

Abstract: Relying on an interview-based research carried out in Szeklerland (Eastern Transylvania) between 2011 and 2020, the present study investigates the impact of the new rural development paradigm on the first level indicated by Van der Ploeg et al. (2000): changes in the relationship between agriculture and local society. The analysed region does not form an administrative unit, it is the eastern region of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy. It consists of rural settlements and small towns, the population of which is mostly of Hungarian ethnicity. More than half of the households have a small amount of land and are engaged in farming as their main or supplementary activity. Following a brief overview of the regional context, our paper analyzes the essential changes that have been taking place in the relationship between agriculture and the regional society over the last one or two decades. The focus of the analysis is how changes in the relationship between agriculture and the regional society appear in the innovative agricultural entrepreneurs' practice and interpretations.

Keywords: innovative agricultural enterprises, modernization, family farming, new rural development paradigm, Szeklerland

Absztrakt: A tanulmány egy 2011 és 2020 között Székelyföldön (Kelet-Erdély) végzett interjú kutatás alapján vizsgálja az új vidékfejlesztési paradigma hatását a Van der Ploeg és társai (2000) által megjelölt első szinten: a mezőgazdaság és a regionális társadalom közötti kapcsolat változásai. Az elemzett régió nem képez adminisztratív egységet, az egykori Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia keleti régiója, vidéki településekből és kisvárosokból áll, amelyek lakossága többnyire magyar etnikumú. A háztartások több mint fele kis földterülettel rendelkezik, és fő- vagy kiegészítő tevékenységként mezőgazdasággal foglalkozik. Tanulmányunkban a térségi kontextus rövid ismertetését követően összefoglaló jelleggel ismertetjük azokat a fontosabb változásokat, amelyek az agrárium és a térségi társadalom kapcsolatában az utóbbi egy-két évtizedben megjelentek. Az elemző fejezetben azt vizsgáljuk, hogy az innovatív agrárvállalkozók gyakorlatában és értelmezéseiben hogyan jelenik meg az agrárium és a térségi társadalom közti kapcsolat változása

Kulcsszavak: innovatív mezőgazdasági vállalkozások, modernizáció, családi gazdaságok, új vidékfejlesztési paradigma, Székelyföld

Highlights

- Essential changes have been taking place in the relationship between agriculture and the regional society over the last one or two decades in Szeklerland.
 - Relationship between agriculture and regional society is complex and has many components.
 - Bottom-up agricultural innovation initiatives can be seen as the most prominent actors of the new rural development paradigm in this area.
 - Changes in the relationship between agriculture and society can be demonstrated at two levels among these actors: discursive and practical level.
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1. Introduction

In relation to an east Transylvanian (Romania), non-administrative area, i.e., the rural and Hungarian-majority Szeklerland, our study analyses how the effect of the new rural development paradigm presents itself in the relationship between agriculture and the rural society. As Szeklerland is not an administrative unit, there are no official statistics available for this geographical area. However, the use of the term

"region" is justified by the strong territorial identity among the population of Szeklerland. This territorial identity is based on socio-historical traditions and is reinforced today by a multitude of development narratives and programmes, symbolic activities (Bodó, 2019; Biró, 2019). Even as part of the onetime Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Szeklerland was considered as a peripheral, backward region. With a view to revitalizing the area, the Hungarian state created special rural development and funding programmes at the turn of the 1900s (Balaton, 2006) and in the years following the Vienna Award (Oláh, 2004). During the decades of Romanian socialism, two extremely significant modernization trends functioning as nationwide programmes had impact on the region: collectivization putting an end to family land ownership and rural industrialization creating a new labour market. Following the 1989 regime change in Romania, both processes came to a standstill, the family ownership structure was restored, socialist industrial facilities were liquidated, and jobs were lost. No further state initiative was launched in this period that would have been aiming at a programmatic modernization of the region. Modernization processes observed in the last three decades are small-scale, experimental, ephemeral processes and are primarily the results of various global effects. Among them, the most essential changes occurred in the agricultural sector and the related activities – especially starting from the 2000s. These changes can be connected with the turn that is indicated by researchers of rural development as the new rural development paradigm. Its vital substantive aspect (OECD, 2006) is the appreciation of rural areas and the rise in prominence of the utilization of endogenous conditions and values. According to experts on the subject (Shucksmith, 2010; Murdoch, 2000; van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Woods, 2007), we are dealing with a multifactorial, multi-stakeholder, complex process. It signifies a distancing trend from the agricultural practice aiming for quantity and making the most out of natural resources while at the same time wishes to answer present-day challenges such as protection of natural environment, the need for a healthy diet, safeguarding of local values, bottom-up development coming to the fore, and utilization of endogenous conditions (Almstedt, 2014). People living in rural areas emphasize their connection to the rural space and are looking for scopes of action to express this connection (Ray, 1999). Professional studies analysing this paradigm shift call attention to many different forms of changes (van der Ploeg et al., 2000). These changes and new approaches are confirmed by works of authors focusing on various subfields and subtopics. For example, territorial cooperation and bottom-up initiatives (Marquardt et al., 2012, Wellbrock, Roep, 2015), types of knowledge, knowledge dynamics (Bruckmeier, 2004), multilevel networks, collaboration of various actors (Wellbrock, Roep, 2015), regional identity and place marketing (Mettepenningen et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2005; San Eugenio-Vela–Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). The post-productivist approach suggests that the functions of rural spaces are about to undergo considerable changes (Woods, 2007). Rural discourses are gaining ground, and there is also a growing camp of social actors shaping these discourses.

