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Anna Brusarosco
**The Role of Italian NGOs
in Rural Reconstruction
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Anna Brusarosco holds a PhD in Geography from the Department of Geography of the University of Padova, Italy. Since 2011, Dr. Brusarosco teaches Human and Social Geography at the University of Padova. She has also studied Environmental Sciences at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice. She has cooperated with several Non Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organizations both in Italy and abroad. Her research interests focus on international development assistance and development education.

**The Role of Italian NGOs in Rural
Reconstruction in Bosnia**
**A geographical analysis of international
development assistance effectiveness**

Anna Brusarosco

Executive summary

The starting assumption of the research is that the Bosnian war (1992-'95) could be interpreted, from a geographical point of view, as a "de-territorialising" event, which implied the destruction of both immaterial and material components of the territory. The rebuilding process, which started with the Dayton Agreement, could then be read as a process of "re-territorialisation", in which the International Development Assistance system has intervened, among other actors, at different levels and in different sectors. The research focuses in particular on rural development, due to its relevance in Bosnia Herzegovina. The research has two distinct aims: the first is to identify and assess the territorial outcomes of five rural development projects realized by Italian NGOs in Bosnia Herzegovina, with the financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The analysis does not deal with a "classical" assessment of efficiency, effectiveness, impact, relevance and sustainability of projects. It rather focuses on a geographical reflection on the role of projects and of the external actors involved (primarily Italian NGOs and Italian Cooperation) in the rebuilding process of Bosnian rural territory, focusing on the modalities that have lead to the territorial outcomes. As for the second aim, the suggestions which emerged from the analysis have been contextualized in the wider debate on the role of International Development Assistance, in order to reflect upon how a geographical approach could contribute to improve its efficacy.

Introduction: objectives, analysis model and methodology

Considering territorialisation as the process through which humans build, use and make territory¹ evolve (Turco 1988), the starting assumption of the research² presented in this paper is that the Bosnian war (1992-'95) could be interpreted, from a geographical point of view, as a “de-territorialising” event, which implied the destruction of both immaterial and material components of the territory (e.g. infrastructures, buildings, industries, as well as social and administrative structures). The rebuilding process, which started with the Dayton Agreement in 1995, could then be read as a process of “re-territorialisation”, in which the International Development Assistance system has intervened, among other actors, at different levels and in different sectors. This intervention was developed during a period (the first decade of the 2000) when former approaches to development cooperation had been deeply debated, so the case of International Development Assistance to Southeast Europe offers an interesting case for assessing the effectiveness of the supposed improvement of these approaches.

The research focuses in particular on the sector of rural development, due both to its relevance for Bosnia Herzegovina³ and because this issue has been a priority in the strategies of Italian cooperation (governmental and nongovernmental) (Italian Cooperation Office 2008).

In conformity with the analysis model proposed by the Italian geographer Dansero (2008), which differentiates a geography “of” and “for” cooperation, the research had two distinct aims. The first one was to identify and assess the territorial outcomes of five rural development projects realized after the war by Italian NGOs in Bosnia Herzegovina, with financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The analysis does not deal with a “classical” assessment of efficiency, effectiveness, impact, relevance and sustainability of projects. It rather focuses on a geographical reflection on the role of projects and of external actors involved (primarily Italian NGOs and Italian cooperation) in the rebuilding process of Bosnian rural territory, focusing on the modalities that have lead to the territorial outcomes.

The research concentrates on the analysis of the deeds of actors involved in the projects, including territory, considering not only its physical components, but also its human ones. The research then takes into account the inclusion/exclusion of actors, their role, aims, intervention logics, the developed strategies, the action systems and the territorial outcomes of the case studies. This analysis model has

¹ We intend territory as the result of the application of human activity on a space, that is, on a stretch of land fitted out only with natural features.

² The paper presents the results of the PhD research elaborated by the Author entitled “Geografia e cooperazione: i progetti di sviluppo rurale della cooperazione italiana in Bosnia Erzegovina”, discussed at the Department of Geography of the University of Padua in 2011, under the supervision of Prof. Pierpaolo Faggi.

³ 80% of the Bosnian territory is considered as rural, as well as 60% of the population is esteemed to live in rural areas in accordance with the OECD criteria.

been developed by the researchers of the Department of Geography of the University of Padua (Bertoncin, Pase 2008), in order to study the impacts of hydraulic territorialisation in the Sahelian region and adapted by the Author to the specific case of rural development intervention in post-war Bosnia Herzegovina.

At a second level, the suggestions which emerged from the assessment have been contextualized in the wider debate on the role of International Development Assistance, in order to reflect on how a geographical approach could contribute to improve its efficacy.

From a methodological point of view, bibliographic research has been integrated with a qualitative analysis of project documents, web-site contents and with field work (semi-structured interviews with NGOs and governmental representatives, local partners, beneficiaries). The elements of success and of failure of projects, which emerged from the assessment, have then been a reference point for formulating suggestions in order to overcome the weaknesses of the International Development Assistance system.

Case studies

The research started from a survey to identify all the Italian interventions in the rural development sector after the war. Five of the projects identified were chosen as case studies, following two criteria. The selected projects needed to have been funded, in at least one of their phases, by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This criterion let us to exclude from the survey projects realized by decentralised cooperation, characterized by peculiar features. Furthermore, the case studies needed to be projects of NGOs that have been in Bosnia Herzegovina for several years – during and after the war – so they are revealing of a well-established presence on the territory of the leading Italian organisations, and put into evidence territorial outcomes of their action over a relatively long-term period. The selected projects are briefly described in Tab. 1.

