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ATTEMPTS FOR BUILDING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN RURAL AREAS. SLOW FOOD PRESIDIA EXAMPLE

Abstract: The aim of this article is to observe the way in which global ideas of the Slow Food movement for sustainability and preservation of food biodiversity are perceived and translated at local level. The study examines different models and strategies of livelihoods in rural areas such as traditional ways of food production and alternative tourism focusing on the family role in the process of establishment, implementation and maintenance. The perceptions of locals towards the ideas of Slow Food and local products are presented. Crucial for building sustainable livelihoods are personal resources, entrepreneurial vision and government regulations to traditional homemade foods.

Keywords: sustainability, rural areas, livelihoods, Slow Food movement, family enterprises

Introduction

Globally resource depletion and achievement of sustainable development are problems of increasing importance, so much as international organizations, governments and scientist are prompted to seek solutions. Bulgaria is also a part of these processes and the ideas of sustainability along with the global trends were introduced by the main actors, particularly international and national NGOs. Some of them try to import ideas and models representing their perception of sustainable development in rural areas which could eventually prevent their depopulation and lead to their revitalization. As EU member, the country can benefit from different funds and financial support is available.

Development of rural areas is among the priorities of the European Union. According to the 2013 Report of Rural Development in EU these areas represent 52% of its territory and 23% of its population. They are supported by Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which provides subsidies in two main ways –

direct payments and common organization of the markets (I-st pillar of CAP) and rural development policy (II-nd pillar of CAP). The data for Bulgaria outlined in the Rural Development Program 2014-2020 shows that rural areas consist of 81% of the territory and 39% of the population. On European level these regions need to deal with a number of challenges such as depopulation, ageing, preservation of cultural landscape and demand for recreation spaces (Sutherland et al. 2015: 2). In this context environmental protection and livelihoods are closely intertwined and become an important factor in the attempts for sustainable development in rural areas.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how global ideas and models of Slow Food (SF) in development of rural areas were introduced, constructed and implemented by local actors. The study examines three of SF Presidia and livelihood strategies of locals focusing on the family role in the process of establishment, implementation and maintenance. The research poses the following questions: what is SF impact in rural development, to what extent global ideas are adopted by local people, what are their cultural representations of these processes, do these policies create real benefits for local people and what are obstacles they faced in attempts for building livelihood strategies. This research started in 2013, within the scope of my doctoral thesis¹. Building on my previous findings, I focus here on the role of family in creating sustainable livelihoods in rural areas². It is based on ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews, conducted during the period 2013-2018 with main actors who promote global ideas for environmental protection – the SF organisation and locals who try to accomplish sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. All names of respondents have been changed and all translations of the interviews are my own.

Theoretical framework

Global environmental discourse

In this study I follow Kottak's understanding of new ecological anthropology which is located at "the intersection of global, national, regional, and local systems, studying the outcome of the interaction of multiple levels and multiple factors" (Kottak 1999: 23). Global environmental discourse is becoming increasingly important in Bulgaria. Kay Milton defines it as transcultural which is not tied to any particular group or location, but flows across cultural boundaries within a global network of communication (Milton 1996: 170). She also gives a definition of environmentalism as "a concern to protect the environment through human effort and responsibility" and as "a type of cultural perspective" – a particular way of understanding the world and as such it "has implications for,

¹ See my doctoral thesis *Environmental Movements in Post-socialist Bulgaria. Cultural Practices and Civil Activity*, January 2017, IEFsEM-BAS.

² This research is funded by the Program for Support of Young Researchers and PhD Students at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

and is expressed in, the things people do” (Milton 1996: 33). In this sense taking action in building sustainable livelihoods in rural areas fits well in Milton’s definition of environmentalism. As Duijzings notes, globalization is not simply an imposition from above; it also includes processes of negotiation, hybridization and co-constitution that involve both global and local actors (Duijzings 2013:18) and I am interested in the issue of the “cultural friction” arising out of encounters and interactions between global and local cultural perspectives (Tsing 2005).

Sustainable development and sustainability

The term receives its first official definition in the UN Report “Our Common Future” (1987), namely “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 41). Subsequently, sustainable development is becoming an official policy that follows principles and recommendations for action formalized in various documents and agreements. According to the anthropologists Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet, the general aim of sustainable development – something that is specifically important for the general idea of ‘sustainability’ involved finding strategies to promote economic and social development in ways that avoided environmental degradation, overexploitation and pollution. According to the authors, since the 1980s, sustainability has been defined as the integration of environmental, economic and social dimensions towards responsible management of natural resources. They summarize that environmental sustainability refers to sustain nature or natural resources for humans and for nonhuman species, social sustainability promotes equality, health and human rights, and economic sustainability refers to sustain people’s welfare, equitable division of resources (Kopnina & Shoreman-Ouimet 2015: 4-11). Carl Maida also perceives sustainability as concept that holds social, economic, and environmental factors within human communities, which must be viewed interactively and systematically (Maida 2011:1).

Sociologist Andreas Neef emphasized on the combination of social, economic and environmental dimensions for achieving sustainable development in rural areas, too. Those aspects along with the sustainable rural livelihoods are essential for enhancing global food security, for protecting water resources and preserving agricultural ecosystems and biodiversity. For Neef there are two opportunities for sustainable development in rural areas. The first one is their funding from the Common Agricultural Policy, and the other is the development of community-based marketing approaches or cooperative producer associations that offer their products on the market together. To these two possibilities he adds one more – encouraging the revitalization of rural areas and recognizing that they can provide services to society that exceed food production. These

include social, cultural, environmental services such as preservation of natural and cultural heritage, entertainment and much more (Neef 2015: 317-320).

