property rights that established agriculture on a market economy basis. By then, three forms of ownership and production had existed: private, state, and social. But since then, apart from continual development of private property relations, significant state ownership in agriculture has continued to be a source of strong debates, because of acreages that have not yet been restituted, and postponed privatisation in the name of political goals that has led to monopolies, clientelism and rent-seeking (Maksimović-Sekulić et al., 2018; Pejanović et al., 2017).

In 2000 with the first democratic government, the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture initiated steps toward EU integration, and soon completed the registration of agricultural households to map the active agricultural and rural population. As other accounts from eastern European member states show, the ministry imported a rather homogeneous body of agricultural and later rural development policies, laws and trade agreements, with the aim of professionalising agriculture based on western European intensive agricultural models (Diković, 2014). The ministry was driven by pragmatic interests toward enhancing production, because of many factors that were seen as unfavourable, rather than by the improvement of environmental and social conditions in rural areas. For this reason, 80–88% of the total agricultural budget is devoted to direct subsidy programs to intensify production, without reference to environmental protection or conservation (Ćurković, 2013).

Subsidies were introduced in 2006, and peaked during 2008–2013 when farmers who cultivated up to 99 ha had the right to claim 120 EUR/ha, thereby providing an advantage to those farmers who already had better economic standing. As of 2016, the Ministry of Agriculture reduced subsidies to 35 EUR/ha and limited them to those who cultivate only 20 ha, in response to “failed policies that did not give the expected results”.

Thus, subsidies today represent a form of state-social

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assistance in agriculture rather than an incentive for production, and in their current form do not ‘motivate’ work. For small producers, subsidies ensure survival in the business and keep their heads above water. Unlike other EU countries where subsidies make up more than half the income of farmers whose behaviour and decisions largely depend on state support (Sutherland, 2010; Medina et al., 2015), in Serbia in 2012 subsidies made up 8% of the gross income of middle-sized agricultural producers. Today this figure is likely to be even less due to further reductions in subsidy.2

Further, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD) are aimed at all types of agricultural households, but the application rates are very low, because they require pre-investment and developed business plans from farmers, which many producers are not willing to make (Milovanović, 2016). Such a situation reveals in the first place that Serbian agriculture has not yet developed the culture and knowledge associated with the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), from either state planners or end-users (Papić and Bogdanov, 2015). Pre-accession funds in Serbia are based on competitive platforms that favour better-off and advanced agricultural producers, unlike other EU programmes that have been initiating new agricultural and environmental schemes that are also competitive but target different types of actors in agribusiness.

Thus, the ‘inbetweenness’ of Serbian agriculture—with its policies that neither meet farmers’ needs nor satisfy EU standards, with strong state control over its capital in agriculture on the one hand, and market-oriented low subsidies on the other, with the economic stagnation of one part of agricultural households alongside an ongoing, small, but important agricultural revolution at other local levels (SEEDEV, 2017)—creates conditions that have many positive and negative sides in the context of the rural development. Within such a state of ‘inbetweenness’, people transition, explore and take forward local norms surrounding agriculture. Conceptualisations of ‘good’ farmers, ‘hard’ work and dignity have a long, value-laden history in the region, and their modern manifestations are explored below.

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Insights on Endogenous Rural Development

I structurally altered my understanding of the role of the state in shaping rural, economic, and social environments after one essential statement from an informant:

Land never stays uncultivated, no matter the political and economic conditions. During the worst period of Serbian agriculture and economic sanctions in the 1990s people were selling a bull or a barrel of oil to cultivate the land, and, surprisingly, not a single hectare remained uncultivated at that time (Jovan, July 2014).

This observation contains the powerful claim that land-people relationships transcended the political-economic system, and determine life in the village more than any other wider institutional transformation or planned change. The following example illustrates it further.

Marko: During the 1990s I paid 400 DM for a barrel of oil for cultivation of the land.

