

DIFFERENCES IN THE ATTACHMENT TO AGRICULTURAL LAND PROPERTIES BETWEEN FORMER COLLECTIVIZED AND NON-COLLECTIVIZED COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Physical, structural and social transformations during the period of collectivisation in Romania call for the need of understanding how these transformations have affected people's attachment to their agricultural land properties (ALP). By studying the functional and emotional attachments of a former collectivized and a non-collectivized community, this paper addresses how people in the two communities nowadays are attached to the ALP's and, if there are differences, to what extent these differences are related to the former collectivisation process. It has been found that people in both communities are attached to the land both functionally, through social and economic benefits, and emotionally through various feelings such as feelings of identity, passion and indifference, but to a different extent. As a final conclusion, in the former collectivized rural areas, people are less attached to the agricultural land properties compared with the people in the non-collectivized rural areas and these differences can be linked to the transformations triggered by the former collectivisation process.

Key words: *collectivisation, agricultural land properties, place attachment, NE Region, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

About 90% of the rural communities in Romania had been for many years under the communist collectivisation process which implied various transformations at physical, structural and social level [1], [2], [3]. These changes may be related to the problems that the rural areas face nowadays, especially cropland abandonment, poverty and depletion of the natural rural resources [4], [5], [6]. Although people have regained their agricultural land properties (ALPs) for the past 20 years, it is uncertain if people in these affected areas still maintain a bond with these areas after being parted from it for a long time. Though, not all rural communities had been collectivised; in almost 10% of rural areas, the ALPs were left outside the collectivisation process. Hence, we

are dealing with two types of communities that emerged after the collectivisation process, the former-collectivised and the non-collectivised community. In this research, it is assumed that the people in the former collectivised community are less attached to their ALPs as it is known that when people are separated from a place for a long time they experience a kind of rupture in their affinity to the land [7]. A known concept for understanding people's relation with their place is the concept of 'place attachment' that can be either functional, which refers to the (dis)satisfaction of user needs in terms of quantity and quality of the place [8] or emotional, which refers to those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the place [9]. A strong attachment is a prerequisite in helping rural people to take responsibility

for their ALPs which means that less abandoned cropland will occur, the natural resources in these areas will be better managed and also people will have an extra mean of surviving. Consequently, this paper aims at comparing the two types of communities for finding out how people nowadays are attached to their ALPs and, if there are differences, to what extent these differences are related to the former collectivisation process. These findings provide valuable information for planners and politicians involved in rural development.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

We have carried out a qualitative comparative case study research and selected two communities from East Romania, a formerly collectivised community called Prohozesti and a non-collectivised community called Lapos. Generally in the two study areas, there are individual peasants with agricultural land properties divided into more plots and practicing subsistence agriculture. On average, the total surface of the land does not exceed more than two hectares. The data has been collected through semi-structured interviews with respondents from the two communities (N=13 for Prohozesti and N=13 for Lapos) covering a high range of individualities: age, gender, and social status. The respondents were mainly selected through snowball sampling [10]. The analysis of the data was done according to the following steps [11]: *familiarizing* with the data, *developing a coding scheme* for analysing the themes that occurred most, *indexing* or coding the data, *charting* or rearranging the data by theme in a table, and the last step was *mapping and interpretation* of the results by looking at relationships between and within the themes and the typologies developed from them. For more in-depth information see the original research report [15].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Functional attachment

Functional attachment was expressed through two types of benefits: **social benefits** referred

as immaterial goods and **economic benefits** referred as material goods that the ALPs can provide for the people. Each of the two types of benefits can be either positively, which implies a high functional attachment, or negatively which implies a low functional attachment. When comparing the level of attachment in the two communities, in the community where more positive satisfactory benefits were mentioned it was assumed that in that community the functional attachment is higher.