Kopnina and Shoreman-Oiomet think that the big question is how to be sustainable. According to them sustainability is not easy to achieve because “requires information and knowledge that individuals, societies, governments or corporate stakeholders either do not possess, only partially possess, do not want to accept or act upon, and / or cannot afford” (Kopnina&Shoreman-Oiomet 2015: 5). Joshua Lockyer and James Veteto go even further in claiming that “the widely promoted concept of sustainability” as “ultimately utopian in nature; it is the good state that we must strive for but may not actually exist except in theory... Despite our best efforts, we do not know exactly what a sustainable society looks like” (Lockyer&Veteto 2013: 1). According to Kay Milton human beings have no ‘natural’ propensity for living sustainably with their environment (Milton 1996: 222). In his article Luke Smyth draws attention to distinctive characteristic of the anthropological critique of sustainable development – “the argument that sustainable development projects often fail to primarily serve the interests of target communities, and instead conform largely to the desires and expectations of the involved external stakeholders, such as foreign donors, non-governmental organisations, and the state. This can be explained through sustainable development’s particular attention to environmental concerns; this results in the dominant discourse of sustainable development privileging etic perspectives in such projects, and discounting local knowledge” (Smyth 2011: 78).

Sustainable livelihoods

Over the past few decades Ian Scoones considers livelihoods perspective as central in discussions about rural development. According to him different approaches have offered diverse insights into the way complex, rural livelihoods intersect with political, economic and environmental processes (Scoones 2015: 1-6). In his work Scoones cited the most common definition which is also a starting point of development of “sustainable livelihood approach”: A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base (Conway and Chambers 1992: 6, cited in Scoones 2015: 6).

Rebuilding of connections between culture and nature. Ecocultural revitalization projects.

Different strategies of livelihoods can be considered as ecocultural revitalization projects and thus the importance of introducing the term. Sarah

Pilgrim and Jules Pretty believe that rebuilding of connections between nature and culture is an essential prerequisite to addressing the many global economic, ecological, social and cultural challenges and would lead to long-term health of both human and ecological systems. They think that the division between nature and culture is not universal and in many cases is a product of modern industrial thought, shaped by the need to control and manage nature. According to them, even when considered as a dichotomy, it is clear that nature and culture converge on many levels that span belief systems, social and institutional organizations, norms, stories, knowledge, behavior, languages, and as a result exists a mutual feedback between cultural systems and the environment, with shifts in one commonly leading to changes in the other. Pilgrim and Pretty formulate their thesis that resilience can be at its strongest when connections are maintained or rebuilt, and when human and biological systems act together. In their view, biodiversity is now a recognized prerequisite to ecosystem health and resilience, as well as an essential precondition to sustainable livelihoods, human health and many other social objectives (Pilgrim& Pretty 2010: xii-xiv; 1-2).

Pilgrim, Samson and Pretty think that ecocultural revitalization projects are a good opportunity for rebuilding connections between nature and culture. Typically, non-industrial communities in a number of locations are taking action to reclaim or maintain their unique beliefs and practices through these projects, which ranging from hunter-support schemes and local food policies to language initiatives and ecotourism. According to them all revitalization projects share a similar objective: to maintain or reclaim the culture of local peoples and reconnect them to the land for long-term individual and societal health (Pilgrim et. al 2010: 237).

Post-productivism

At this point it is important to introduce another essential concept for better understanding the processes in rural areas – post-productivism. According to Almstedt et. al it is as an idea and political ambition rather than an imperative and irreversible change of rural economic activity (Almstedt et al. 2014: 297). It is also “a discourse in public policy about moving rural places away from primary production and towards the ‘new economy’”. The authors are trying to define post-productivism in comparison to productivism. While the latter refers to intensive farming with high inputs and high yields, post-productivism is “an approach to farming that is environmentally sensitive, not predicated on high yields and where farmers may look to non-agricultural use of their land and resources to supplement their incomes” (Almstedt et al. 2014: 299). According to Vasiliki Galani-Moutafi, “rural” is no longer equated with agriculture or productive activities, considering that the latter are often modified, abandoned or replaced by commodification processes associated with new mobility patterns and opportunities for entrepreneurial activity as well as the (re)valorization of

resources (agro-food products, landscapes and cultural heritage). She thinks that new trends related to leisure patterns, tourism and commodification practices relying on the consumption of signs, spectacles, experiences and information, entail a recapturing of the “rural” and the “local” (Galani-Moutafi 2013: 104).

The Bulgarian context

In Bulgaria, the political shift to democracy in 1989 marked the beginning of a new era of profound economic and social transformations, defined by Radost Ivanova as “commensurate only with the most extreme periods in our history” (Ivanova 1997: 5). It led to “the seeking of new roads... where everyone should walk alone, at their own risk” (ibid.). In this period there were two opposite trends in the relationship between the village and the city. On the one hand, as Milena Benovska-Sabkova notes, the connection with the village is not lost. People with “urban professions”, young families, and pensioners keep on producing food for their own consumption (Benovska-Sabkova 2001: 251-252). Focusing on transformations under socialism in a Bulgarian village, Yana Yancheva, shows the process of depopulation as consequences of collectivization. Socialist modernization, have failed to achieve its goal and, thus, have “caused the depopulation of the villages” (Yancheva 2015: 474). Nadya Velcheva takes a different approach examining subculture in remote villages. She notes that those villages are gradually becoming a periphery of the city because of active migration (Velcheva 2009: 178). According to her the old structures of rural livelihoods are destroyed and not replaced with new ones leaving those who decided to stay in the villages with no perspectives. Velcheva thinks that the main problems in Bulgarian villages are related to low productivity in small-scale production and low interest in the growth of agricultural livelihood (Velcheva 2009: 188-189).