Project	a. Promotion of agricultural systems with reduced environmental impacts in Bosnia Herzegovina	b. Protection and valorisation of high quality traditional products of Herzegovina	c. Raspberry of Peace / Support to the food farming chain of small fruits in Bratunac	d. Breza – Cooperation and development: support to local initiatives for rebuilding and development	e. Renovation of agricultural activities in family farms
Leading NGOs	Leader: CEFA (European Committee for Education and Agriculture). Partners: COSPE (Co-operation for the Development of Emerging Countries), ARCS (ARCI Culture and Development)	Leader: UCODEP (now OXFAM ITALY), Partner NGO: CEFA	ACS (Association of Cooperation and Solidarity)	Leader: Re.Te. Partner: CESVI (Cooperation and Development)	ITALIAN CARITAS
Location	Blagaj, Buna, Bijelo Polje (Municipality of Mostar), Stolac, Konjic, Popovo Polje area (Federation of Bosnia and	Municipalities of Nevesinje, Trebinje, Stolac, Mostar and Canton 7 Herzegovina Neretva	Bratunac	Municipality of Breza (Zenica-Doboj Canton, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Derventa, Bosanski Brod, Sanski Most, Oštra Luka, Bosanski Petrovac, Drinic, Ljubija, Prijedor, Prnjavor, Banja Luka,

	Erzegovina), Nevesinje and Trebinje (Srpska Republic)				Aleksandrovac
Duration	Projects elaborated in 2000, started in 2004 with an expected duration of 3 years, extended until 2010	3 years 2008-2011 (as continuation of previous interventions on the same area and the same sector)	3 years 2008-2011 (as continuation of previous interventions on the same area and the same sector)	Planned: 3 years 2007-2010 (as continuation of previous interventions on the same area)	2 years 2006-2007 (as continuation of previous interventions on the same area and the same sector)
General aims	To promote the introduction and diffusion of a sustainable production-sale chain for crops, involving individual and associated farmers	To improve living conditions of population, and sustaining and promoting traditional agriculture as income generating activity	To improve the quality of life in Bratunac, in particular for families composed by widows and poor families, and to encourage the restart of economic activities and of the social relationships between the populations of different ethnic groups	To improve the living conditions of the population in the Municipality of Breza (the project operates in different sectors): agriculture, education, environment, women)	To improve the quality of life and to strengthen the return of refugees in rural areas through starting and developing new agricultural activities, aimed at crop sale.
Specific objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To promote sustainability and profitability of agricultural activities; - To increase employment opportunities in the intervention area; - To hinder rural exodus; - To reduce the pressure on urban areas; - To support the return of young people in selected areas; - To introduce European productive standards and methodologies in agriculture, particularly in organic agriculture; - To increase technical knowledge and professionalism of farmers; - To increase crops quality; - To support the gradual approach of Bosnia Herzegovina to European Union; - To introduce European models 	To promote integrated rural development in Herzegovina through the valorisation of three local typical products (honey, cheese and wine)	To support families that produce small fruits and the cooperative for the production and the fruit manufacturing they have created	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To increase the employment opportunities and the income generation of members of the disabled association, women and young people living in the Municipality of Breza; - To improve the educational and environmental systems in the Municipality of Breza, through training for teachers and technicians. <p>The activities in the agricultural sector are part of the first objective.</p>	<p>The specific objectives are different for the various project phases:</p> <p>Phase 1. To acquire knowledge of the individual and collective situation of the members of the beneficiary families, related to the willingness to change.</p> <p>Phase 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To increase agricultural production thanks to training activities and donation of inputs. 2. To create added value at family level, selling the production surplus in the market. <p>Phase 3.</p> <p>To strengthen the productive processes (at each level) and the sell chain of crops</p>

	for cooperatives and to promote the potentiality among farmers; - To foster a wider environmental awareness in the agricultural sector; - To define a reference market for the organic products in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina				
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Geography of cooperation: assessment results

Context actors

Following the approach of a geography of cooperation, the results of case studies' assessment have led to an evaluation of the role of Italian NGOs in rebuilding Bosnian rural territory. Clearly, they cannot solve all the issues related to territorial rebuilding alone, and must be framed into a wider context, in which different actors contribute to the process. Therefore, the first step of analysis has been to identify and briefly discuss the main context actors, highlighting their strategies and approaches.

European Union rural policies, although they do not directly apply to the Bosnian territory, are one of the main references for other stakeholders. Nowadays, one of the priorities for Bosnia Herzegovina is to achieve accession to the European Union: even if it will not take place in the short-term⁴, several initiatives are already set to adequately prepare the country. The need to direct rural development policies and actions towards an adjustment to European rules and criteria is strongly perceived at all levels, from national institutions to small farmers.

The approach of the Local Technical Unit of Italian Cooperation in Bosnia Herzegovina (UTL)⁵ has been oriented to sustain this process, also through the support to projects of Italian NGOs that could contribute to creating the conditions for future accession. None of the case studies includes an explicit reference to European integration in its objectives, but the need to bring conditions of Bosnian rural territories closer to the European ones emerges in all the projects.

Bosnian institutions (State, Entities, Cantons), on the other hand, seem to have opted for an official strategy which has proved problematic to implement. Indeed, although rural development is officially considered as a priority for the country, the weakness of institutional action is perceived by stakeholders as one of the main obstacles to rural development, as it results from the interviews to the territorial actors. Without adequate institutional support aimed at the creation of a sound

⁴ Bosnia Herzegovina is still just a "potential candidate country" for accession.

