"Let's live my village", in search of the Wallonia countryside

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Do you think you live in the country or in the town? This apparently simple question reveals a lot about the criteria used to establish which of the above describes the place where a person lives. The ruralist geographer Serge Schmitz focuses his research on redefining the countryside. Through the call for projects "Live my village", he analyzes trends and fashions related to associative village life, village mentality and rurality.

The call for projects proposal "Let's live my village" was launched in 2012 by the Roi Baudouin Foundation, whose motto is "working together for a better society". This is the context in which it carried out the project "living neighbourhood" from 1997 to 2011, which encouraged inhabitants to participate in the life of their district. However, because it did not really mobilize villages and rural communities, the project mainly concerned the urban environment. From 2012 to 2014, it was therefore replaced by "Let's live my village" which supports the inhabitants of rural communes in Wallonia who become involved in the life of their village. The ambition is to motivate people to work together, to meet up and therefore increase social cohesion in the rural environment.

In order to select the most deserving projects, the Roi Baudouin Foundation called upon a jury made up of experts from different environments: representatives of the Rural Foundation of Wallonia, people involved in the Walloon Network for Rural Development, representatives of various non-profit organizations, and an academic, Serge Schmitz, who is Professor of Rural and Human Geography at the University of Liege.

Three calls for project proposals were launched, with 120,000 Euros available for each one. In total, the foundation received nearly 300 projects aiming to receive a maximum budget of 5,000 Euro. The selection criteria were: innovation, feasibility, participation, durability and improvement of the quality of life for the village.

Projects such as the creation of a G100 citizen's summit in the village or the creation of an interactive map of the commune were rewarded for their innovative character.

From a scientific point of view, participating in the selection of projects for "Let's live my village" constituted an opportunity for Serge Schmitz, who carried out his research on rural life in an on-site laboratory for the
analysis of places, landscape and European countryside (Laplec). The call for project proposals demonstrates
the dynamic initiatives that exist in parts of the countryside as well as the innovations put in place to create a
friendly environment in the village. An added interest of the project resides in the fact that a large database was
available which was not produced by the researcher. The study was based on analysis of forms spontaneously
filled in by citizens, which demonstrate what is lacking in the villages. As a member of the jury, Serge Schmitz
used participant observation to gather his data. In the context of his research on rural life, the geographer
therefore personally analyzes the 300 or so projects suggested by citizens (1).

**Rural or urban environment?**

In Belgium it is difficult to define rurality. Most definitions start with urban environment and then measure
different levels of urbanization. "It would appear that in fact there are very few country area left", explains Serge
Schmitz. From a sociological point of view, there is no more countryside: our lifestyles are the same, we all
watch the same television channels, and we consume the same goods... Some people draw the conclusion
that there is no longer any point in studying the rural environment. When outside Belgium, we still find places
that could easily be classed as being rural. In our country, it is becoming objectively very difficult to tell when
one goes from the urban to the rural. The indicators change over the decades as well. According to the OECD,
the density that defines a rural area is 150 inhabitants/km², which excludes most of the Flemish countryside.
While compiling an Atlas of Belgian countryside (2), we had to adopt different criteria to define the countryside
in the North of the country On the Flemish side; the indicator was 600 inhabitants/km² as opposed to 150 for
Wallonia. These indicators are therefore relatively subjective and depend a lot on the context. In the Asian
countryside where agriculture is intensive, the population density can be very high and the criteria are entirely
different".

The real question is therefore to know how to define whether one lives in the country or in the town. For 5
years, the laboratory has systematically added a question to all its surveys, whatever the subject: Do you think
you live in the country or the town? "People who live in Grimbergen near Brussels or Beaufays near Liege
also consider themselves to be living in the country. Even though these results are surprising, it is not up to
the geographer to decide whether they are right or wrong. The country is also a state of mind".

One question on the form particularly grabbed the attention of the geographer: "How does your association
operate in the country"? Being associated with a region that is considered to be rural, with the presence of
farmers, resorting to the number of inhabitants per km² or even explanations based on the distance of services
and public transport are all arguments mentioned by the participants to explain the rural nature of their project.
You could also read answers such as: "The commune of Corroy-le-Château is essentially rural, Quitens road
still has a working farm and various cropfields"; "Olne is a village with countryside that is typical for the Herve
region and is situated at the foot of the Ardennes. Its population density is relatively light: 239 inhabitants/km².
The slogan of our community is "Olne, rural and friendly". Moreover, we have a quite important number of
farmers in our village"; "In this village there are more cattle than people (around 1480 cattle for 736 people)",
etc.