Meanwhile in the period 2000-2007 various programs and projects started aiming to integrate EU policies and to make farmers aware of the rural development programs, building capacity for sustainable land management and promoting activities that engage local communities in solving global environmental problems; sustainable agriculture and sustainable rural development. Some of the projects were funded by the Global Environment Fund and were implemented in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program. During this period Bulgaria as a country in the process of joining the EU also relied on the support of pre-accession assistance of the SAPARD program³.

Barbara Cellarius thinks that environmental management in former socialist-bloc countries has received considerable attention with the fall of the Iron Curtain. She also notes that biodiversity and conservation as a global priority has been imported into Bulgaria in the form of Western-supported projects (Cellarius 2004: 3).

³ For more details see *Programa za razvitie na selskite rayoni* (2007-2013), 82-92 p.

The case study of three villages in Bulgaria reflects precisely these processes, in particular the way in which ideas and activities of the SF movement impacts practices and representations of those who are locally involved with the project Presidia.

Main ideas and activities of SF International

The international NGO's philosophy is based on a view of a future world where everyone has the access and the opportunity to enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet. Their approach is based on a concept of food that is defined by three interconnected principles: *good, clean, fair*⁴. What is behind these three principles? The food should be *good*, which means that “flavor and aroma, recognizable to educated, well-trained senses, is the fruit of the competence of the producer and of choice of raw materials and production methods, which should in no way alter its naturalness”. *Clean* food means that “the environment has to be respected and sustainable practices of farming, animal husbandry, processing, marketing and consumption should be taken into serious consideration. Every stage in the agro-industrial production chain, consumption included, should protect ecosystems and biodiversity, safeguarding the health of the consumer and the producer”. *Fair* (food) refers to “social justice that should be pursued through the creation of conditions of labor respectful of man and his rights and capable of generating adequate rewards; through the pursuit of balanced global economies; through the practice of sympathy and solidarity; through respect for cultural diversities and traditions”⁵.

According to ideas of SF founder Carlo Petrini current agrofood system is unsustainable and has to be changed. He thinks that traditional food systems created and developed by local people are sustainable one. Petrini is convinced that these systems were provided livelihoods to most of the planet for centuries while maintaining environmental balance. Thus Petrini and organization's activists seek “sustainable methods of cultivation and processing of products” always with thought of “biodiversity conservation and preservation of local food and production traditions”⁶.

As Daniel Philippon summarizes all activities of SF are “focused on a single goal: fostering a specific kind of economic development intended to establish and promote food communities that share its values of quality food, made by small producers that use environmentally sustainable production methods and pay fair wages.” (Phillippon 2015: 10). Based on the above-mentioned principles one of the main activities of the organization is biodiversity preservation. For this purpose, in 2003, is founded SF Foundation for Biodiversity. The Foundation

4 See <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-philosophy/>

5 Slow Food Manifesto for Quality, available at https://www.slowfood.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Manifesto_Quality_ENG.pdf

6 For more details see Carlo Petrini, *Buono, pulito e giusto: Principi di nuova gastronomia* (2005). Quatations here are from Bulgarian translation.

aim is “to promote a model of agriculture that is based on local biodiversity and respect for the land and the local culture, is in harmony with the environment and aims to provide food sovereignty and access to good, clean and fair food for all communities”. It coordinates and promotes different projects through initiatives such as the Presidia, the Ark of Taste, African gardens, Chefs’ Alliances and Earth Markets. According to the understanding of the organization Presidia project has become “one of the most effective instruments to put SF’s politics on agriculture and biodiversity into practice”.⁷

The Presidia project began in 1999 and currently contains more than 500 Presidia and involves more than 13,000 producers around the world. The aim of Presidia is “to protect traditional products, traditional processing methods and rural landscape and ecosystems, all at risk of extinction, as well as safeguard native breeds and local plant varieties”. To set up a local Presidium it is necessary to meet two important conditions – environmental and social sustainability or clean and fair elements. The next steps are described in detail on official page on the Foundation. They include filling out application form with general information about the product or practice, letting know local SF entities about it and sending it to the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity. The second step is visiting by local coordinators, getting a clear picture of the situation and identifying the project’s potential and possible problems. The next step is to start working with all involved producers on drawing up production protocols following the guidelines and questionnaires that the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity has made available for different product categories⁸. The described steps supposed bottom-up approach where local community is active actor for creating Presidia. Is it the same process in Bulgarian case studies?

SF Foundation usually do not support Presidia projects directly through funding of product’s production. The support of international organization to local Presidia projects is realized through activities as organizing trainings, promotion and support, communication and creating a platform between producers and chefs, retailers, experts around the world⁹.