J. D.: Oh! Isn’t that too expensive for one barrel? I mean, why would you pay so much for a single barrel of oil?

Marko: Well, a person who has grown up here cannot leave the land uncultivated. You watch it every day. You can’t let it go. It’s in the genes. Either you love it or you don’t. And yes, it cost me like Greece [a common Serbian expression when someone runs into debt], but, well, we are used to living like this. I was working at a loss back then, but at least my children weren’t hungry, and we didn’t lack anything in the household. (July 2017)

When, during an informal talk, I asked one farmer how it felt to be in the fields, he simply said, “I feel great!” (Jaroslav, March 2013). His prompt and instinctive answer insinuated that land to him represented a symbiotic relationship between ownership, obligation, emotional attachment and professional satisfaction. Arguably, these cannot be structurally shaken, even by external factors. Farmers’ dedication to land and agriculture was also recognised by a local doctor:

When patients go home from hospital, they first go to visit the fields, to check the quality of corn, wheat. It is their life, and more. It is their very love for the land. (Marija, June 2013)
It is well-documented that a crucial aspect of private property lies in control, not only over one’s own resources, but also over one’s own life, even though it may be a liability and a burden at the same time (Sikor, 2006).

The social burden of land and the maintenance of the farm household are both a constraining and rewarding experience. The failure to do so might affect the reputation of a person (and their family). Meeting locally-set expectations, in combination with individual aspirations for betterment, may also be rewarding to an individual (and their family), and to their social and symbolic standing. To earn a good reputation, one cannot go below an implied local standard which requires synergic interaction of the deadlines imposed by nature, followed by hard work and appropriate treatment of the land that meets the productive, aesthetic and sentimental expectations of the producer and community. The standard of meeting such local norms provides a person with a sense of dignity and accomplishment and serves as a positive example motivating others to do the same. This
explains why the land never stays uncultivated, even when it makes an absolute loss, and points to the idea of endogenous rural development which may proceed counterintuitively to the economic and political circumstances. The following protagonists emphasise the practical importance of local social climate and understanding of what it takes to be subjectively and socially regarded as a virtuous and productive farmer and co-villager.

The Local Vision of Development: Three Stories

When Maruška (aged fifty-four) and her husband married they did not have anything. They lived in one improvised room without a bathroom under the barn together with their two small sons. In the beginning, they worked as day labourers mostly in private households and the state agricultural farm in the village. From the money they saved, they bought a small plot of land and built a house. Then, they started a farm with fifteen pigs. Soon the farm started to grow and at the end of the year, they had sixty pigs. Since the farm was expanding, they moved it to the summer ranch near the village and lived there for five years together with their sons. But their sons could not accept their family business, which they found embarrassing, and asked them to shut down the farm because other people in the village looked down on them and called them “piggers” (svinjari).

Maruška and her husband eventually sold off the pigs and from that money, they bought 3 ha of land, two tractors and have since committed exclusively to agriculture. During the last thirty years, they acquired all the necessary mechanisation, a total 10 ha of their own land, and, moreover, they have taken a further 7 ha on lease. In the meantime, they expanded their household activities with cows, sheep, and pigs. Maruška and her husband built two houses for their two sons and organised two generous send-off parties for them when they joined the army. When their sons got married they organised big wedding ceremonies. She thinks all this would not have been possible without the pig business: “We thrived thanks to pigs, hard work, and our own sweat.”

Although Maruška, her husband, sons, and their families live in two separate houses, they work the land and run the household together, and share all income equally. She is very proud of what they have
achieved over the last thirty years and compared their success to the old well-known landowners (*gazde*)\(^3\) from the village who failed.

*Gazde* for whom we had previously worked for wages have ruined themselves, while we have thrived. This is because they strictly stick to the old, traditional, way of doing things, and the mothers-in-law have the last word. In our household we do it differently, we have a democratic approach, and we agree upon who is doing what. (July, 2013).

Maruška feels herself to be an example of a person whose success and well-being came as a result of hard work, a desire for a better life and social recognition. The importance of the latter was subtly emphasised in her talk about big celebrations and enormous spending, which are local indicators of status that satisfy both the desire for showing off on the one hand, and a public confirmation of one’s success on the other.