Influenced by external forces, these processes have made their appearance also in the area under study, first of all in the form of spot-like, occasional, and experimental initiatives; however, the number of such initiatives is constantly on the rise (Biró, 2019). A typical example is the increasing number of bottom-up, small-scale, agricultural innovation initiatives inspired by outside stimuli. On the one hand, this process poses a challenge, and, on the other, it offers an innovation alternative for a rural area that can be characterized by strong traditional-cultural patterns and where the traditional, self-sustaining family farming model dominates up to this day (Laki, Biró, 2001).

Our analysis considered Van der Ploeg et al's (2000) study as a starting point – the authors adopted five levels of analysis in defining the characteristic features of the turn represented/conveyed by the new rural development paradigm (these features also indicate the deviation from the former modernization paradigm). Nevertheless, the present paper will address only the first level indicated as such by the authors, i.e., changes in the relationship between agriculture and regional society. This relationship in the region at issue is also complex and has many components – on the one hand, new social needs and expectations arise towards agriculture, while innovative agricultural enterprises, production practices, and organizations appear as a new type of offer for the regional society. The target group of our analysis is made up of the innovative agricultural entrepreneurs since in the present period bottom-up agricultural innovation initiatives can be seen as the most prominent actors of the new rural development paradigm in this area. It is based on the interview series conducted in this context 2011 that we will present how

changes in the relationship between agriculture and regional society appear in agricultural entrepreneurs' practice and interpretations.

This kind of professional approach bears great significance in the case of peripheral rural areas that, being part of post-socialist countries, could not have access to information on professional methods of rural development prior to the last two-three decades and could tap into relevant sources only relatively late. A typical example in this respect is Romania, where the period before the 1989 political-cultural turn saw a centralized system excluding all bottom-up development initiatives, while the relevant professional, policy information could not make its way through the country borders either.

Research on the regional appearance of the new rural development paradigm is also justified by the fact that the socioeconomic role of the agricultural segment is absolutely a key feature of this region, and it will probably keep this position in the medium term. Over half of the households have landed property and also perform some form of agricultural activity to some extent. This leads to the fact that agriculture and its associated activities play a considerable part in regional-scale employment, food supply, and changes in social relationships and forms of cooperation. With regard to the multifaceted and central role of the agricultural sector, one should not overlook the professional observations of researchers who interpret the operation of enterprises not merely as an economic but as a complex social process (Steiner et al., 2021). Speaking of the region under study, this approach also implies taking into account those peculiar sociohistorical processes that have been shaping the various autonomous forms of individual and community lifestyle throughout the centuries and that still contribute to the attitude adopted by the population towards any kind of external (state or global) influence.

Following a brief overview of the regional context, our paper goes on to summarize the essential changes that have been taking place in the relationship between agriculture and the local society over the last one or two decades. The chapter dedicated to this analysis looks into how changes in the relationship between agriculture and the local society appear in the innovative agricultural entrepreneurs' practice and interpretations.