Slow Food Bulgaria

The global ideas of SF entered Bulgaria around 2004 through its main local activist – Maria, biologist, who works as associate professor at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She is president of the Association of SF Convivia in Bulgaria, the legal entity representing SF association in the country and member of the Board of directors of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity. Maria’s first meeting with the ideas of Slow Food occurred during a conference in

7 See <https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/en/what-is-the-foundation/>

8 See <https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/en/what-we-do/slow-food-presidia/how-is-a-slow-food-presidium-set-up/>

9 Information, published on official website of Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity <https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/en/what-we-do/slow-food-presidia/>

Florence about genetic resources where she presented her work. She liked the NGO's approach made connections with Italian activists. Maria wanted to bring Bulgarian local producers to the first Terra Madre Salone del Gusto in 2004¹⁰ but before that, she has to find the appropriate products and their producers. She describes this process as “very difficult”, because at that time now one in the country has ever heard about this organisation. According to her, local people couldn't understand what she and her fellows actually do and want. Maria thinks this is because Bulgaria does not have traditions in offering to the market local products with long history. For her, socialist regime is to blame for the current situation – “socialism forced the existing gap between people and land. It was when the land was taken from people and therefore the bond was cut down at once”. She thinks socialism and its “propaganda” is responsible for having treated peasants as “backward class” and “lower category people”, as opposed to “progressive proletariat who works in factories”. This is the reason why, according to her, “people working in rural areas are not proud of what they are doing, and if they do not appreciate the product they make, it is because they are not connected with it, its history and its traditions”.

Maria underlines the socio-economic context in Bulgaria is different from Italy where there is a long tradition in establishing labels and traditional specialties for different regions. “There [in Italy and France] everything is preserved... you know the name of the village where specific cheese has been produced for 200 years”. In Bulgaria you have not that kind of information because these products are mainly homemade and remain within family households. She again accuses socialist policies: “45 years everything [she speaks about food] is made according to the Bulgarian State Standard [and there are only] 2 types of cheese, 2 types of yellow cheese, 5 types of salami and the whole variety of products that is preserved in the other countries is not preserved here”.

The initial impetus for the development of the SF movement in Bulgaria came from the invitation to participate in Terra Madre Salone del Gusto. This is why the NGO's approach in Bulgaria could be defined as top-down because local entities of association are active actors who seek traditional homemade products that are not on display. Maria claims that they try to preserve what is still available as foods, ways of production and successful politics, so “people should continue the old practices and thus preserve the traditional way of living and livelihood”. Thus local organization follow international organization principles of work – on official page of the SF Foundation for Biodiversity they state: “We must not dwell on what we have lost, but focus on what we can still save”. SF support projects in Bulgaria in “different ways” but mainly by promoting its ideas and providing expert assistance. According to Maria local communities usually cannot appreciate how valuable it is to keep traditional foods and practices; it is pity that an outsider should have a better understanding of how much this is

¹⁰ International forum is held since 2004 in Turin, Italy and gathers producers and people, working in the field of gastronomy, food, globalization and the economy from around the world. Slow Food usually funds producers to participate in the forum and to sell their products.

worth. That statement may be true at the beginning of SF activities in Bulgaria but not now. At the current moment almost every village in the country organizes its own festival dedicated to some local and “traditional food”. These processes are part of the phenomena of the “re-invention of food” (Grasseni 2007) – a way of rediscovering and revaluing food as patrimony, as cultural heritage and as a catalyst of new forms of relationships and way of life (Grasseni 2012: 198). As we see in a case of Smilyan beans local people are active in creating and developing politics for their “re-invention”. SF tries to import new values to the way people perceive food and one model that should fit well in every context. As we will see the context is complex and every case has its own specificities.

According to Maria important role for difficulties in implementation of SF politics has Bulgarian state. Many respondents with whom I speak talk about “the state” which represents Bulgarian administration, politicians and politics. Maria shares that “the state is not well-disposed – does not create conditions for people to start small business in agriculture sphere or in the processing of some products”, “in general small people in countryside do not exist for our state”. She says that “it is very difficult to motivate people to continue” to grow or produce certain product because there are regulations that create obstacles to sell legally some of the products. As we will see in the case of the Green cheese European regulations and their implementation from Bulgarian administration are among the main reasons for the cancelling of this product project. As Petar Petrov notices farmers are particularly “sensitive” to Europe because their activities and incomes strongly depend on both, the European Union requirements and state subsidies. Farmers address critics not only to EU agrarian policies, but also to their implementation in Bulgaria (Petrov 2018: 21).

Analyzing problems of implementation of global ideas, Daniel Philippon notices that “the problem with ideologies is that they rarely reflect the reality on the ground, which is more varied and complex than any generalized system of ideas could ever hope to represent” (Philippon 2015: 7). Seemingly in Bulgaria, SF encounters specific conditions, historical context and problems for each of its product projects (Presidia). Here will be presented three of the six Presidia supported in Bulgaria: the Smilyan Beans, the green cheese Tcherni Vit and the meat specialty Meurcha from Gorno Draglishte.

My fieldwork started long after SF had begun to work with producers in these villages.¹¹ In the three cases there are some common characteristics. The three villages are located in the mountains, two are along rivers. The village of Smilyan is located 13 km south of Smolyan in the Rhodope, while Tcherni Vit is 17 km away from the town Teteven, in the Central Balkan. Gorno Draglishte is located in the foothills of Rila Mountain, about 10 km from the big ski resort Bansko. Despite the similar micro climates the three products and Presidia have different ways of development.

¹¹ My fieldwork in Smilyan and Cherni Vit was held in 2013 and in Gorno Draglishte – in 2018.