⁵ UTL are decentralised delegations of governmental Italian Cooperation in developing countries.

environment for rural development, territorial outcomes of development projects can have only a limited role in the effective rebuilding of territory. External interventions can be useful at local level, especially where they are realized in collaboration with local stakeholders, but they cannot be decisive for national scale issues, above all in the Bosnian context, where institutional structure can be read as a territorialisation excess⁶ that determines differences in territorial development. Nevertheless, at local level, Italian NGOs intervention has certainly had effects, as we will see.

Ideological field

Our analysis focused first of all on the main external actors⁷ in the projects – i.e. the leading NGOs – describing their ideological field of reference, in order to understand if and how it has conditioned their strategies, especially concerning the involvement of other actors and the selection of the intervention territories.

The examined NGOs range from large national-level organisations, sometimes with international connections (such as UCODEP⁸ or Italian Caritas), to smaller organisations such as Re.Te. or ACS. They have different ideological references: some of them are completely secular (Re.Te., UCODEP, ARCS, ACS), while others have a catholic imprint (CEFA), and some others, such as Italian Caritas, are explicitly Catholic. Among the secular organisations, Re.Te. and ACS originated in the context of workers' rights protection and ARCS refers explicitly to a left-wing political area.

The ideological field has indirectly guided the NGOs' selection of the intervention territories, defining preferential relations with specific actors (e.g., for Italian Caritas, with local Caritas and parishes). Bebbington (2004) hypothesized that the geographies of nongovernmental interventions are generated especially by the social networks and institutions that are at the foundation of the NGOs' existence.

Italian NGOs, however, have not identified their local partners or intervention territories making any discriminations and they have not adopted excluding strategies. If initially they based their choices on existing relations (understandably, with actors belonging to the same ideological field), through remaining on the territory for a relatively long time they built new relations with other stakeholders, not strictly belonging to their ideological field, including different subjects and territories in their projects.

The NGOs considered in the research come from different parts of Italy: some of them are extremely well-established in their territories, while others have a wider

⁶ We have a territorialisation excess when a geography includes and develops more complexity than that needed by the society to live and to reproduce itself (Turco 1988).

⁷ With "external actors" we mean all the actors who come from outside a territory. Internal actors, instead, are those belonging to the territory.

⁸ UCODEP became OXFAM Italy in 2010; we chose to maintain the former name in our research because it was the denomination of the organization when the project was launched.

diffusion. This aspect has also influenced the projects, determining a weaker or stronger level of involvement of actors coming from the NGOs' native territories.

Another element to underline is the collaboration in realizing new projects between NGOs already active in the same area, officially with the purpose of increasing the interventions' efficacy. We can however suppose that this collaboration was also due to NGOs' power strengthening strategies, aimed at obtaining further funds⁹ in order to assure the continuation of their presence in Bosnia Herzegovina. The primary aim of each actor, in fact, is to preserve itself, using all the available opportunities to survive (Turco 1988).

Furthermore, we must observe that in both the joined project of Re.Te./CESVI and that of UCODEP/CEFA, some disagreements between the partners arose, due to the fact that they did not completely share the objectives and the approaches. Nevertheless, the conflicts were not unsolvable, and generally these NGOs based their common work on collaboration and dialogue, obtaining positive territorial outcomes in terms of efficacy in the rebuilding process.

Internal actors and interaction among the actors

The local partners of NGOs in most cases were local associations. Bertoncin and Pase (2008) highlight - as critical element - the role of associations as subjects judged *a priori* in charge and able to become spokesperson for the needs of the whole community. In several cases, the local counterparts of the projects were associations or cooperatives created by previous interventions of the same NGOs, really in charge for a given sector and basically democratic. The NGOs, however, did not pay particular attention to local power dynamics they were influencing through collaborating with internal actors. Also, when some of them showed the tendency to act according to their own private interests, the Italian organisations intervened re-orienting indirectly the actions (for instance, improving training activities for local partners, in order to strengthen their sense of responsibility toward the project) rather than in an authoritative way (for instance, changing local partner). The local partners were usually also beneficiaries of interventions, actively involved in the different phases of projects and so identifiable as strong actors.

Individual beneficiaries, on the contrary, can be qualified as weak actors, involved just passively in the actions. The project of Italian Caritas is an exception: some beneficiaries, in fact, assumed the role of local representatives and the whole intervention was based on donations that were aimed to answer to specific requests, based on development intentions expressed by each beneficiary.

Local authorities had very different involvement levels. In the Italian Caritas project, some municipalities were deeply involved, becoming in some cases local representatives. In other projects, municipalities were not involved at all, or had a

⁹ UTL, in fact, gave priority to initiatives realized in partnerships by NGOs.

contrasting attitude, declaring their support to the initiatives but not giving it concretely.

Cantons, Entities and central state institutions did not participate to the projects, with the exception of the Ministry of Agriculture of Srpska Republic, which partially co-funded the activities of the UCODEP/CEFA project. It is not clear if the exclusion of these actors is due to the NGOs' will or to the institutions themselves not "letting" themselves be involved. The interviewed actors, however, have often reported the weakness and substantial indifference to territorial needs and problems demonstrated by institutions at all levels, which denotes at least their scanty interest in being involved in projects aimed at supporting territorial development.