Social benefits. The following positive social benefits were predominantly expressed in Lapos (n=16): recreation (e.g. *“being in the garden and just sitting on the grass and looking around relax me very much”*), commodity (e.g. *“the lands near the house”*), and healthiness (e.g. *“food is very healthy and tasty because we don’t apply chemicals”*). Regarding the ‘healthiness’ aspect people in Lapos seem to care not only about their own healthiness and of the livestock but also about the present and the future healthiness of the land. They consider it is very bad to use chemical fertilizers or pesticides for the soil because in time they will weaken the soil. With other words, place attachment is also associated with future conditions of the place and not only the present conditions like it was argued in literature [12]. In Prohozesti (n=4), social benefits were poorly mentioned and only including the recreation and healthiness categories. The following negative social benefits were predominantly mentioned in Prohozesti (n=3), while in Lapos none: harsh working conditions (e.g. *“there are only barren hills with no shade... hard to work all day long in the sun”*) and need for pest control (e.g. *“during collectivization time the seeds were treated, nowadays I must buy new seeds every year and even though grows only weeds”*).

Economic benefits. In both communities these types of benefits were predominant negative. There were only few people in each community (n=6 for Lapos and n=5 for Prohozesti) that find worthier to work the land as a source of revenue (e.g. *“it helps my family to carry on our livelihood in a decent*

way”). Most of the people talked about the negative economic benefits that they encounter when working the ALPs. In Lapos (n=11) people find that some crops don’t grow that well like in other parts of Romania which means that they cultivate only certain crops that brings them the best benefits (e.g. *“suitable for producing hay but not for maize”*). Despite the negative benefits, people in Lapos they keep maintaining the land as it is. At the other hand, in Prohozesti (n=12), most people complained that the general crop production is low compared to the past, few people said that the crop productivity is much lower than in other places of Romania and few other people told that is not worthy to cultivate the land because of the crop theft that occurs in the area (e.g. *“harvest got stolen during collectivisation time and gets stolen also nowadays”*).

There are three main reasons for the low levels of productivity. One reason is the necessity to fertilize the soil with chemical fertilizers because of being used to it during collectivization times (e.g. *“I would have preferred to have the land how it was in my grandparents’ time because it wasn’t dependant on chemicals”*). Thus, the soil quality had been changed during collectivization times and nowadays people still have troubles by restoring back the soil to its initially quality. A problematic factor is that is difficult to find manure in the village as there are not many animals anymore that can produce it. The second reason is the fact that people have difficulties with travelling to their land plots because it is impossible to hire horses (only a few people own horses in this community or to hire tractors. Horses were taken away from the people during collectivization times and nowadays only few people in this village have returned to the old habit of raising horses. Besides, it seems that in Prohozesti there is no available grazing area anymore and this fact discourages people to raise livestock. During the collectivisation period the riparian area along the main river Tazlau was used by the people from Prohozesti as a cattle grazing area. But, nowadays, the riparian area has become a kind

of land fill as people are depositing their garbage in this area and therefore the possibility for grazing in this village is also limited. The third reason is the low financial opportunities people have in this village which implies they have no money to buy chemical fertilizers and also no money to hire tractors (e.g. *“During collectivization times things were much better, we had well-paid jobs and had tractors to work the land with, nowadays we don’t have either of them”*). Hence, we can argue that attachment is a dynamic process and can be influenced by different experiences lived in a place like the fact that the people are used to get high productivity rates but also can be influenced by the physical transformations of the place, in this case changes of the soil quality. These findings are contrary to the findings of Low and Altman (1992) who argued that the physical place provides only the background for forming ideas, feelings and memories on place and that actually the experiences lived in place influences people’s attachment to that place.

Figure 1 depicts the functional attachment in both communities. The difference between the two communities is that in general in Lapos there are more positive benefits associated with the ALPs than in Prohozesti. Although the economic benefits are seen predominant negatively in both communities, in Lapos people are most satisfied with the social benefits offered by the ALPs while in Prohozesti the social benefits are overlooked by the negative satisfactory economic benefits.

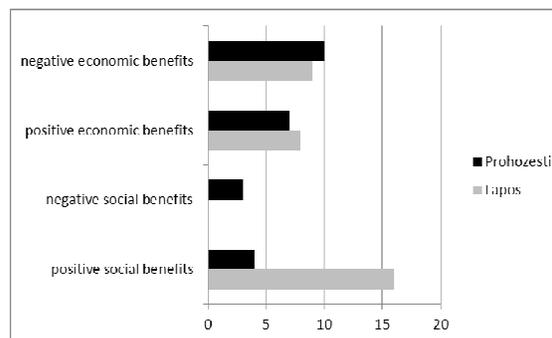


Fig. 1 Differences in functional attachment to the ALPs of Lapos and Prohozesti

Emotional attachment was expressed through verbal feelings that are either positively or negatively.