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Since he was ten years old, Goran (aged forty-three) has worked in agriculture and has always seen himself in it. Goran attempted a small private business during the 1990s in order to diversify his sources of income and support the household. He bought a truck and did unreported transport services for ten years, but despite this, he never ceased to work the land.

By the 1990s Goran and his father had 2 ha of land and took an additional 15–20 ha on lease. From the 1990s to 2000, due to the political situation in the country, the price of land became cheaper, and Goran and his father seized this opportunity and started to buy 2–3 ha annually.

In 1995 Goran significantly advanced the household when he initiated informal cooperation with his neighbour and friend. The aim of their cooperation was to help each other out in different agricultural work and to combine machines. Their cooperation resulted in mutual benefit and prosperity and during this time Goran invested in expanding the

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\(^3\) Most of my interlocutors have a common understanding of what it means to be a good *gazda*. A *gazda* is a person who is not neglectful and who puts jobs in the household and fields ahead of everything else; someone who is a good planner and whose household has all that is needed; whose household, fields and stalls are tidy; who is a good and generous host on celebrations; who respects local tradition and people in the community; who is honourable and content with the profession of farmer. Although there are several local synonyms, what distinguishes this from other terms, is that one cannot be a *gazda* without land.
stock of agricultural buildings. In 2005, Goran and his partner realised that they were now experienced and capable enough to run independent businesses and decided to end their partnership.

According to Goran, hard work, entrepreneurial initiatives, economic intuition, cooperation with his partner, as well as the small business that he ran for ten years, all helped him to invest in his production and accumulate land when it was cheap. He grew into one of the most successful agricultural producers in the village and today he has 60 ha of his own land and an additional 60 ha on lease. In 2013 he was given an award for being one of the most successful agricultural producers in the area.

Goran argues that most successful producers like him, who seized the opportunity and invested in their businesses, already stood out before the implementation of state programs such as subsidies. In his opinion, readiness to invest in production and to expand one’s property are the key factors for development.

Today the land is in the hands of those who want to work it properly, and many have thrived as gazde. Nowadays all producers compete to work better; much attention is given to proper care and treatment of the land. Some twenty people from the village have thrived and cultivated from 20 to 90 ha of their own land. (August, 2013)

The symbolic value of good harvest and well maintained fields, apart from their economic reward and valued aesthetic also demonstrate a farmer’s commitments to soil and agriculture, which is positively evaluated and appreciated by his peers. “The symbolic value of the crop is thus in that it displays the farmer’s commitment to agriculture as a way of life, to the soil and to the crop, and not in its display of the profitability of the farm” (Burton, 2004: 209). Likewise, the social value of competition spurs the enthusiasm for production, and in a synergetic way influences attitudes toward the intensification of production, thereby influencing local development trajectories.

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Ivica (aged forty-three) and his family lived for a long time as tenants in relative poverty because of his father, an alcoholic who had a low reputation in the village. Despite being an excellent student in high school, Ivica was not allowed to go to university because his family had
neither land nor money to support his ambitions. Ivica instead had to do various jobs. He worked as a day labourer, then in private manufacture of fruit juices, he drove a taxi, sold and smuggled cigarettes, and acted as a bingo caller. He sometimes worked twelve-hour days, and despite this harsh life he never despaired because his optimism and vision kept him strong and persistent.

Today Ivica works in a company in the nearby town. His hard work and commitment to the job have led him to the position of the chief of the department with a competitive salary. But the general situation in the company among employees makes Ivica very unhappy. Even though this position enabled him to travel and see the sea for the first time in his life, to refurbish his house, and to buy some land, he could not countenance staying in the company.

After nine years spent in the company, Ivica prepared to resign and commit completely to agriculture, and he started to buy agricultural machinery. During this period, he bought approximately 5 ha of land, expanded the garden and invested in poultry. He found his motivation in acquiring land and gaining the symbolic status of a respected householder. “Every time I bought a piece of land, I had to fast for a whole year to pay off the debt, but one motive has always kept me going—that a poor man should earn capital—because my parents did not have a gram of land” (February, 2013).