This attitude could have been fostered by massive intervention of external actors in Bosnia Herzegovina during and after the war, which have lowered the sense of responsibility of authorities regarding their role of support for the territory. Furthermore, according to some authors (Kaldor, 1999; Rumiz 1996) the nationalist rhetoric that led to the war was connected to an instrumental vision of nationalism, exploited by the political and economical elite to preserve their control of the economy and the state, in the period of transition towards democracy and market which followed Tito's death in 1980 and the fall of Berlin Wall. Often, those who took advantage of the conflict obtained positions of power when it ended, and benefited from fuelling nationalist sentiments, which are more influential when the population lives in a precarious situation. Thus, these subjects do not have any interest in supporting project objectives that are aimed at improving the living conditions of people in the country and at supporting the peaceful cohabitation in between the communities.

Territory as an actor

The assessment highlights that territory has been considered in the projects as a real actor. All the interventions, in fact, were developed not by following standardised models, but by identifying needs and solutions through "listening" to territory and giving it voice, first of all by allowing different internal actors to express themselves. Obviously, some points of view were excluded, but we believe that the ideal of an all-inclusive participation of all the territorial actors is unattainable. In some cases, actors exclude themselves, while in other cases it would not have been concretely possible to actively involve all the numerous beneficiaries.

The projects, however, did consider the different needs and opportunities existing in the territory, as expressed by the number of stakeholders that were called to participate. The intention to listen to territory is also evident in the way that projects were developed, not purely on the basis of simple data collection and theoretical assessments, but taking into account the previous experience of the NGOs in the territory.

The coherence among the context analysis realized by the external actors and the local needs, resources and opportunities identified by the internal actors, which emerged in the interviews, is revealing of the territorial knowledge of the NGOs and of their approach to local territory, conceived as an active subject of intervention and not as an object, a mere recipient of action.

Also, the projects' implementation exemplifies the attention paid to territory: in some cases, in fact, strategies and actions were totally revised when they demonstrated to be ineffective compared to territorial answers.

Logics

The attention to territorial features is also evident in the substantial adequacy of logics adopted by the "territorialising rationality" (those who propose, manage and control the territorialisation) and the logics adopted by who live the territory (the so called "social rationality", Turco 1988).

The results of the analysis then led to the rebuttal of the thesis of Minca (1994), who affirmed that cooperation interventions are processes of hetero-centred¹⁰ territorialisation for definition, because, at least in the examined projects, territorialisation was auto-centred, although carried out with the intervention of external actors, who however acted coherently according to the social rationality.

This observation lets us also suppose that the review of approaches to International Development Assistance has slowly changed from rhetoric to real practise during recent years. NGOs are starting to adopt approaches centred on territorial actors' involvement and on the consideration of existing resources and constraints. We can read these changes from the point of view of autopoiesis (Maturana, Varela 1980), or as a way for the organizations themselves to survive: as a reaction to criticisms, NGOs have probably considered a revision of their approaches, in order to continue functioning.

Strategies

The strategies adopted by the Italian NGOs in the examined projects were strong, but usually open to ongoing modifications and to sharing with other actors. The autonomy of these actors was not been controlled through clearly asymmetric relationships, but rather through trying to share aims, resources and information. Thanks to this strategy, internal actors generally developed a sense of responsibility toward the projects, and acted to make them effective, obtaining at the same time a benefit for themselves in an autopoietic perspective.

The NGOs seem to have basically adopted participatory strategies, especially in the implementation phase rather than during the project'elaboration process.

¹⁰ Turco (1988) defines the hetero-centred territorialisation as a process of territorial building managed by a social rationality elaborated outside the cultural and spatial context of the society that we are observing. The auto-centred territorialisation, on the contrary, is ruled by actors or groups that identify themselves as part of the same social body.

Participatory approaches were adopted mainly towards local partners and other collective actors, whereas they were almost absent towards single beneficiaries, with the exception of the projects of Italian Caritas and CEFA/ARCS/COSPE. In the first case, the project was based on a direct and continuative dialogue with beneficiaries. The second has involved a professional figure of “rural entertainer”, aimed at supporting participation of farmers in the activities. In any case, the adoption of associations and cooperatives as local counterparts makes at least theoretically possible the indirect participation of final beneficiaries, through their involvement in the activities of associations and their representation in governing boards.

External actors - and sometimes the internal ones, too - have however highlighted that Bosnian cooperatives and associations often adopt strategies based on control and on asymmetric relations between the governing boards and the social base. This is probably due to past territoriality of Bosnia Herzegovina, whereby state cooperatives were administrated by a few people, without the real participation of workers that the self-management system would have contemplated (Cingolani 2006). The current cooperatives are often inclined to maintain the same kind of asymmetric relations as in the past, due to autopoietic strategies of the actors that detain the power. Thus, single beneficiaries (generally small farmers) have a limited tendency to active participation, because of mistrust and suspicion towards associations. Then, although new associations and cooperatives created by the development projects seem to adopt more participatory approaches, a real inclusion of their members in association life is still difficult.

This supports the stance of Bertoincin and Pase (2008) that participation should not be presumed as a fact but rather considered as an element that has to be built. Italian NGOs seem to have acted initially assuming the will to participate of local actors as a fact, but then, listening to the natives, they became aware of the need to train people to participation, therefore creating the conditions for a more active inclusion of actors.