2. Regional Context – Brief Overview

Szeklerland is a social geographical framework for the analysis and it is not an administrative unit (For a more detailed description of the area see Biró, 2019) – it includes Harghita and Covasna counties as well as the eastern part of Mureş County; it is basically a rural area. Based on geographical features, it is divided into several minor regions that have small towns – with 10 – 50,000 inhabitants – as their central elements, whose catchment areas include a few dozens of rural settlements. Its entire population is about 600,000 strong. A great many historical works describe the region, most of which place a special focus on the particular social organization that has been characterizing this region for several centuries (Egyed, 2012; Imreh, 1979; Venczel, 1980). Some of the crucial elements of this specific organization are strong locality (the decisive role that community ownership and institutions have in farming, the vital role of local identity, and the organization of community life), self-sustaining family farming model relying on land ownership, and, last but not least, the social organizing role of local and larger-scale forms of autonomy. This specific social functioning model formed over several centuries has developed a set of values, norms, and cultural patterns that had a pivotal role in the attitude towards the modernization programmes aimed at the region from the outside world. A classic example is the population's refusal of the large-scale farming model offered by collectivization (Bodó, 2004; Oláh, 2009); they mostly accepted the industrialization and urbanization model but carried on the family farming practice – under many forms and included in informal activities – in the context of urban lifestyle (Bodó et al., 1994; Biró et al., 1999). Another issue that appears to be of great importance in connection with the further changes occurring in the region's development is how the still functional lifestyle model developed in the wake of the region's specific sociohistorical processes relates to the agricultural innovation turn that started to make its appearance in the region in the last two decades as some sort of offer or possibility, emerging through global channels and not as a governmental or top-down intervention.

Traditionally as well as recently, this region has been characterized by small-scale, self-sustaining family farming. Collectivization terminated the family-based land ownership structure in 1962, and the majority of the population became industrial workers or performed activities in the household. Subsequent to the 1989 Romanian revolution, the landholding system was restored in the form it used to have before 1962. These regional processes fit well into the national ones: “After 1989, under Land Law 18/1991, overconcentration of the landed property turned into excess fragmentation, and big farms gave way to small, peasant-type family farms. In 2005, Romania numbers over 4.25 million farms, of which 99.5% are individually owned, and uses 65% of the overall agricultural area. The average agricultural area/individual farm is 2.1 ha, at an average of 3.7 parcels/farm” (Bălteanu, Popovici, 2010: 98).

Following the promulgation of the 1991 Land Act, small-scale, self-sustaining agricultural activity was resumed in the Szeklerland area as well. Research data on the region (Laki, Biró, 2001; Biró, 2006; Biró, 2019) reveal that over half of the families are still engaged in farming activities as a main or ancillary activity and have their own lands. The land structure is fragmented; the fields pertaining to some of the settlements are divided into several thousand plots of land. The size of lands owned by families are of a few hectares on average, the purpose of farming being mostly the production of a money surrogate and ensuring the family’s food supply. The major part of the families with land ownership performs farming activities in addition to having another job. The process of land consolidation is slow-paced, the function of the land leasing system is minimal, and the forms of associations and cooperative societies are numerically negligible and their social role marginal.

This is the very context wherein an increasing number of innovative agricultural enterprises emerged starting from the 2000s, which are completely different in their composition and modalities of operation from the long-standing family-scale farming practice characteristic of the region; therefore, in this respect, these initiatives qualify as innovations in terms of the region.

We find it important to underline that these innovative initiatives have been organized in the wake of extra-regional incentives (Kovács, 2018), are small-scale, and there is only one or two of them in each settlement. They produce products and use production technologies that were previously not given any emphasis at all or merely existed as ancillary activities in the farming practice (cultivation of medicinal plants, fruit farming and processing, rose cultivation, snail farming, mushroom growing, cheese making, worm farming, raising of small livestock, Mangalitsa farming, etc.); besides, the manner of knowledge acquisition and the applied marketing practices are also novel in their nature.

It is from extra-regional sources that these innovative initiatives acquired the necessary professional knowledge for starting a business. As further characteristic features: they are open to professional, technological, and other types of modernizations; wish to make use of local, endogenous conditions and resources; are committed to food safety, health promotion, and the protection of natural assets; attach importance to business considerations as well, which is absolutely not typical of traditional family farming; are seeking to share their knowledge and experiences with their immediate environment; are explicitly connected to a local community (locality) (Biró, Sárosi-Blága, 2020).

3. Major Processes of the Changes in the Relationship between Agriculture and Regional Society

We have been conducting research in Szeklerland since 2011, within the framework of the research programme of Pro Agricultura Hargitae Universitas Foundation and WAC – Centre for Regional and Anthropological Research – organizations operating in Miercurea-Ciuc, – each year looking into a particular segment of the agricultural innovation processes, based on case studies and interviews, while seeking to reveal the sociohistorical specificities as well as the present-day socioeconomic function of the studied processes. Besides taking stock of the agricultural actors and institutions (Biró, 2018), the processes of generational change, the local embeddedness processes of innovative agricultural enterprises, the attitude towards digital technologies, and the modes of knowledge acquisition constituted the subjects of our analysis (Biró, Magyar, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). During the analysis work, we could observe several indications that not only regional agriculture has undergone changes – primarily

as an influence of the new rural development paradigm – throughout the last two decades but also the relationship between agriculture and local society. In what follows, we will provide a brief overview of the changes experienced in the analysed region. These changes are seen as specific in the context of global influences and the region's unique characteristics:

