Introduction

Development in Its Place: Issues in Local Development

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Guest Editor

In scientific research as in sociopolitical debate, it is sometimes necessary to reinsert ideas in their place or context, which is an essential undertaking in the advancement of knowledge. The critical analysis of processes to comprehend reality has even become a distinct area of the scientific activity known as epistemology. Should then development be restored to its place by asking what development’s “place” is? Using such an image is not merely a game, for we must remember that development necessarily occurs on a territorial or local scale. It evolves in specific places: countries, regions, central and peripheral areas, in cities, towns, and localities. The spatial aspect of development is of such importance that the concept is constantly accompanied by descriptive spatial adjectives, so that one speaks of regional development, local development, and even international development.

By definition, development implies a spatial dimension, and this spatiality, from the viewpoint of the place where development occurs, is necessarily local (Jean, 1989). When this argument is pursued to its logical conclusion, we can infer that, if development is local in nature, the notion of local development is a pleonasm. But beyond the semantics, this expression denotes a very significant current of thought and action in late twentieth-century sociopolitical dynamics; in actual fact, it is at the heart of new trends, adjustments, and reversals in state intervention as well as in the demands of social movements, whose sense of belonging to a common territory is becoming an identity factor for them. And even if the so-called experiments in local development are frequently rather feeble ones, a cobbling together of solutions to avert the worst — in most cases the socioeconomic decay of the area — does not this notion more essentially prefigure a new view
of human relations, a new vision of politics, a new form of social and
territorial administration?

For almost a decade the notion of local development has thus been
used to denote various practices for developing social entities in their
spatial organization. It generally signifies an “alternative” approach,
defined more or less in opposition to the approach to development
from the top, or development via specifically-directed intervention
through state-type regional planning, which it is supposed to replace.
Local development, then, is development from the roots up, develop­
ment that is endogenous and self-centred. A new ideology has thus
taken shape, arising in the language of protest of those at the bottom
and increasingly propagated by the various levels of political power
and public administration. It is a curious reversal in perspective, which
some observers feel is linked to the economic crisis and the resultant
weakening of state intervention.

This transformation in ideology is evidently a transcription, on the
level of territorial administration and regional development issues, of
larger transformations that are marking modes of social regulation in
“advanced” societies. This can be associated (to use Alain Touraine’s
expression in his 1984 work) with the phenomenon of “the actor’s
return.” Indeed, a series of parallels with several other social move­
ments can be identified here, whether it be participation in the owner­
ship and management of production companies (also termed self­
management or industrial democracy), participation in the administra­
tion of public facilities and certain social and health care services, the
establishment of new social relations between men and women and
between more or less visible minorities and more or less moral majori­
ties, or again, the creation of a new “self”-oriented galaxy of terms:
self-health, self-training, and so forth.

The notion of “local development” is relatively new in Canada and
in Quebec. In my hypothesis, it is a useful expression to denote the
innovative development practices that emerged during the 1970s in
struggling peripheral regions, where national policies of regional de­
velopment had failed in their attempts to revive such regions, which
were falling behind on the road to economic growth hailed by Quebec
and Canadian economies during the 1950s and 60s. It is astonishing
that governments took at least a decade to realize that developmental
disparities had hardly lessened and had at best remained constant, des­
pite several billion dollars’ worth of investments in programs to reduce
regional disparities in Canada. For such inequalities continue to exist,
de spite efforts deployed by governments to foster regional economic
development, a fact recognized by the prestigious Economic Council of
Canada (Brodhead, 1987).

Paradoxically, it is also beginning to be recognized that local initia­
tives, with the dynamic support of their milieu, have produced the most
clearly positive results in terms of strengthening communities in diffi­
culty. Consequently, in the political sphere as well as in the scientific
milieu, there has been growing interest in experiments with endoge­
nous development, which appear to be a radical departure from pre­
viously dominant theory. On every side there is an attempt to go back
and listen to regional “actors,” who alone are capable of outlining
development projects that take their identity into account, and of judg­
ing the relevancy or efficiency of any intervention. It has to be
acknowledged as well that success seems to be linked to a wide scale of
relatively modest initiatives, in any case less spectacular ones than the
costly efforts deployed in the megaprojects (Brodhead, 1987).

The study of experiments deriving from local dynamics in the
peripheral regions is now in fashion. The Groupe de recherche inter­
disciplinaire en développement de l’Est du Québec (GRIDEQ) from the
Université du Québec à Rimouski has been interested in this since
1974. Even if much work remains to be done, at least we have the
satisfaction of noting today that such a research perspective on
regional development, which seemed ludicrous to some not that long
ago, is now part of the “dominant trend” in political and scientific
investigation into development in the peripheral regions.

This issue of the Canadian Journal of Regional Science includes work
carried out by the GRIDEQ researchers but is not limited to such. I
wanted to bring together a certain number of contributions, not in
terms of the authors’ institutional affiliations, but with an awareness
of their common interest in regional issues, in order to express the
multiplicity of research on regional development and the diversity of
theories, whether explicit or implicit, that are taking shape in this con­
temporary era, which I term “a time of uncertainty” in the opening
article of this work.

The articles offered here derive for the most part from papers
presented at colloquia during the past three years. There is obviously a
fairly lengthy time lapse between the initial papers and the text pre­
Dented here, but this is inevitable when one knows a little about the
contingencies involved in university work as well as in the publication
of scientific journals. Nevertheless, these sometimes substantially re­
worked texts express very current concerns, which led the CJRS to
devote an entire issue to them.

When articles are not expressly commissioned by the editor, there
is the risk that they can constitute a grab bag of sorts. I was, however,
in a position to sort through the unpublished work of the last few
years, and it seemed to me that the most pertinent selection fit into
two main subject categories. The first group of articles was concerned
with a close examination of contemporary dynamics in regional deve­
velopment, in the wake of what appeared to be new approaches in local development. The subtitle, “A Quebec perspective,” is relevant here, as all the texts refer to the Quebec experience, especially in its most innovative aspect, namely, the establishment of a new regional planning and development organization — a new institutional framework — known as the “municipalités régionales de comté (MRC),” or regional county municipalities. The second group of articles more directly questions the entire body of intellectual output or overall intervention which occurred in the name of regional development. These reflections are admittedly more epistemological in nature, yet they are at the core of needed investigation in regional studies today and are not without bearing on the emergence of new practices in local development.

As is conventional when presenting a thematic issue, I could discuss each article and demonstrate that its selection and logical sequence in relation to the others has not come about by chance. Instead, I am leaving it up to the reader to make his own judgement, with the hope that I have whetted his appetite to some degree.

References