Smilyan beans

Smilyan beans (in Bulgarian “smilyanski fasul”) are produced in the villages following the upper valley of Arda river and their name originates from the biggest village by the river – Smilyan. According to information given by locals, these beans “grow well” only in this closed mountain area, covered by small farmlands. This location is a factor for the natural selection of the seeds – knowledge was preserved by families, and is passed from generation to generation. Parceling of the land is another important prerequisite for SF. Therefore to this day, people use exclusively manual techniques to grow the beans, with no mechanical help because machines cannot be used in these small plots of farmland. This contributes to preserve the old way of growing beans with not huge quantity of production but with high quality. According to locals and experts there is another unique side in growing the beans – during the sowing a combination of several different crops are planted alternatively – for example a row or two of beans, several rows of potatoes, a row or two of beans, etc., there could also be corn. Whereas nowadays this type of seeding has a scientific explanation (different crops take different minerals from the soil), the local population has found it from their own experience. The uniqueness of Smilyan beans, according to experts, is determined by its composition and quality¹², and for the locals it is revealed mostly in its taste – “it’s more delicious”, “it differs in taste qualities”, they say.

My research shows that locals are proud of the product and in 2003 they followed the initiative of then newly elected mayor Stefan and decided to organize Smilyan beans Festival. As he states: “Smilyan beans actually made our village famous and we owe them at least some sort of advertising... I’ll tell you that if in our small Bulgaria every region advertises what it makes best, maybe things will be different”. During my fieldwork the former mayor was one of the activists trying to establish policies for popularizing the region. He also considers that Smilyan beans in restaurants’ menus could be an additional attraction for tourists. Stefan could be defined as a “keeper of tradition”, the most important for him is to preserve the way of growing – “I want my grandchildren to keep growing Smilyan beans as my grandmother did”. He thinks that the idea is not to produce big quantities - “we do not want to make plantations of beans” but to have beans for friends and connoisseurs and for selling. According to Stefan, SF supports local community in preserving Smilyan beans mainly through promotion and funding for travelling to Tera Madre meetings. He also shares that organization does not finance directly producing of beans and only supports project of creating special labels which certify origin of the product and aim to stop its falsification.

The activist is Dimitar - the chairman of SF Presidium. He presents a different picture of SF intervention in region. According to him the SF’s role for preserving Smilyan beans is significant. He says that organization support them

¹² Smilyan beans are catalogued by the Institute of Plant Genetic Resources K. Malakhov – Sadovo and they have entered the National Gene Bank as a plant genetic resource.

financially for creating labels, for participate of Tera Madre and for experience exchange – “we were invited many times in SF cooperatives’ network to see how this system works in the word. Ot can work here as well”. Smilyan beans Festival was initiated by SF, after the Municipality decided to support it. Some local people headed by SF wanted to lunch a Festival of food with the participation of producers of the upper valley of Arda river while others prefer the Festival remains as it was. Dimitar thinks that new ideas could hardly be imposed to local people. In general, tourists can get information about accommodation and landmarks in village municipalities which make me to conclude that the area is being promoted as a whole destination.

Dimitar admits that not all local people adopt ideas of SF because “it is a typical Bulgarian feature – it is very difficult for people to assume that someone helps them unselfishly”. He shares that around 10 producers who were funded from SF to participate in Tera Madre to sell their beans began to perceive “Smilyan beans as unique product” and “after they came back [from Italy] they began to follow the rules and advices gave them [from SF]”. Dimitar hopes “the things will work” but the implementation of SF ideas will take time “because people in Rhodope are conservative and slowly adopt new things”. My fieldwork also shows that locals associate SF mainly with the Terra Madre forums where they have presented and sold their beans but they do not adopt the philosophy.

According to Maria local people perceive the product “just as beans ... its only beans, nothing more”. She means that they do not perceive “food [in this case – Smilyan beans] as emanation of culture of the place”. She considers that growing of given crops or producing a given food specialty is a result of complex relationships through the years between people and environment – in this case more precisely soil and climate conditions. Locals expect from SF presence different kind of benefits – popularizing the area, additional attractions for tourist services and a source of financial support for family. The process of “re-invention of food” (Grasseni 2007) began before SF arrives and in this case as the study reveal local people appreciate the product. At the current time I cannot define them as conservative and slowly adopting new things, and yet they subscribe to another global idea such as the importance of clean food with no pesticides, and the common tendency of returning to the more natural ways of growing crops: “Our beans are ecologically clean, they are different, and the seeds are different. After all we have to go back to authenticity”.

According to Dimitar, almost every month people from Italy are coming to buy Smilyan beans which supports local economy because Italians buy it on a higher price, with the aim to stimulate producers. He is convinced that people started growing more beans after SF intervention in the region. According to him people now can sell their product on higher prices¹³ because there is a demand throughout the whole year. In June, producers claimed that at this time of the year they have already sold their beans and have some left only for gifts and guests. In this case we see how, the higher price determines the turning of “typical and local products into new types of luxury commodities” (Grasseni 2012: 202).