- The social perception of occupations associated with agriculture has been acutely negative, especially in the post-1989 period. The social perception of activities connected with agriculture took a positive turn, and this type of social perception is becoming increasingly present.
- It is a sign of change that new social needs and expectations have emerged with respect to agriculture, this sort of needs and expectations being previously inexistent in the region.
- Consumption demand for healthy foods and organic products is a novel phenomenon in the region, some of the producers trying to meet this type of demand. The relevant narrative is becoming more and more apparent in both the media and everyday discourses.
- Connecting agricultural products to the place of production (locality, region, producer's name) is yet another novel regional development. The organizational form of "local products' fair" works both at the regional and local level. A new process is also underway, according to which different settlements specialize on a particular agricultural product.
- Environmental aspects are assigned an important role mainly in the practice and narratives of innovative agricultural entrepreneurs.
- In relation to product manufacturing, the promotion of artisanal character is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of product marketing while at the same time being given a role in the public positioning of the producer's person.
- Striving for personal quality assurance becomes a main focus primarily of the producer-buyer personal relationship.
- The need for creating a personal and trust-based relationship between producer and customer has emerged in the region.
- Population needs for product presentations and fairs is gradually gaining acceptance among producers, who embrace a positive attitude towards them.
- A characteristic process of the region is that producers respond to the growth in demand by expanding their product range and individualizing their products.
- New social needs concerning the agricultural segment have a considerable media thematization in the region, and this thematization appears in everyday communication as well. Thematizations and narratives conveying the changes in the relationship between agriculture and local society are manifold, occasional, situational, and often contradictory.
- Regional institutions and organizations also initiate and support programmes and events that reinforce the above-mentioned processes (networking for local producers, organizing local fairs).

The above list is not exhaustive, and we should emphasize that these processes are formalized only to a small extent. They materialize in many areas, various situations, independently from each other, and with varying intensity. Initiatives, thematizations, and programmes are most times spot-like, do not form a system, are not interlinked, and mutually reinforce each other indirectly at best. Changes in the relationship between agriculture and local society constitute a multi-stakeholder, multilevel, contextual, and ephemeral process, which is growing and getting stronger at the same time.

4. Methodological Aspects

The over 100 interviews conducted in the Szeklerland region between 2011 and 2020 within the framework of the research programme of Pro Agricultura Hargitae Universitas Foundation and WAC – Centre for Regional and Anthropological Research – organizations operating in Miercurea-Ciuc –, formed the basis of our analysis (Biró, Magyar, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

In our research, qualitative data was collected eclectically using a combination of semi-structured interviews, informal observations and additional document analyses relevant for the topic. We adopted the method of theoretical sampling (e.g., Glaser, Straus 1967; Miles, Huberman 1994). Our research considered as innovative agricultural enterprises all those microbusinesses operating in a rural environment that perform a new type of activity in comparison with traditional family farming in Szeklerland. The main topics and aspects of the data collection work and analysis were the following:

- circumstances in which the activity started (when it started, what effect or incentive it took, how it started, what were the conditions initially);
- individual and family farming experiences, learning history in the education system;
- acquisition and status of professional knowledge required for an innovative initiative (agricultural technology and other professional knowledge, managerial knowledge, endogenous/local knowledge);
- relationship to the immediate environment;
- network connections;
- positioning practice of one's own activity (content, methods, procedures and tools for positioning one's own activity, positioning activity, product, personality, work process).
- use of subsidies (national, county, local banks and the type, role, and effect of subsidies in farming);
- what the interviewee considers to be an important problem or topic to be solved (regulation, administration, national or regional policy, local program, learning, etc.);
- progress scenarios (area, activity, conditions, timeframe);
- opinion on the situation in the region: the situation and opportunities of young agricultural entrepreneurs in the Szeklerland region.

During the interviews, we sought to explore the phases of creation/formation and operation starting from the conception of the business idea. We are talking about social actors whose activity greatly differs from the views, practices, system of values, and goals of the social context they live in. By all means, it follows from this position that they attach great importance to the reflection on their own initiatives and activities and the formulation of associated narratives; they talk about themselves and their activities readily and at great length. They are constantly preoccupied with the question of how local society views them. They willingly agreed to have their interviews printed in publications distributed in the region, and they also asked for some copies.