Even though Ivica cannot be compared to other, bigger producers, his case is particular because his dedication to agriculture allows him to build a respected name—where his father failed—and to erase the bad image that the village associates with his family. His religiosity also strengthens his social reputation, as was symbolically acknowledged when he was offered a place on the church council. His proven commitment to his faith and related good reputation turned out to be crucial factors on a few occasions when Ivica purchased land from people who did not want to sell it to other parties, but did want to sell it to him. They were even happy to wait for his payment because they trusted him and wanted to help him in fulfilling his ambitions.

Ivica’s story represents the importance of ‘classical’ values that carry weight in rural Serbian society such as hard work, dedication to agriculture, and religiosity. These features were important in earlier times, and still represent key values in contemporary village life.
Explaining Endogenous Development Stories

The living conditions of the individuals portrayed above have significantly improved in recent decades. They have thrived economically by acquiring and enlarging their existing capital. Common to all of these personal histories is that their improvement dates back to before state-led agricultural support. According to these individuals, existing state measures, including subsidies, did stimulate their production, but they did not trigger their desire nor their achievements. Likewise, favourable economic conditions and good prices on produce have also boosted their professional satisfaction and motivation.

These individuals’ development was self-initiated, and motivated by the importance they placed on the pursuit and attainment of social distinction through locally recognised forms of ‘hard work’ and ‘dignity’, including building a good name or benevolence, competition, cooperation, and the desire for professional and personal autonomy made possible through land ownership. These values resemble those
of neo-agrarianism, a social and political philosophy which places strong emphasis on private ownership that develops an owner’s responsibilities as exercised through economic, social, environmental, and political spheres (Thompson, 2010; Fiskio, 2012). The norms that, thus, privilege and value ownership, integrity, labour, active work on the land, and attachment to a community, generate a cultivar of moral character (Berry, 1996). As in various other cases worldwide, the village and, consequently, the ethics of producers have derived directly from labour and agriculture.

For centuries, the entire life of a peasant went by in scheduled labour. His habits were formed according to this schedule. Every task, when it became due, was urgent. Every task and every deadline was vital. Not by the coercion of another man, but under the discipline imposed by nature and put on him directly. Such necessity always gives a high moral sense to the drudgery of the peasantry. Never is a peasant so ethical as in his work. The qualities thus gained by each generation are bequeathed to the next generation, who enrich the heritage. Rich funds of certain working qualities were thus accumulated and settled in the rural population. (Vukosavljević, 1983: 418, translation by the author)

Another comparable example comes from Emery (2014) who explores understandings of work ethics, specifically hard work, among British farmers who value ‘hard work’ even when their financial returns continue to fail. Work ethic, therefore, should not be considered only in a utilitarian sense, as a path toward the maximisation of production, profit and wellbeing, as it also influences identity formation. To that end, “meeting obligations, securing identity, status and structure, are as fundamental to livelihood as bread and shelter” (Wallman, 1979: 7). Burton also clearly points out that “while there are economic benefits to maintaining tidy agricultural landscapes, the social symbolic value of the tidy landscape is unlikely to be related solely to economic factors for the simple reason that while the tidy fields represent the output of agriculture, they do not indicate the level of inputs” (Burton, 2004: 209).

As much as hard work, dignity, accompanying elements (such as land ownership, autonomy, individual desires and motivations), and ‘exemplary’ people give rise to a particular type of valorised personal

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In the original text, the author used the word *seljak*, which is a term for the peasant, still in wide use in rural Serbia.
and family model, they equally influence the logics of local economic development. Thinkers of the utilitarian tradition (Bentham, [1781] 2000) would find many instrumental arguments to explain how development comes into being. These are partially right. The role of the local community in assessing, acknowledging, or disapproving of somebody’s success might sometimes be decisive. Success may indeed be individual, but it is meaningful only in the community, which is why its maintenance implies certain liabilities on the part of those who are considered exemplary. Thus, spreading knowledge, information, and support to peers is not only a pure act of benevolence, or an ethical aspiration, but also an unspoken expectation put on those interested in maintaining their social standing in the village. Values, consequently, become instilled in people not only through the influence of collective representations of what is considered good and important in life (Robbins, 2015). Values become represented to and instilled in subjects through the influence of those considered to be “exemplary persons” (see Humphrey, 1997; Robbins and Sommerschuh, 2016). These persons, in fact, shape the community and impose their standards,
unlike subsidies, IPA, IPARD and other state agricultural policies which in the local context seem irrelevant.