Positive emotional attachment

Feelings of identity were expressed in both communities through different individual meanings that people attribute to ALPs by means of shaping people’s sense of who they are. In Lapos (n=6) people see the ALPs as an integrated part of their peasant existence (e.g. *“The land is my origins; my life is built around this land”*) while in Prohozest (n=3) ALPs are making people identify as *‘hard workers’*; *‘being destined to work the land as the thing they know best to do’* or even feeling like *‘the master’* after having the land taken away from the people during collectivisation time.

Feelings of passion appeared to be the type of feelings that make people from Lapos (n=11) the most attached to the ALPs while in Prohozesti (n=6) this type of feeling was expressed to a lower extent compared to Lapos. There are two ways people in the two communities showed their passion for the ALPs. Firstly, feelings of passion were described as an attraction people feel for the land expressed in words such as: *‘like’*; *‘love’*; *‘enjoy’*; *‘passion and ‘interest’* in Lapos, and *‘pleasure’*; *‘hobby’*; *‘like’*; *‘enjoy’* among respondents from Prohozesti. Secondly feelings of passion were expressed through the willingness people have to not depart with the ALPs. In Lapos 9 people told how determined they are to keep the ALPs (e.g. *“If I would be forced to sell a piece of land, for me it would feel like a painful goodbye”*) while in Prohozesti only 4 people expressed similar feelings.

Feelings of morality are related to the reasons why people would not consider quitting working on the ALPs. People from Lapos (n=19) and Prohozesti (n=14) gave quite similar answers, which can be divided in three categories of reason. The first category relates to the fact that the land is inherited from the ancestors. People see the heritage as a moral duty to take care of the land because in this way people can show their appreciation to the ones that *“fought in the war”* or *“sacrificed*

themselves” to get in the possession of this land. It is not only the land as an object passed from older generations but also the knowledge about how to work the land, the appreciation for the land, but also the feelings of love for the land (e.g. *We are attached to the land through the love inserted by our parents*). The second reason is related to the religious thoughts people believe in, like for example it is being a *“sin to sell or abandon the inherited land”*. The third reason why people wouldn’t consider departing with the ALPs is because they can pass the land to their children. In both communities it is normal that when one of the children gets married, the new couple inherit a piece of land from the parents, therefore for the people it is an important issue to keep the land for their children and in this way a kind of continuity is maintained by the family in passing the land from generation to generation: *“If I wouldn’t know that my descendants will come back for the land I wouldn’t work the land anymore, but I hope one day my children will return here.”* (Prohozesti).

Negative emotional attachment

Feelings of concern were expressed most of all among the people in Prohozesti that although their wishes to pass the ALPs to their children, they also expressed their concern that their children would not take care of the land the way they did it: *“I fear after I will die that weeds will grow as big as the house, no one will care about my land.”* (Prohozesti). This type of concern was also present in Lapos expressed among two people.

Another reason to be concerned about the ALPs is due to the high amount of land that is abandoned in Prohozesti. Some expressed their concern in terms of grief for seeing the land abandoned (*“I feel sorrow”, “I feel sad”*), others showed their frustrations (e.g. **“people where more devoted to the land in the past”**).

Feelings of indifference were expressed among the youngest respondents from Prohozesti, they expressed their indifference (e.g. *“don’t like working the agricultural land”, “having a job is more important than working the land”*).