These may be called narratives of the self (Gergen, Gergen, 1984). The author takes the view that such narratives are guided by events and can be rather considered social than individual processes. A crucial element of such narratives is the valued endpoint (Gergen, Gergen, 2001: 80–81), which in our case also implies some sort of summative assessment with regard to the relationship between the innovative enterprise and the social context. This feature of the narratives entails that a vast amount of personal content can be found in the interview texts and that respondents sometimes formulate summative and evaluative, concise statements concerning their situation or their activity as a whole. The initial part of our analysis contains an illustrative selection of the commonly encountered thesis-like statements, and we make an attempt at understanding their role. The second part of our analysis is dedicated to the description of three dominant types of using personal content.

5. Results

Our analysis attempts to present how changes in the relationship between agriculture and local community appear/take place in the practice and interpretation of innovative agricultural entrepreneurs. The examined agricultural enterprises are in a specific intermediary position in this region. One of our previous analyses (Biró, Kovács, 2021 [in press]) revealed the elements that in the process of enterprise creation, the component set of the new rural development paradigm (global, external influence), are

integrated on the one hand and from the component set of the local community (endogenous effect) on the other. The next important question in line is what procedures the innovative agricultural entrepreneurs adopt in their efforts to connect the elements of the new rural development paradigm and the local social context through their activities. At the same time, this process is closely linked to the issue of the enterprises' social embeddedness. One of our previous analyses has already tackled this subject (Biró, Sárosi-Blága, 2020; Sárosi-Blága, 2017) and concluded that the social embeddedness of innovative agricultural initiatives is a process still in the experimental stage. It includes a high diversity of patterns, but these are mere attempts in nature, and their effectiveness is uncertain. The analysis below attempts to follow a double direction in the examination of the process. Investigating how one tries to build up their own position and interpret it is an essential professional question also because the position of the individual businesses creates at the same time the social position of the particular innovation.

5.1 On the Role of Thesis-Like Statements

Passages referring to one's own business, products and activities, local position, and the relationship with the local community, often include wordings that can be linked to the view, ideology, and practice of the new rural development paradigm. Interviews analysed in the context of the research contain several hundreds of such statements. In the vast majority of the cases, these are short, single-sentence statements at most, which express some kind of conviction, value, or goal in an explicit, thesis-like form, in a normative tone. Less commonly, they are formulated in response to questions asked in the course of the interviews. A much more common occurrence is when the interview subject changes tone and emphasis and inserts in their speech such a thesis-like statement, and then they carry on speaking in the same manner as they have left off previously. Some typical examples are as follows:

- *"The environment must be protected; production must be adjusted to this."*
- *"One should make developments only if they are able to retain quality."*
- *"We are poisoning ourselves, too, whenever we use insecticides."*
- *"Local resources are the most important."*
- *"We need smaller farms because they are good and they can produce quality products."*
- *"Large farms just abuse and exploit the land, the animals."*
- *"Producing healthy food is the most essential thing, and not economic benefits."*
- *"The number of organic farmers will be on the rise because people will become accustomed to healthy lifestyle."*
- *"A complete change of mentality is needed."*
- *"The point is to consume normal, healthy foods."*
- *"One should rather produce fewer but quality products."*
- *"First of all, people's knowledge should be expanded."*

The above-indicated thesis-like statements always appear in contexts where interview subjects try to place their own initiative, or components thereof, that can be associated with the new rural development paradigm into the local social context. Thesis-like statements featuring an insistent tone are illocutionary speech acts through which speakers place their innovation explicitly in the local social context of a different nature or in opposition to the medium of a different nature. They are not interested in the circumstances of positioning and do not interpret it, but through their formulation they consider positioning in the local context as a *fait accompli*. In a recent analysis, we demonstrated that innovative agricultural entrepreneurs put into practice multiple attempts to facilitate embeddedness in the local social context (Biró, Sárosi-Blága, 2020), but they also insist on the above-mentioned verbal positioning besides the adopted practical solutions. This procedure leads us to the conclusion that the use of thesis-like, normative statements may have a protective, legitimizing function for the speakers, relieving them to some extent of the task of constantly creating their own position. This verbal positioning is a unilateral gesture, which makes it reasonable to ask how the innovation (enterprise, product, activity)

conveying/expressing the new rural development paradigm is understood in the local social context. Linguistic positioning makes use of language tools to anchor the new initiative in the specific local context but gives very little indication as to the true nature of the relationship between the new initiative and the local community. The frequency of the normative statements suggests that this type of positioning currently bears great importance for the innovative agricultural actors.