13 In 2013 Smilyan beans was sold around 8-10 leva for kilogram.

Does SF succeed to create specific kind of economic development for local communities? My research shows that growing Smilyan beans is not sufficient for making a living and in many cases these are small family enterprises. All activities are kept in the family and that, on one hand, helps to preserve the traditional techniques. But on the other hand, locals cannot increase quantity of beans production in order to achieve economic sustainability. First, because of the specific conditions in the mountain area and more precisely the small plots, and second because people perceive the crop as only supporting the family budget: “If someone thinks that you can become rich with these beans, that is not true... we want to preserve the [traditional] way of production, in contrast with everything else that has become commercialized in the globalized economy“; „beans have greatly helped me to support my children [while they are students]... beans support your family not only as an income but also as food“; „it’s not the sole occupation for anyone, it is a risky production because there’s a chance for no harvest at all”.

According to Dimitar the income from beans production is not enough for the whole year and it is also unstable – “you can produce maximum 500 kilograms, that are 2 acre... no one has more land [than 2 acre]” such quantities of beans “provide you around 4 thousand leva per year” – not sufficient for making a living.

Stefan says that there is no support for producers willing to grow beans as main agricultural activity. They have to do it along other activities “it does not require all your attention, and all of your time”. People I met have other major sources of incomes. They cannot hire seasonal worker and rely on the unpaid labour of family members. Producers develop direct connections with consumers and usually sell their production very quickly. In general, they do not encounter difficulties in selling their product.

These data leads to the conclusion that Smilyan beans cannot secure economically sustainable livelihood. Along with small plots of land families need to rely on their own resources for funding the production because according to information of former mayor Stefan Smolyan municipality and all its other small municipalities are not stated as rural areas in official documents and respectively are not eligible within the system EU funds such as SAPARD and the Rural Development Program¹⁴. The other issue is that the border checkpoint with Greece is not opened yet. This affects the development of tourism as a whole because people cannot travel easily between the two countries and combine different tourist attractions. Locals complain also that „the state” does not support enough small producers and subsidies cannot reach real people who actually produce food. According to Dimitar the state creates many norms and rules that make obstacles for small-scale producers. For example agricultural insurances registering farmers oblige them to pay “so much” that they have to work almost all the year only for that.

¹⁴ More about “culture of projects” and implementation of Common Agricultural Policy in Bulgaria see in Petrov, Petar, Ivanka Petrova (sast.) 2018. Agrokulturni transformatsii v usloviyata na evropeizatsiya i globalizatsiya. Sofia: IK „Gutenberg“.

To this I can add another important problem for locals – over the years Smilyan beans have gained wide national popularity resulting in numerous falsifications of its name by selling large quantities labelled “Smilyan” in various parts of the country and in stores that practically cannot be produced in the upper valley of Arda river¹⁵. To protect the name they decided to register two legal trademarks in Patent Office in Bulgaria – for geographical region and name trademark “Smilyan” since 2007. Another initiative, supported by SF local organization, is to design a special label in order to guarantee quality and origin of beans from this region. The name and the phone number of the producer are also provided. This stimulates direct sales and could lead to the “reconnection” of producers with their clients; consumers with product-process-place and finally people with nature (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 28-33). At this stage we can consider that the reconnection with the place of production is established despite above-mentioned attempts for falsifications. Consumers are in general able to distinguish Smilyan beans from others.

In 2015 Bulgarian member of the European Parliament Momchil Nekov in collaboration with SF Bulgaria started a campaign under the motto “Protect the Bulgarian Taste”. Smilyan Beans are among the promoted products with potential to candidate for EU quality labels¹⁶ in order to be protected from falsifications. The procedure is in progress and meanwhile locals have built a factory for legal packaging Smilyan beans – an idea dating back to 2013. Lately (October 2018) the website agronovinite.com informed that the procedure for EU quality label continue, and locals in now growers from 21 villages have made an association engaged in defending the Smilyan beans label.

These dynamic testifies of the importance of the product and the existing awareness of its potential that have emerged prior to the intervention of SF Bulgaria. As local people stated many times during my fieldwork they have always grown this sort of beans and will continue. In order to reach sustainability families have to combine agriculture with tourism and search different strategies for livelihood. As Vihra Barova stated in her research in the same region “farmers cannot afford to develop their activity independently from tourism... rural tourism is one of the channels for exchanging local products and services”.

Cherni Vit green cheese

Unlike Smilyan beans, the SF’s “invented tradition” of “the Bulgarian” green cheese¹⁷ from Tcherni Vit did not last long. The recipe was first

15 According to data from the local Presidium coordinator not more than 25 tons per year are produced.

16 For more information see https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/food-safety-and-quality/certification/quality-labels_en

17 The cheese is made from row sheep’s milk, which after hardening is covered with mold. Unlike countries with traditions in producing such cheese like Switzerland, Italy, and France where most dairy products are artificially infected with fungi, in Tcherni Vit Green Cheese they are a product of abiogenesis. Humidity and the specific mild climate

“rediscovered” in 2007 during a SF International expedition, while seeking new and “unique foods” to be included in their global network. This product started gaining popularity after an intervention from the international organization. Its uniqueness according to SF lies in the natural formation of green mold on the surface of white cheese, placed in wooden barrels. The driving force for the product development were again, as the case in Smilayan, the former mayor Todor and his wife Kalina who embraced the SF ideology and its attitude toward food. According to their words at the beginning a major problem was that the recipe for production had not been saved and local experience on the technique and passing knowledge from generations were not available. Todor made more than 40 interviews with older residents of the village trying to find how the product was created and the answer he always received was – “it just happens”. He also said that for the villagers it was all a “matter of accident”, because according to them mold is due mostly to the wooden barrels. After numerous researches conducted for more than 3 years with internationally renowned cheese specialist, consultant of SF International, the “recipe” for obtaining green mold has finally been “revealed”. In addition to the specific climate conditions, another important ingredient is the milk composition, while the barrels do not play a significant role. However, this product is not appreciated by the local population. “It’s something that has just appeared – some like it, others throw it away”. Even though leading components here are the researches by specialists rather than local knowledge, Todor is glad “we have resurrected a technology [for making cheese], dating back from the early 20th century, and it has turned out to be the best”. Interviews with locals and data from official websites about green cheese drive to the conclusion that in this case it is about an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawn 1983). Apparently that is not single case as Philippon notices “SF has faced a number of critiques that it is nostalgic for a mythologized “local” and has invented food traditions at least as much as it has preserved them” (Philippon 2015: 10).