Action systems

The strategies adopted in the projects included both material intervention and intervention with a major informational content. They were carried out through very different action systems, suggesting that the examined Italian NGOs did not simply copy standardised and pre-existent models.

Generally, rural development in projects were mainly associated with agricultural activities. The only case with an explicit reference to a wider vision is the project of UCODEP/CEFA, focused on the valorisation of typical local products with touristic aims as well. The project of Re.Te/CESVI was essentially centred on agriculture, but the whole intervention was aimed at the general development of a rural community, through activities in different fields (education, environment etc.).

The other projects, although strongly based on agriculture, all had social objectives too (return and resettlement of refugees, for instance), and agriculture was

conceived as a tool and not as a goal of interventions, transmitting at least a concept of rural development based not only on economic growth, but also on a more general improvement of the quality of life.

We must highlight, however, that NGOs demonstrated openness to dialogue with local actors regarding needs, opportunities, strategies and actions to adopt, while they completely missed a debate on development concept, and took the definition of “development” for granted. This confirms the critics of development seen as a rhetoric that is barely put into question, an idea that permeates all the practices by now (Latouche 2005; Rist 1997; Sachs 1998; Sidaway 2007).

On the other hand, a common element of the action systems was training, included in every project. Minca (1994) underlines that information is essential in order to reach sustainable interventions. Magnaghi (2000) highlights the need to consider cooperation as a tool to help self-determination and the empowerment of local communities.

Information and training can support self-determination, not only because they give cognitive tools for managing new built territories (e.g. new infrastructures), but more generally because they grant the acquisition of expertise that guarantees projects’ sustainability. In the examined cases, the NGOs trained people not only on technical aspects (as new agricultural techniques), but also on the valorisation of existing human resources, in order to create local figures who will be able to guarantee the autonomy and the survival of the new organisational structures activated by their projects.

Territorial outcomes

The territorial outcomes of the Italian projects can be considered as relevant. The assessed initiatives did not substantially modify the territories in which they were carried out and changes were consistent with social demand.

In general, the projects tended to foster particularly the creation and support of new territorial organisational structures, such as cooperatives and associations, rather than infrastructure building. Coherence between territorialisation logics and social rationality logics brought about a strengthening of territorial structures, enriching the territory with new hubs and networks.

Nevertheless, if assessed projects were effective in building new local networks and sometimes in connecting them with supra-local nets, the creation of connections with international markets was more problematic. Several initiatives had originally planned to sell abroad the agricultural products obtained by projects activities, so as to increase families’ incomes, but it was rarely possible to accomplish, especially due to contextual conditions (competitiveness, European rules etc.) that were not adequately considered.

Generally, projects did not introduce new knowledge and practices which was very different from that which was pre-existent, but they often focused, more or less explicitly, on the recovery of traditions and on maintaining existing crops and the territorial organisation of agriculture based on small parcels of land.

Even where external actors proposed new techniques and organisational systems, however, these were never invasive. In every case they were introduced with respect for existing practices and giving local actors the possibility to accept them or not, and to manage innovations, sharing competences and knowledge through training. The prior listening to the territory and its acceptance as an active subject allowed external actors to identify resources and opportunities, valorising the existent ones without forcing the introduction of new development models.

Considering the geographical definition of complexity¹¹, one of the aims of the Bosnian war was to destroy it through ethnic cleansing and the creation of ethnically homogeneous territorial entities. Some of the projects (particularly those of ACS and Italian Caritas) aimed to foster the refugees' resettlement, a process that we can define in geographical terms as a territorial re-complexification, because it allows the reduction of homogeneity in communities. Other interventions were based on the idea that, by improving the economic conditions of people and making them work together, it is possible to convey a positive message of reconciliation, fostering a concrete return to a peaceful coexistence, at least at a local level.

Clearly, the process of refugees return and the composition of social relations among different groups is extremely slow and difficult, and projects cannot alone solve a situation that is deeply related to the power strategies of strong actors. Nevertheless, at local level, the analysed interventions contributed to re-complexification, giving concrete work opportunities to people, thus supporting their return and stabilisation, and limiting further migration processes. In this context, the NGOs adopted indirect strategies, showing concretely that reopening dialogue is useful for facing common problems and supporting the creation of new relations.

On the contrary, the impacts of the projects on territorial re-complexification through an increase of the territorial functions is generally less clear. As we underlined, in fact interventions focused mainly on the support of agricultural activities, while reference to rural development as a multifunctional process was weaker. However, projects maintained the traditional territorial organisation, based on small parcels of land and on the diversification of crops, so they contributed to keeping the existing complexity, in contrast to the general process of de-complexification and specialisation.

If, before the war, agriculture was usually a collateral activity for families, nowadays it is the only possible livelihood for many of them, even if they have to face serious threats due to competitiveness and to the difficult market integration of small

¹¹ As "the disparity between the possibilities that action can realize and those that remain at a potential status" (Turco 1988).

farmers. The assessed projects, through supporting small farmers and creating networks that give them protection and a greater weight in policy making, could to avoid these subjects to be forced to sell or abandon their fields, and so giving space to land grabbing by large farms, multinational corporations or even other countries.

Minca (1994) also highlights the risk that International Assistance could produce territorialisation excesses, for instance, creating new territorial centralities that could attract more investments than the other parts of the territory. Generally, it seems that the Italian NGOs intervened giving priority to the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina and particularly to Herzegovina. However, this did not seem to be a strategy which explicitly aim to favour a specific territory, actor or social group. Rather, it was a consequence of pre-existing relations, dating back to the war and the early post-war period, when the intervention of some NGOs in Herzegovina caused a further concentration of other projects in the same areas, increasing the territorial mass¹² and triggering vertical autopoiesis¹³ processes.