5.2 On the Role of Personal Content

The analysed interviews call our attention to another procedure, which is also connected to the local positioning of innovative agricultural entrepreneurs. An investigation into the planning, development, and operation of innovative agricultural enterprises reveals that personal content is given a substantial role in each of these phases, and interview subjects offer a detailed, argumentative presentation of the elements making up this personal content. Several types of personalization can be distinguished in the examined ventures. In the following, we will provide a presentation of the three most common types in this respect. While more than one type of personalization may be present in a business, there will always be a single dominant type.

Tab 1. The main characteristics of the three most common types of personalization present in a business. Source: own table, based on research results

	Type of Personal Local Engagement	Creative Type Making Use of Individual Abilities	Type of Building on the Components of Personal Career
The type of innovative activity	Family business engaged in the cultivation of herbs.	Gastronomic or other kind of creativity of women working in agricultural family businesses.	A married couple running a small pension in one of the remote settlements of the region.
The main focus of the activity	Family dealing with the innovative initiative as well as on the personal self.	The creativity, ideas and work of the women.	Manual work and traditional peasant food. Traditional knowledge and knowledge acquired through training and learning.
The relationship with local community	Strong, multi-level, with informal aspects. Central role to the personal side of this connection, to personal encouragement, persuasion, good examples/best practices, and expression.	Partly formal, focused on meeting demand for products, and the role of one's own ideas in this process.	Based on establishing personal relationships with clients.
The integration of the activity in the local community	Strong: informal activities and social engagement.	The activity is partly integrated in the local society, the focus is on the openness of the entrepreneur, who is looking for ways to connect with community.	Representation of a complex lifestyle certified on many levels and expanded in time and space.

The Type of Personal Local Engagement

This family business engaged in the cultivation of herbs has been operating for two decades now in a small settlement near the forest, away from major roads and large municipalities. There are three family members working in the business on a permanent basis, who employ 10–15 seasonal workers for the summer months. The family cultivates 10 different kinds of herbs and collects 20 further types of them in the surrounding area. They dry them in a traditional way and produce 13 types of tea blends and various medicinal ointments. One family member even offers therapeutic massage. The products are sold locally, in the nearby settlements, and at regional fairs.

The family and the personality of the three family members receive emphasis in a number of ways in their activities. The most significant activities in this respect are as follows:

- Periodically they organize small gatherings, when they deliver demonstrations on herbs, cultivation techniques and teach locals and people of the neighbouring settlements. They have established a herbal club, where they invite further experts on the subject. Also, they organized a herbal festival in the village. *“We had presentations, presented a number of herbs, made some tea for participants to taste... it was an all-day event; we spoke to families, young people, the elderly.” (38 years old man)*. They organized seed exchange events too, where herb seeds could be exchanged or purchased.
- Whenever they can offer employment possibilities, they always ask local people and invite them through personal contacts. Consequently, seasonal employment is not formalized, does not convey an asymmetric relationship but is instead informal, personal in nature.
- They often encourage local farmers to take up herb cultivation as an alternative to potato production. In case someone is willing to make a shift in this direction, they help them with advice, seeds, and even through direct personal involvement.
- If someone wishes to get involved merely to gain personal experience, they are also happy to help.
- It is not only their activities and products that they link with the name of the settlement but their personality as well. In their methods of promotion and marketing, they always connect their activity with the name, features, and natural assets of the settlement.
- They initiate and organize local product fairs, which exclusively does not have herbs as their main attraction but offer representation and marketing possibilities for all local producers.

A characteristic feature of the above-listed activities is that the main focus is placed on the family dealing with the innovative initiative as well as on the personal self instead of the business or its products. Their relationship with the locals and the people of the neighbouring settlements gives a central role to the personal side of this connection, to personal encouragement, persuasion, good examples/best practices, and expression. Besides the topic of herb cultivation, issues acting as constituents of the new rural paradigm are also given a place in these personal expressions, such as: prioritization of exploiting local values and features, importance of healthy nutrition, the role of artisanal character, and the relevance of environment protection.

This type of activity is much more extensive and diversified than might otherwise be justified by entrepreneurial interest and efficiency in the strict sense. Legally speaking, this is a private business, but social engagement is given a major role in functional terms, and this takes a concrete form via the personalization of activities, which is not some sort of extra activity besides the normal business operation but its everyday, organic part. We should point out that these activities are all informal in nature, are not integrated into the settlement’s official sphere, institutional programmes; instead, they are part of the normal functioning of society.

The Creative Type Making Use of Individual Abilities

Local product fairs organized in the region offer a variety of examples for the gastronomic or other kind of creativity of women working in agricultural family businesses. Our interview subject runs a family business together with her husband and adult son – they keep cows and sheep for the purposes of milk production. Based on the family organization of labour, the woman in the household processes and sells the milk – 300–400 l/day –; this is her part of the work. As a result of customer demands for cheese products, five years ago she began to utilize cheese as raw material and create a number of unique artisanal products. She has no problem selling them: *“I have established such an extensive client base that I cannot satisfy all demands.”* (40 years old woman).