As Todor and Kalina shares, thanks to the green cheese and by actively targeted advertising they also promoted their village. In two of the Presidia I analyze the name of the village is part of the product’s name and thus, not only the food is advertised, but also the villages it originates from. “Back then I created a policy for the village”, he said, referring to the period when he was the mayor. Local people understand very well what he was doing and according to him there is an effect. Now, visitors of the village ask for the green cheese, after the media campaign started in 2013: “the state is doing its job when creating conditions for developing tourism dedicated to certain product and tourists to have possibility

are other factors for the appearance of green mold. Large temperature differences during day and night are also determined from experts as an important condition to the formation of green coating on dairy products. Milk quality is also essential. Premise here is that this region has preserved herds of Teteven indigenous sheep breed mixed with Karakachan sheep, and so the protein composition of milk is different than in the other areas of the country.

not only to taste green cheese but to buy it legally”, states the couple of local entrepreneurs.

The main problem for this SF project is that the cheese is made from unpasteurized milk and which is against current legislation. At the time when green cheese was “rediscovered” and promoted the implementation of European legislation and regulations for such kind of dairy products was at the very beginning. The national policy in Regulation 26 that governs direct deliveries of small quantities of raw materials and food from animal origin was criticized by many producers and NGO sector that it had tough requirements applicable mainly to large manufacturers. According to Todor, the Bulgarian state authorities do not support small-scale dairy producers to register their production officially because it is easier to control 2 or 3 big dairy farms instead of 350 small-scale producers. Different experts mainly from NGO sector denounce this lack of flexibility in implementation of national and European legislation. The Regulation was changed several times until it finally met the requirements of small-scale dairy producers, due to the active participation of NGOs in the process. After these changes many of them started to be supported by the project “For the Balkan and the People”¹⁸ and registered their dairy production. The aim of the project is to show that it is no so tough to register officially since the changes within the Regulation. Their support of the farmers is not only financial but also expert assistance – explanation of every step in the process of registration. Some of the registered producers succeed to create sustainable livelihoods.

Todor created a network of around 10 producers but after inspection from the state authorities¹⁹ in 2012, locals stopped producing green cheese. He shares that state authorities “scared the local people by telling them that they were doing an illegal activity, and actually made them give up. It is a nightmare - that feeling of being a criminal in your own country, it is unbelievable”. After the inspection they tried to register small-scale dairy farm but instead of explanation they received a list of regulations referring to cow milk, not even to sheep and goat milk. Additionally, the production of this specific cheese has to take place in an ordinary dairy farm, which, according to activists, will contrast with the whole idea of a homemade product. Todor is convinced that production of homemade green cheese has to be authorized: “It is the only way for people to start producing and to be proud of their work”. He believes that positive changes in the legislation would boost production, sufficient for make a living.

The couple of activists, now the only remaining producers of this cheese is very grateful for SF initiative to rediscover and communicate about this product – “without their support we probably couldn’t have done it. They have made us aware of what we have here and that is extremely valuable. They have given us

¹⁸ The purpose of the project is the same as Slow Food’s Presidia project – to help local communities make fair living from nature while preserving it in a sustainable way, see Report of the project, available at <https://www.bioselena.com/public/files/news/315/files/135.pdf>

¹⁹ The inspection is made by Bulgarian Food Safety Agency.

the opportunity to meet many people from around the world who appreciate what we have done”. In 2013 Todor and Kalina were fully subscribing to SF discourse. My impression from meeting with them is that they perceive preserving green cheese as a cause and want to show to other locals that they could build successful livelihood through producing it. The family has other jobs and making green cheese is not their main economic activity. Todor was most active during the time when he was mayor but then, as he shared, he found another “more normal cause”. They also connect producing of cheese with development of local tourism.

Currently, a small quantity is produced as special tourist service for the local hotel and special degustation.

Meurche from Gorno Draglishte village

Another product protected by SF Presidium is meurche (in Bulgarian “nafpavok” – dry-cured porc meat encased in pig’s bladder). Diana, who is the coordinator of this Presidium project shares that SF has a key role for preserving the production of meurche which otherwise would have disappeared. According to her in the past every family raised pigs and made this special cured meat and it was normal part of people’s activities. People here do not perceived it as something special and unique until outsiders started to appreciate it as such. Producing meurche is an expensive and long process because it is made from the best cuts of the pig – lard, leg and shoulder, then it has to dry in the attics during four months in the winter. After that it is preserved in ashes where it matures for up to 16 months. Traditionally it was consumed in special occasions until September at the end of the harvest season²⁰. Production of meurche is not officially registered but can be offered also for degustation in guest houses. Diana believes that the legalization will change the taste and it will lose its uniqueness: “It has always been so, for so many years it did no harm anyone, our ancestors were not so stupid to poison their families”. I think that the lack of regulations is the main reason why its production has not turned into a main economic activity for locals. The question is whether legislation would be sufficient to preserve a product and build sustainable livelihood.