In this context, it is possible that the choices on projects localisation could have had a role in creating new centralities and marginalities on the Bosnian territory (Reynaud 1988), but in order to make an accurate assessment of this issue, it would be necessary to map all of the interventions realised in the country.

Another risk highlighted by Minca (1994) is that the International Assistance intervention was not able to reduce territorialisation deficit¹⁴. Interventions based on an hetero-centred logic, which exclude a population or a part of it by territorial building, prevent it from reaching a sufficient autonomy that guarantees the satisfaction of social needs, even after the departure of external actors. On the contrary, our assessment shows an auto-centred territorialisation frame, which contributes to reduce the territorialisation deficit.

The projects' territorialising rationality seems to have been efficient and shared by social rationality, supporting the transition from a closed to an open and strong territory. These processes of transition are not yet concluded, and it will be necessary to verify if the territorial strengthening supported by the creation of new hubs and networks will hold in the future, thanks to effective strategies. On the other hand, in fact, territorialising (institutional) rationality is not efficient nor shared with social rationality as yet. In this context, the contribution of external actors through cooperation projects is not sufficient to make the Bosnian territory, as a whole, effectively strong, even if these interventions can give some support, especially through setting an example to territorialising rationality on how to work in concert with social rationality.

¹² The territorial mass is the combination of human acts that contribute to built the territory (Turco 1988).

¹³ We speak about vertical autopoiesis when the survival of a structure is guaranteed through the activation of new functions (Ibid.).

¹⁴ We have a territorialisation deficit when a territorial action destroys complexity, or when a society has needs and expectations that its geography can't satisfy (Ibid.).

Although the analytic model adopted for the present research has been developed for a different territorial frame (the Sahelian region) and for a different type of projects (hydraulic interventions), its application to rural development projects in the post-war Bosnia Herzegovina has been equally effective. It allowed us, in fact, to highlight the territorial outcomes of the projects, their role and the role of the external actors in the territorial rebuilding, as well as the processes that have led to the territorial results.

The model, clearly, is not expected to be the unique tool for a reading of the territorial processes related to International Cooperation. It is rather a point of view, useful for highlighting some issues. Similarly, the methodologies of intervention and the outcomes of the case studies do not cover the analysis of the whole field of the International Development Assistance, which involves other actors, sectors, and countries.

However, the strengths and weaknesses of the projects which emerged through the assessment of the specific cases can be compared to critiques of the cooperation system, in order to identify concrete recommendations to improve the effectiveness of International Development Assistance, thus developing a geography for cooperation.

Geography for cooperation: some suggestions for the International Development Assistance system

The Italian intervention for Bosnian rural development was carried out during a period of major reviews to International Development Assistance approaches. The Italian NGOs projects seem to have acted taking into consideration the criticisms of the cooperation system. Nevertheless, this review process cannot be considered concluded yet.

The second objective of the research was to elaborate some suggestions to further improve the efficacy of International Development Assistance, drawing on the results of the case studies analysis.

We used the critiques of Carrino (2005) and Cereghini and Nardelli (2008) as a kind of guidelines, comparing them with the results of the project assessment to highlight the suggestions that a geographical point of view can help to reveal.

Centralism

The first critical issue is centralism, that is the concentration of power and responsibilities connected to the idea that only a few expert subjects should lead development processes. In nongovernmental cooperation, centralism translates into the fact that project planning is rarely carried out in consultation with local actors, sometimes with the exception of local authorities or stronger internal stakeholders.

In the analysed cases, planning was done without the direct participation of the beneficiaries; nevertheless, thanks to the prior presence of Italian NGOs in Bosnia Herzegovina, the context analysis for projects were not grounded only in quantitative data or technical assessments, but in the direct knowledge of the territory and on pre-existent relations. Thus, projects have considered the different territorial voices, in terms of expressed needs, opportunities and strategies.

Carrino also underlines that if we deprive local actors of essential information and of spaces where to be active in development process, they will feel less responsible towards their own future. On the contrary, in the case studies the NGOs demonstrated a good ability to share information – and essentially to share power – thereby establishing symmetric relations with internal actors, who acquired a sense of ownership towards the interventions.

Also, the project management was often delegated, at least partially, to local partners, giving a role of supervision to the Italian NGOs. For instance, Italian Caritas employed local representatives in each intervention territory to manage some aspects of the project. The UCODEP/CEFA initiative created and supported different local associations, to give representation to various territorial needs.

At a governmental level, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems to have assigned to UTL an important role in the selection of the projects to fund, demonstrating the willingness to delegate decisions to the subject that better knows the territory. In 2010, however, the Italian Government closed the UTL in Sarajevo, giving the competence for Bosnia Herzegovina to UTL in Belgrade.

Hierarchies

This fact let us introduce the second critical issue: the strict transmission of decisions in a hierarchical way. The closure of UTL in Sarajevo, for instance, was imposed with hierarchical modalities that did not consider the territorial needs, but rather related to other strategies of strong external actors.

On the contrary, we observed that generally, even in the larger NGOs, the “base” (e.g. expatriate staff) has a fundamental role in the whole project cycle. The NGOs recognise the territorial competence of staff that have direct territorial experience, rather than adopting a top-down approach. Often, the same expatriate staff, already working in Bosnia Herzegovina, proposed new interventions based on the needs they identified.