She is very proud to have acquired all knowledge about this craft through individual endeavours and experiences, in an informal manner; it was only in the early steps that she asked for and received help from a local elderly person. She is convinced that one must be self-sufficient, has to develop their own skills, and that *“if someone is very fond of a certain profession, then they will take it on and will be able to learn it by themselves if they are aiming for continuous improvement.”* (40 years old woman). It follows from this basic position that – unlike many other producers – she does not sell cheese as such but a number of unique, self-invented products made out of cheese as a raw material.

“Cow’s milk cheese has been high in demand recently, these types of artisanal cheese including varieties with garlic, chili pepper, sweet red paprika, dill, and many kinds of classic, smoked, non-smoked, and other cheese types. I make cheese platters, but that can be made of cow’s milk alone. The cheese platters I make are especially highly appreciated. The platter itself is made out of cheese, and I use lettuce leaves as decoration. Then I place on it round cheese, cumin cheese, smoked cheese, Mozzarella, cheese with wild garlic, garlic, chili pepper, and then I wrap it up like a bouquet and put a ribbon on it; some like to have a red–white–green [Hungarian flag] ribbon, some ask for white, some others for blue, and still others for red; this is made to each customer’s preference. If it is meant as a gift for visiting a newborn, then I put a little heart on it that says “God bless the baby!”, or if it is for an engagement party, then “Lots of happiness!” – it depends on the order.” (40 years old woman)

She willingly offers a detailed description of how she works, points out that she is always on the lookout for new solutions, and pays close attention to being able to adapt to customers’ needs. She provides an interesting explanation for this creative attitude:

“I get my ideas while making cheese; I am always thinking of how I could make it even better. When I was a little girl, we did pottery in the family, and that is where the idea came from: if dogs, cats, or plates can be made of clay, then it can be done with melted cheese as well, as I can make whatever shapes I want, all I need is some knowledge and manual skills. I love this so much, just cannot stop doing it.” (40 years old woman)

Inspired by her own experiences and works, she even wrote a book on how she had learnt this craft step by step, on how she works and publishes recipes on the production of certain products, on the foods she cooks in the traditional way.

She would be happy to pass on her knowledge to whomever wants to learn this craft; she would especially love to work with school children. She believes there is still a low number of those who recognize the potential of local values, the importance of natural foodstuffs, and the many different things one can achieve on their own.

The Type of Building on the Components of Personal Career

B. S. runs a small pension together with his wife in one of the remote settlements of the region. As a little child, he would spend plenty of time with his grandparents living in a village, where he became familiar with doing manual work on the field, haymaking, looking after the animals, i.e., the elements of rural lifestyle that previously characterized the area. Among them, he lays special emphasis on manual work and traditional peasant food – he had both of these components built into the operation of their pension.

He puts it down to this childhood influence that after starting a family he would buy an old farmhouse in a small settlement and start to plan for an agritourism pension. Nearby the pension, there are animals (horses, sheep), a vegetable garden, and a small orchard. In the catering of guests, they rely on foods produced by the family, grown in the local farm. The pension can accommodate 14 guests at full capacity, which, adds the interview subject, is crucial for establishing personal relationships. Programmes organized for the guests are connected to the operation of the family farm:

“I need to organize programmes where tourists can gain insight into the operation of rural domestic farms; they can get to know, for instance, how horses are taken care of, how cows are milked, how cheese is made, or how vegetables and fruits are grown. The foods served must also be made of self-produced ingredients. We try to present the typical rural lifestyle, agricultural work, traditional homemade foods and drinks and to get the guests involved into agricultural work and the duties around the house. Next to our family house, there is an oven built in the first half of the last century, where we can bake bread or roast pork or lamb. Also, we try to introduce our guests to local traditions and folk customs.” (42 years old man)

Our interview subject participated in a training for pension managers, but his professional knowledge is based on his personal experiences acquired in Greece and England. He also attended a course on writing grant applications, so he does not hire an external expert for this job. He employs external manpower only for ancillary work and attaches great importance to his personal involvement in all activities. Establishing good personal relationships with his guests is his top priority, wherefore he always spends a great deal of time on being together with them. He takes advantage of every opportunity to talk with the guests and maintain personal relationships; he is always in charge of heading and directing the programmes, always in the focus of the experience situation, and always connecting the current experience situation with the personal career/way of life and the elements of the surrounding rural environment. In his opinion, this personal connection constitutes a guarantee that the guests will return or will recommend the pension to others – this is the basis for authenticity and creating trust. He sees the settlement and the region as a valuable asset, feels it is his own and presents it to the guests as his own. By his person, he represents a complex lifestyle certified on many levels and expanded in time and space.