**An increasingly professional approach**

In order to have their project taken into consideration, the candidates fill in a questionnaire in which they are
requested to supply some information on the association, financial information for the payment of a subsidy,
a project description, its objectives and its budget, etc. The way these forms are filled in makes it possible to draw conclusions about the nature of the candidates. The projects are both from non-profit organizations and de facto groups and their creation is often linked with the opportunity to receive funding within the context of this call for project proposals. The de facto groups can show difficulty in completing a somewhat administrative form, to the point where it is possible that this "cultural obstacle" could dissuade some "ordinary citizens" from taking part in the process. On the other hand, cultural centers or youth centers seem more skilled at filling in these types of documents, showing that there is an increasingly professional approach to the quest for funding.

Some projects are distinguished by the intervention of outside networks. In Wallonia, several structures offer their skills as well as tips for succeeding in getting funding (for e.g. Qualité Village Wallonie). These structures are also causing a cascading effect: a project that was funded during the first campaigns then tended to multiply similar suggestions for subsequent calls for projects (this was the case with collective vegetable gardens, for example). The different cases analyzed also demonstrate the fact that the state or commune is no longer the only body that inspires innovation in the villages. Citizens are themselves learning how to qualify for subsidies if they want to develop projects or benefit from certain services or activities.
Rediscovering the country?

Rural areas today have resorted to a series of functions that they had lost for a time. Up to the middle of the 20th century there was an exodus from the country to the towns where industrial and service industries were based. The only thing that is left of the country is agriculture. The motorways, the increasing means and mobility of households favor a return to the country, accompanied by a development of the service sector there. The economy is more residential: services (for e.g. schools, creches, hairdressers) are getting closer to the country and the country is less and less connected to the agricultural world. The attraction of the countryside depends a lot on the living environment and its green spaces which are cared for by the farmers whose numbers are decreasing steadily.

Among the projects proposed, many are related to public spaces, community gardens, the restoration of pathways, local history, festive events, and play areas for children, community houses or folklore theatres. Knowing full well that agriculture is what defines the country, citizens rarely, however, associate farmers with their village projects. In the context of "Let's live my village", only two projects out of the 300 suggested include farmers. One project, for example, suggests "rediscovering the farms that are characteristic of the four villages of Merbes-le-château from various perspectives (from a historical or children's viewpoint…) in order to reinforce the feeling of belonging and local identity by developing the rural character of Merbes-le-château". While it suggests giving information about life on the farm, this project neglects to request the farmer's point of view.

By way of contrast, collective vegetable gardens are growing. "This phenomenon was typically urban because the communal vegetable gardens aim to suggest a living space to workers that live in the towns, where they can get in touch with nature, meet or eat better food. Today, these communal vegetable gardens are invading the countryside which is quite paradoxical in an environment where the inhabitants normally have land and links with agriculture", argues Serge Schmitz. These projects demonstrate the development of the countryside and the distancing of the citizens from the land that was once the countryside.

Most of the projects suggested in the context of "Let's live my village" are far from the archetypal view of the country which was seen as being linked to agriculture. This is also the case for projects that aim to recreate public spaces. In most villages, there were no longer any public spaces. Only the church or the football field...
enabled the community to meet at certain times but the decline of religion and the diversification of sporting activities have rendered these places obsolete. Today, people are leaving villages more and more to work outside and the village school does not always exist. All these elements have created a demand for the creation of public meeting places in the village which itself had become a kind of dormitory or was simply dying. Many suggested projects were linked to the creation of meeting places, "to create a village feel".

The commission responsible for examining the candidacy received a lot of projects for recreation areas, far from the archetype of the countryside. "In the past, children played in the fields. Today, we need to create a safe playing area even though the playing area is already situated in the fields the woods or the surrounding countryside", notes Serge Schmitz.

Through these different examples one question appears: are we not reinventing the Belgian countryside? Today, having become periurban, the country is acquiring very particular needs linked to the residential economy and a population that is absent all day long. Requirements related to equipment - that were non-existent before - and new dynamics are becoming more and more glaringly obvious.

(1) The Call for project proposals "Let's live my village": between free interpretations and compulsory readings regarding innovation and convivial village ambiance in Wallonia. In "The Countryside: spaces of innovation in an urban world", Nantes, Spaces and Companies (ESO).