McCloskey’s insights are valid here: “It won’t suffice, as the World Bank nowadays recommends, to add institutions and stir” (2016b: 10). The idea and importance of ‘thriving’ in rural communities first occurs in people’s mindsets. The value attributed to agriculture, assumed and related ethics on working the land and maintaining the household, signify that in these communities in Serbia, hard work (as well as the motivation to undertake it) is socially respected. Such a social climate spurs on some members in the community towards land, productivist orientations, but also towards liveability. It is true that Goran who cultivates 120 ha, and Ivica who cultivates 5 ha cannot be compared and will never be (financially) equal. Yet, what is common to both is their commonly held motivation and their emphasis on becoming a ‘good’ and ‘dignified’ householder, which accounts for their prosperity. The growth, therefore, cannot be measured only by quantifiable factors, but also by subjective dimensions of value and wellbeing.

Likewise, those who own between 5 and 10 ha do not consider themselves unsuccessful, nor poor. On the contrary: Maruška, as well as Ivica, see themselves as slowly thriving and living a dignified life. This is due to a combination of factors such as better prices for products, the enthusiasm for production, the desire for professional and personal autonomy obtained through land ownership, and the desire for a better life.

**Conclusion**

Most externally-introduced rural development projects are guided by noble and benevolent intentions. They however often fail to accomplish their goals. Planners are seldom interested in understanding whether and how their ideas of development and local values synchronise, and how, why and in which direction local populations internalise and modify extant values. Moreover, theoretical but also policy horizons become blurred as they cannot see the solution to the dilemma—“what, if not through planning?”

As shown in this account through examples from Serbian villagers, the role of hard work and dignity, exemplary persons, and village ethics
drive some forms of economic activity and development, in particular around land and farming. The cases provided here do not just present the importance of individual thriving but also of the principle of subsidiarity that places modest responsibilities for local wellbeing at the lowest level of the community and through role models. Villagers ‘develop’ and undertake work with constant reference to neighbours and other villagers. In the village, nothing can compare to the intensity with which laziness is despised, and conversely the admiration for a hard-working householder. Similarly, neglected fields that urge for competent treatment by the farmer are considered as “an anathema to farmers’ sense of their professional identity and expertise” (Burton, 2004: 208). Such local perceptions have created a self-regulating system, with elements of competition, judgement and shaming, in which neighbours and co-villagers look at each other, learn from each other, and compete with each other. The synergy of their activities creates the phenomenon of social imitation. There is an ethics of becoming ‘better’, not necessarily richer; by extension, there is attention given to how to improve land cultivation.

Farmers create their own progress, impose new standards, and change themselves accordingly. Their ethos, understanding of life, and their nerve seem apt for such achievements. Without the strong influence of state policies and subsidies on the daily decisions of farmers’ businesses such a scenario of development is highly likely. If, in the course of joining the EU, the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture initiates the intense integration of Serbian agriculture with the Common Agricultural Policy, this will lead to an enormous influx of EU subsidies, where farmers’ sense of autonomy and control might be limited or traded for subsidies (see Krasznai-Kovacs, 2019). Subsequent crowding-out of personal incentives, local motors of development and accumulated knowledge will become a justifiable concern along with the disappearance of the village social fabric.

If policy-makers acknowledge studies beyond their narrow plans and investigate local manifestations and forms of rural development, future interventions may be transformed in targeted areas. In other words, rural development may be undertaken with closer attention to local ‘ways of doing things’. Moderating policy and regulations to rural conditions on-the-ground and recognising existing social climates and local visions
of development can potentially offer better pragmatic ideas than the reinvention of the wheel and the application of homogenous solutions, as well as gaining the systematic momentum many governments hope for.

References


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11. What is Not Known about Rural Development?