The examples analysed are indicative of the crucial role personal content has in the creation and operation of businesses. Entrepreneurs are seeking uniqueness that can be connected to their personality and family, and they do not follow operational standards. Adopting unique, creative solutions brings to the fore the bricolage solutions linked to the different situations. Their operation is rather activity-centred and only secondarily product-centred. Many elements of their activity address the immediate social environment, their goal being to ensure immediate transparency, a personal, trust-building representation.

6. Summary

The paper at hand investigated how changes in the role of agriculture appear in the practice and interpretations of the most important actors, i.e., the innovative agricultural entrepreneurs, of the regional presence of the new rural development paradigm. We emphasized the sociohistorical specificity of this process. Further, the major processes related to this topic were summarily presented, indicating the diversity as well as the situation-dependent, ephemeral, and contradictory nature of these processes. Our interview-based research conducted among innovative agricultural actors led us to the conclusion that changes in the relationship between agriculture and society can be demonstrated at two levels among these actors. At a discursive level, the normative, sentence-like forms of stressing change can be recorded. On a practical level, it can be observed that innovative agricultural producers do their best to live up to the new social expectations and needs by making their activities unique and personal and through the emphatic integration of their personality into the particular agricultural activity. This personalization practice gives the entire innovative activity a unique character, however, rendering it at the same time contingent and conferring upon it low formality as well as an ephemeral character, while it may also constitute a barrier to growth, networking, and embeddedness into the social environment.

7. Discussion

What kind of rural development trends will characterize those peripheral post-socialist rural regions that were the target areas of state modernization interventions prior to the 1989 regime change, but where the process was not taken further after 1989? A further defining attribute of the Szeklerland area is that throughout its peculiar social history it has developed defensive, survival strategies against external interventions, and these have proved to be effective in many cases (e.g., ignoring the modernization process conveyed by collectivization). Nowadays, modernization is not an intrusive process and has no authority in the background, yet we can see preventative measures taken against the new rural development paradigm as a global effect. What kind of countryside is being constructed in this confusing and multi-stakeholder process? What kind of support policy should be adopted in such a situation? The questions are open, and a series of professional analyses is necessary, especially with regard to the present-day role of the habits and cultural backgrounds developed over the course of the sociohistorical processes.

The examined area shows that bottom-up innovations are in a peculiar situation. There is no regional policy or institutional framework as yet that would selectively support and reinforce the innovative components of these agricultural enterprises. The LEADER action groups organised in Szeklerland since 2011 have been innovating through the European way of operating and support practices. However, due to operational difficulties, this innovation potential is not yet being exploited to any significant extent (Biró, Magyar, 2013). From the point of view of innovative agricultural enterprises, the funding opportunities under the LEADER Programme resulted in more focused developments, and thus less structural change at the regional scale (Biró, Magyar, 2019). Although subsidization practices are a reality, they are targeting exclusively the manufacturing of innovative products and not the support of producing the innovative components. What we can see is that innovations remain “stuck” at the level of uniqueness, do not become social-scale phenomena, and create a low regional impact. Most probably, the sociohistorical specificity is responsible for the fact we can only talk about “hidden” innovation with respect to this region, about a particular type of innovation potential of the rural areas (Alpek, Oláh, 2021; Shearmur, 2011, 2015), which might exploit the interference of global effects and intrinsic features but only in a unique, creative way and on a small scale. Analysis results suggest that the legitimation processes of the innovative initiatives remain within the context of the local society, and the social impact of these initiatives takes effect at the level of small-scale local social structures, to a very restricted degree. The core idea of hidden innovation in the studied case is that this might represent a significant element due to several factors such as embeddedness, social impact, the great number of personal components, and the depth of involvement into economic activities, but its social radiation does not go beyond the scope of locality. As a matter of fact, we are facing an unplanned rural development process taking place parallel to and completely independent of the planned rural development process that is based on infrastructural and other official grant applications (Eversole, 2021). There are reasonable grounds for believing that in the operation of these and other similar parallelisms such sociohistorical specificities are given a role that receive less emphasis in professional approaches drawing attention to convergence and competitiveness. The case of Szeklerland, but most probably also that of similar regions in a peripheral situation, calls for numerous professional analyses in order to deliver professionally informed responses to the contradictory, delayed catching-up processes taking place in these areas.

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