Feelings of inability were expressed by people from Prohozesti that would like to maintain the land but they find it difficult to do so and therefore they abandoned some land plots for reasons like: the big distance to the land; the low financial possibilities or the impossibility to sell local products (e.g. “the EU is destroying us; nothing that we produce is satisfying our markets. Only imported products are good enough”). More than this, some people from Prohozesti expressed their willingness to give up the land to a ‘land owners association’ because they believe that this would be the solution to prevent more land to be abandoned in their village. We considered this type of answer surprising as a high number of studies have found that place attachment is greater in physical settings wherein people’s goals have been achieved [13], [14]. Our findings on attachment to the ALPs in context to the non-former collectivized community have proven the opposite. When the communism system ended, the most ardent goal for those deprived of their property rights due to the former collectivization of agricultural land, was to get these properties back [3]. Thus, the goal was achieved but not the satisfaction and therefore people started abandoning their lands. It means that not always does the achievement of a goal on a setting; also increase ones attachment to that setting. By comparison, in Lapos, although most of the ALPs are located more than 5 km away from people’s homes; the distance or the financial means weren’t considered reasons for land abandonment like it was found in Prohozesti.

Figure 2 summarises the emotional attachment of both communities. We can see that the people of Lapos experience more positive feelings than the people of Prohozesti, who express rather negative feelings. This means that the level of emotional attachment among people in Lapos is higher than in Prohozesti. Feelings of *morality* predominates the positive emotional attachment in both communities while the negative emotional attachment that was mostly expressed in Prohozesti and is mainly expressed through feelings of *inability*.

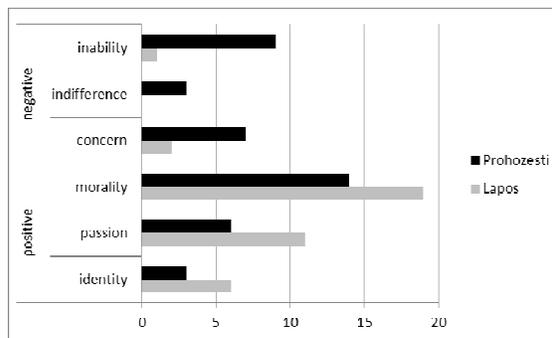


Fig. 2 Differences in emotional attachment to the ALPs of Lapos and Prohozesti

CONCLUSIONS

1. It can be concluded that the level of attachment to the ALPs differs largely between both communities. The low functional attachment found in Prohozesti is triggered by the fact that in this community people value their land mainly in terms of economic gains, and not so much in social gains. The economic gains, mainly the crop productivity are not as much as satisfactory nowadays as they used to be during collectivisation times and the social gains don’t seem to compensate people’s needs., These findings can be linked to the former collectivization period because in these days people from Prohozesti experienced high crop productivity rates, so it is something that people became used too. Nowadays, due to the fact that they do not have the financial means to invest in fertilizers, mechanization and transportation that are needed to reach high crop productivity, people in Prohozesti show low satisfaction with the benefits that can be obtained from the land and thus a low functional attachment.

On the other hand, in Lapos, people see the ALPs, to a lesser extent important for the economic gains but rather they attribute social meanings more related to the quality of the ALPs such as a clean, friendly and peaceful work environment; the land as much as possible in one place, and most importantly, to obtain healthy and tasty food products, which explains their high satisfaction with the ALPs. All these achievements are possible due to the fact that in Lapos people are working the land in the old traditional way by making use of

horses for most of the work and fertilizing the soil with manure.

2. Looking at the emotional attachment, in Lapos the positive feelings (identity, passion and morality) predominate this type of attachment. Besides the feelings of morality that has to do with their ancestors/ family bond, it seems that also the social benefits obtained from the land triggers also positive feelings such as identity and passion for the land. In Prohozesti, although feelings of morality are predominant, the negative feelings (concern, indifference and inability) are present and they are triggered by the low satisfaction levels with their land and in consequence are triggered by the changes brought by the former collectivism in people's lives.

3. Based upon our two cases, we could assume that in the former collectivized communities of Romania people are less attached to their agricultural lands than the people in the non-collectivized communities were functionally and emotionally they account for a more positive attachment. The changes produced by the former collectivisation system such as land spatial changes in the village, change of soil quality, changes in people's habits and people's orientations combined with the low financial opportunities are the main reasons influencing the low functional attachment to agricultural land properties among people from Prohozesti. Based on these findings it would be advisory to take in account the historical background of the involved communities in the proposed measures in rural developing plans.

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