In our opinion, analysed cases have had positive territorial outcomes, precisely because they were developed involving the territory, starting from the direct field experience of the people who elaborated the projects, and from prior relations with various territorial actors. In this sense, a geographical approach highlights some fundamental elements for projects success.

According to Cereghini and Nardelli (2008), in fact, cooperation interventions risk being invasive because they are based on a weak knowledge of the local contexts. The solution here is not only to consider the territory during the whole project cycle, e.g. through theoretical assessments of territorial features, but also to actively involve the local level in the projects. As Dansero (2008) notes, following the point of view of external actors can lead to some elements of territorial complexity being excluded, which is a limitation.

To overcome this limitation, then, geography suggests to go beyond approaches that give space only to external points of view, and to “enter” in the territory, giving voice to many different local stakeholders in order to build a wide and inclusive representation of the territory, with its potentialities and problems.

At the same time, it would be an error to consider internal actors as always expert and trustworthy. The problem of reliability of the local partners has been reported by several NGOs representatives during the interviews. To identify the more trustworthy subjects is a real challenge to NGOs, that, again, need a direct knowledge of the territory, in order to be able to sort out reliable information.

According to the principle of subsidiarity, the assessment has therefore highlighted the need to delegate the project elaboration and management to the actors at the closest level to the intervention. In our opinion, the management of development projects should be committed to expatriate staff who should be kept local for a sufficiently long period, in order to develop a direct knowledge of the specific territorial context.

More attention should be given to the reliability and representativeness of the internal actors, taking into better account local power dynamics. For this reason, it would be desirable for NGOs to start their activities in a country with small-scale interventions, in order to develop a territorial competence and to have the opportunity to better integrate themselves. These interventions could be, for instance, aimed at the development of a sound environment for participation, which local communities tend not always to perceive as a necessity.

In this way, organisations could start to know and understand the territory better, contacting step by step those actors who are really ready to actively participate, developing relations of mutual trust that could help identifying problems, resources, needs and opportunities.

The risk, in fact, is to involve in the projects only those people who are already trained to participate, on the basis of their interest or cognitive resources. Weak actors, lacking these competences, tend to exclude themselves. Therefore, it should be also easier to activate participatory processes including different territorial stakeholders, not only in the project implementation, but also during their elaboration. The assessment of territorial data needed for context analysis,

moreover, should be elaborated by a competent professional figure, who should be able to read the territorial complexity in the right way.

The importance of relations

According to Turco (2009), cooperating means literally working together, so cooperation necessarily presupposes relations. Raffestin (1981) reminds us that relations are always power relations. All of the assessed projects emerged in fact from a relational chain, often informal, previously created among the actors, and we underlined how these relations influenced the selection of intervention territories or of other actors to involve.

Thus, it is important to develop a wider awareness of the meaning of relations in the cooperation system. For instance, the problem of identification of reliable information sources is exactly a problem of asymmetric relations, where external actors are weak, probably without realising it. Namely, external actors cannot presume their power in the relations and must also consider the power dynamics inside the communities where they act.

To achieve successful projects, relations among actors should be as symmetric as possible. This means that strong actors must often step back, accepting to adopt auto-centred strategies, as occurred in some of the assessed Italian projects.

Furthermore, relations among all the subjects involved in the projects should be based on shared information and resources, recognising the competences already available on the territory. Only in this way, interventions can be effective, guaranteeing action pertinence and the congruence between territorialising and social logics.

Again, we must highlight the importance of a stable and continuous presence of expatriate staff on the territory. NGOs, in fact, are often identified with their expatriate staff, and during the field work we verified that the reliability, the enthusiasm, the personal commitment of these people is really fundamental for creating trust relations, which are essential for effective projects.

Moreover, in countries like Bosnia Herzegovina, where International Assistance has been widely active, often with controversial interventions, we have verified the importance of a direct and informal relationship between internal and external actors, to support responsibility and ownership. Local actors often declare interest and willingness in being involved, without a real subsequent participation, but with the awareness that, in any case, they will have some kind of benefit. It is the typical Bosnian behaviour of *nema problema* (no problem): the NGOs choices are never brought into question in order to avoid dispute, but at the expenses of the achievement of the expected results.

Developing direct and frank relations and demonstrating reliability, expatriate staff can contribute to project ownership by local actors, and let them trust in the interventions and share their territorial knowledge in order to obtain effective results.

Sectorial approach

Another critical element is the sectorial approach, which brings to highly specific interventions, unconnected each other and not integrated on a wider frame of answers to complex territorial problems and needs. It is again a problem that arises from the territory and has territorial implications, therefore a geographical approach lets us read it easily.

The assessed projects, although oriented towards agriculture, all considered other aspects, too: refugees return, reconciliation and multifunctional rural development. Thus, economic activities have been considered also due to their social functions and their role for a relational territorial reconstruction.

The NGOs considered intervention territories as complex systems, made by interactive components, with the awareness that, to solve structural problems of communities, it is not sufficient to intervene in just one aspect.

The geography of complexity elaborated by Turco (1988) shows the territory as a system, characterized by a level of complexity. Each development project interacts in some way with the territory: NGOs should develop a greater awareness of the territorial complexity influenced by their own activities, accepting the fact that developing countries have their specific complexity, too. Clearly, this does not mean that every organisation should work in every sector, but they should consider the mutual connection between territorial components, understanding that, acting in one sector, they impact (positively or negatively) also upon the others.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the context, which is often insufficiently taken into account due to sectorial approaches: this was a critical aspect also in the analysed Italian interventions. For instance, the export of crops, produced thanks to the projects, was not possible because of the market conditions, which had not been adequately considered during the project planning.