Diana is a producer. Unlike the others she has already some business experience. It is important to note that she had another business and decided to change it by accident. However the preparation of meurche is not her main economic activity – incomes are not sufficient for making a living. Diana combines production with running a guest house together with her husband, sister-in-law and two retired women from the village. The guest-house is fully booked during the whole year and business is growing. Her family started by renting one room for guests and step by step developed the business till now when they have 5 rooms. Diana shares that she first pursued a training course about alternative tourism. In a neighboring village there is another owner of a guest house who also made a training course but she confess, her enterprise cannot provide enough

²⁰ For more details see <https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/en/slow-food-presidia/meurche/>

financing for making a living, so she needs to work additionally as a teacher. Diana's attitude toward food coincide with SF philosophy and it is obvious in dishes which she offers to tourists – local recipes, made from homemade products from her yard or provided by neighbors and associates, cooked slowly. She cooperates with other houses in the village where she sends tourists when her house is full, but visitors eat always at her place. Diana shares that she is not afraid of competition and thinks that it is “natural to work in a team”. Diana offers to her clients full services and “sells emotion”. In the house there is a small “museum” where guests can dress in traditional Bulgarian costumes or can learn some traditional crafts. Special program presents local customs and thus people are being carried “to [their] childhood, remembering what it was like in the past”. Grannies not only show crafts and customs but also have a special role as “animators” for guests – singing songs, telling stories and giving toasts. Diana is very active woman proud to speak and preserve also the local dialect. Locally, she is the leading force of the whole project. Everyone associates the village not only with meurche but with her personality. She claims that her successful business is based not only on experience but also because of her personality: “you can copy my house 100%, you cannot copy me. Guests don't need to only to be given a key and a bed, they want something more. The idea is to have entertainment, to do something different. We rely more on emotions and a kind of performance”. Diana shares that it is also significant to “know how to read and interpret what is written”. The last refers to the particular skill such as being able to listen and to understand recommendations and advices from different people and certifying organizations. According to her she succeeded because at the very beginning she met the “right guides”. Diana's house has the certificate “Green lodge” by the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism, which is a quality mark offering addresses of B&Bs and small hotels hosted by local people who give special attention to local nature and culture²¹. All this factors helped her to develop alternative tourism. She explains that she was not aware of the beauty of the mountains Rila and Pirin until her late 40s. In her opinion, Bulgarians need more time to change their attitude toward nature – “and I don't talk about 2 or 3 people, it's about everyone; we are still not mature enough to the idea”.

She is also a good communicator. Diana often participate in popular TV shows. The last she made was together with local grandmothers – the very popular TV show “The Farm” where they demonstrated to participants traditional crafts and dishes. Her team also represents Bulgaria on tourist exhibitions. Last but not least, Diana's clients recommend on websites the guest house to others. Her family entirely supports her. She and her husband work together and help each other. Their children have different jobs but also help in their spare time. Diana always says: “you will not get rich, but you will not die of hunger. It's good, as it is”.

The same attitude towards business has also another family in the village running a guest house. They also hope their children will continue this activity because this is worth doing. They do not rely on subsidies from EU funds but took

²¹ For more details see <http://www.baatbg.org/green-lodge/38/>

bank loans to restore the house. They have received only one grant from Global Environment Fund. All these families build strategy to develop their business step by step, without important initial investments. Another owner of guest house in a different location shares that “there is not a guest house which can make quickly profit and attract clients immediately”. This statement make me to conclude that alternative tourism can be defined also as “slow” business because it takes time for enterprises to become sustainable.

Conclusion

Slow Food ideas and models of creating specific economic development on local level cannot be defined by a single characteristic. The three case studies show their own specificities – different contexts, unequal resources, different cultural representations and livelihood strategies. It is clear that there is a discrepancy between the ideas which SF are trying to implement as models for sustainable rural development and the real outcomes that people realize in the attempts to build their livelihoods. The ways of production defined as sustainable in the past cannot create a secure livelihood for the people in these areas today. Every case has specific problems connected mainly with state politics and implementation of European regulation in Bulgaria. Yet, SF top-down approach is not enough to enable producers integrating this new philosophy. The three case studies show that producing activities cannot provide alone sustainable livelihoods and usually have to be combined with tourism. Other examples of entrepreneurial initiatives in Eastern Rhodope shows that some sustainability can be achieved through combination of several activities such as organic farming, nature conservation and ecotourism²². As we see from the analyses all case studies are initiatives of families but not all can grow into economic sustainable livelihoods.

The main impact of SF is to give awareness that food is a part of the culture and it can give identity to regions. But Bulgaria does not have long-term traditions in creating such policies in rural areas as Italy where the movement originated. However, case studies show that policies for popularizing places and regions through the products can succeed and there it is the beginning of a post-productivist transition in rural areas. In some cases locals have already recognized it but still have not expressed it in the terms of the organization and its ideas for sustainability. Speaking about global ideas such as sustainable agriculture and development, clean food and protecting environment are main aims of NGO's. Environmentalism as cultural perspective among locals in rural areas is still at the starting point.

22 See Stancheva 2018.

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