Thus, NGOs should adopt multi-scalar approaches, considering not only the local level, which is directly involved in the projects, but also the reference context at different levels, and the connection between territorial system and environment (as intended in system theory: all that is outside the system).

In order to increase the interventions' efficacy, it would be useful to involve a professional figure who could give a multi-scalar and a multi-sectorial reading of the territory, taking into consideration its complexity.

Assistentialism

International Development Cooperation has been often accused in the past of adopting approaches that prevent the self-determination of the communities in developing countries. We can affirm that this has not been the case in the assessed Italian projects. For instance, the intervention of Italian Caritas, although based on donation, aimed at supporting beneficiaries in their own way towards autonomy.

Effective interventions should support the recovery of sustainable territorial know how, in order to favour the achievement of autonomous development processes. Minca (1994) underlines that a geographical assessment could give cooperation actors some tools for identifying local methods of territorial management, through which projects could reduce the gap between social and territorialising rationality. But it is also a responsibility of the internal actors to make projects really effective.

Thus, in our opinion, it is fundamental to train local actors to participate, in order to achieve ownership, which is essential to project sustainability and to avoid the failure of interventions with the departure of NGOs. Active and aware participation can lead local actors to develop their own development strategies, in the framework of self-centred processes of territorial management.

Furthermore, realizing small scale interventions in order to prepare local communities for participation could let new proposals emerge from the territory itself. In this sense, NGOs' role will become that of process facilitator and of supplier of resources lacking in the territory (in material and relational senses), thereby avoiding the imposition of their own development vision.

"Projectism"

The last critical issue considered is the so called "projectism" (Carrino 2005), that is the degeneration of the need to plan interventions. Despite the introduction of Project Cycle Management, we continue to find an overlapping of unconnected interventions on the same territories, and territorialisation deficits and excesses in the areas that become marginal or central for aid flows. Nowadays, the "run" to funds caused by the reduction of economic resources for International Assistance, raises the risk of having projects that meet the needs of donors rather than those of the territories.

We can, then, introduce another element that has often emerged in dialogue with cooperation actors: time. Although this may not seem to be a geographical issue, it in fact is if we consider territory as "the historical result of the co-evolution of human societies and environment" (Magnaghi 2000).

Donors' calls for proposals are often open only for a few weeks: NGOs are therefore forced to elaborate projects in a very short time, or to have them ready. This clashes with the need to plan interventions based on direct territorial experience, involving

territorial actors and developing trust relations. Time imposed by donors is therefore a limit to the effective consideration of territory. Donors should take into account the temporal element, both through supporting organizations that can demonstrate being in the same territory for a long time and knowing its features, and by giving adequate time for the planning of new projects.

Another obstacle is posed by the approval time of project proposals. In the cases of the CEFA/ARCS/COSPE and of the Re.Te./CESVI projects, years passed between the project planning and its real beginning. In both cases, changes that took place in the meanwhile resulted in the need to modify the plans. Territory, in fact, is not a fixed and stable entity, but it is continuously evolving, and even minimal changes can have important impacts on intervention logics and strategies. Donors should consider this aspect, reducing the time between project elaboration and approval.

According to Cereghini and Nardelli (2008), the lack of sustainability in donors' rules also concerns project duration, which is usually two or three years. They do not take into consideration that development processes cannot be realized within a fixed standard time, which is the same for all territories and communities. Territorial evolution can be very fast regarding its material components, but at the same time, immaterial elements can change very slowly, and internal actors need time to adopt and strengthen effective strategies. Interventions often fail when NGOs leave the territory. This could be caused by errors in projects elaborations, but also by the lack of time for creating the right conditions for interventions success and community ownership.

One of the selection criteria for the case studies in the research was precisely the fact that they had to be the continuation of prior interventions of the same NGOs in the same territories. Positive territorial assessed outcomes, in our opinion, come probably from previous knowledge and relations developed by Italian organisations, thanks to their relatively long-term presence in Bosnia Herzegovina, which let them achieve a territorial competence, and enabled them to adapt interventions to new territorial conditions.

The geographical point of view, then, highlights the need to adopt more flexible procedures in project organisation, considering the long timescale of development processes, which is connected with the time needed by the territory to evolve.

Conclusions

Concluding, we can affirm that the role of rural development projects of the assessed Italian NGOs in rebuilding the Bosnian territory has been fundamentally effective. The territory they give back is stronger and more complex, respecting its material and immaterial features. Nevertheless, the process of territorial reconstruction after a catastrophic event like a war is long and difficult, and it depends first of all on the local stakeholders who hold the power, and then on the capacity of social rationality to condition the territorialising rationality. The projects

seem to have acted in a way which gave tools to adopt effective survival strategies to internal actors, including the weaker ones. Only the same internal actors, however, will be able to use these tools efficaciously.

The case of Italian Development Assistance to rural development in Bosnia Herzegovina, beyond the specific analytical model applied and the territorial context chosen for the research, demonstrates that a geographical approach can give some concrete suggestions for improving the efficacy of Development Assistance. The challenge highlighted is to put territories and communities at the centre of the intervention, because they can be direct agents of change, and in this challenge, a geographical approach can provide effective tools, both conceptual and practical.

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