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Conference Paper

Global-Local Interface And Identity In Rural Portugal

40th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "European Monetary Union and Regional Policy", August 29 - September 1, 2000, Barcelona, Spain

Provided in Cooperation with:

European Regional Science Association (ERSA)

Suggested Citation: Roca, Zoran (2000) : Global-Local Interface And Identity In Rural Portugal, 40th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "European Monetary Union and Regional Policy", August 29 - September 1, 2000, Barcelona, Spain, European Regional Science Association (ERSA), Louvain-la-Neuve

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LOCAL-GLOBAL INTERFACE AND IDENTITY IN RURAL PORTUGAL

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Abstract

The intensification of linkages between global and local spheres of life and, in this context, changing spatial systems and identities of places and regions, have been intensively discussed in Social Sciences since late 80'. However, too little attention has been given to a better understanding of the linkages between local identity as development resource and the role of agents of change at community levels in the light of the increasingly aggressive globalisation of economy and culture. Particularly in the peripheral, economically lagging and socially fragile regions local development agents increasingly face most difficult choices in efforts to maximise competitiveness and commodification of local development resources and, at the same time, to minimise losses of cultural, environmental and other aspects of local identity. A possible way out of the conceptual dilemmas and methodological limitations in grasping the issue of local effects of globalisation is proposed in this paper. Specifically, an analytical framework is presented for assessing the knowledge, attitudes and practice of local development agents in valorising local identity in the context of the local-global interface. Also, the first findings from an ongoing exploratory field-research project on this topic in Portugal are presented.

Introduction

In the present era of aggressive globalisation of the economy and culture, the "strength", "resilience" and "adaptability" have been increasingly praised qualities of local identity.¹ Moreover, the "competitiveness" of local identity has become almost the panacea in regional development policies. "Globalisation, as the compression of time- and space-barriers, seems to ascribe a greater salience to place and region, since firms, governments, and the public come to identify the specificity of localities (their workspace, entrepreneurs, administrators, and amenities) as an element for deriving competitive advantage. Place-marketing, in this context, is said to constitute a critical element, both for success in the interregional competition for investment (Lach and Urry 1992) and for global industry itself to derive competitive advantage and corporate distinctiveness (Ohmane 1989; Porter 1990)" (Amin and Thrift 1994, 6-7, in Agnew 2000, 105-106).

In the European Union, one of major arguments has been that an increased competitiveness of localities and regions on the globalised market of goods, services and ideas, can be decisive for achieving the sustainable "local development engineering" in the peripheral regions and countries. To this end, valorising the promising and neutralising the inhibiting elements and factors of local identity has been considered a major development challenge at all levels, from national systems and supra-national integration schemes down to the level of regions and local communities. (Comissão Europeia 1994; Commission européenne 1994).

In Portugal, the preservation and strengthening of local identity has been accepted as the *conditio sine qua non* for local and regional development. It is argued that globalisation, together with the enlargement of the EU, is imposing difficult challenges because "it has brought about elements and factors that are unfavourable to both the inter- and intra-regional social and economic cohesion", though, at the same time, "it is essential to attract foreign investments that will enable diversification of the regional economy and, at the same time, promote its high quality and stability, including social and environmental sustainability" (MP 1999, Chapter I: 52; 69). In this context, it has been maintained that the valorisation of the identity is essential in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of regional and local development policies, strategies, plans, programmes and project operations, as well as that "harmony between modernity and

tradition mean, both territorially and geostrategically, combining the generalised cosmopolitan living patterns with the valorisation of collective identity" (MP 1999 Chapter III: 10).

The problem, however, has been that appropriate analytical frameworks and tools for comprehensive identification and assessing of local diversity, as well as for understanding local-global interdependencies, have been lacking. The objectives of this paper are to highlight some conceptual-methodological shortcoming in interpreting the changing local character of places and regions in the context of globalisation, as well as to present the first findings of an exploratory field-research project on this topic in Portugal.

Conceptual dilemmas and methodological limitations

To reconcile local development needs, potentials and contexts with globally imposed conditions requires a comprehensive recognition of origins and nature of the identity of places and regions. However, to assess, interpret and eventually reorient local effects of globalisation is hardly achievable unless methodological difficulties in grasping the issue of local identity are overcome. Major problem has been that local identity has not been operationalised, that is, transformed from a theoretical construct into a true analytical category.

If it is unclear what the identity of a place or region means in factual and/or verifiable terms, that is, beyond the usual generic designations such as "local character" and "local uniqueness", or "local heritage" and "endogenous specificities", how can one determine what aspect of the identity needs to be strengthened, preserved, diversified, or made more competitive, so that it becomes a factor of local and regional development? Furthermore, how to monitor and evaluate changes in local identity, against which reference points? Which quanti-qualitative benchmarks to use to distinguish, compare, or predict the desirable from unwanted changes in local identity? And, even if the nature of local development issues at stake and the needs for change were identified, who are the legitimate "guardians" of local identity, that is, which institutions or individuals are capable, or entitled, to cope with forces of globalisation locally?

As to the interpretation of effects of globalisation, the major limitation has been an overwhelming dominance of the generalised, macroscopic perspective and too little

empirical insight at the local level. Another limitation has to do with the “underestimation at present of the literature on the local-global nexus in terms of the role of people and their organisations as social agents affecting change” (Hadjimichalis, 1994: 249). Indeed, virtually no effort has been made to divert from a tendency to interpret changes in economic, cultural, political and other spheres of life primarily from the perspective of systems and institutions, and to ignore the fact that every institutional setting is run and used by concrete people, both individually and as groups, and that, consequently, all representations of local identity are necessarily subjective.

Searching for evidence in Portugal

An exploratory, policy-oriented, field research project, entitled “Globalisation, Territorial Identity and Agents of Local Development”, was launched in 1999, with the following main objective: to determine the presence and nature of local consequences of economic and cultural globalisation in rural Portugal.² The findings are expected to contribute to, first, improved focussing, in both conceptual and operational terms, on local identity as a development policy issue and, second, better targeting of development stakeholders in rural development plans, programmes and projects.

The main project activity has been the collection of empirical evidence about changing local identity of rural places and regions, and, at the same time, about the role of development stakeholders in that change.³ Data is being collected through a series of nation-wide surveys on knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) of local development stakeholders in relation to the globalisation effects on local identity.

The principal instruments in the realisation of surveys are KAP questionnaires, each one designed to address a different set of local development stakeholders. In order to obtain as comprehensive as possible information from the stakeholders' reactions regarding local change in the global-local context, the concepts of local identity and globalisation were transformed into analytically manageable components.

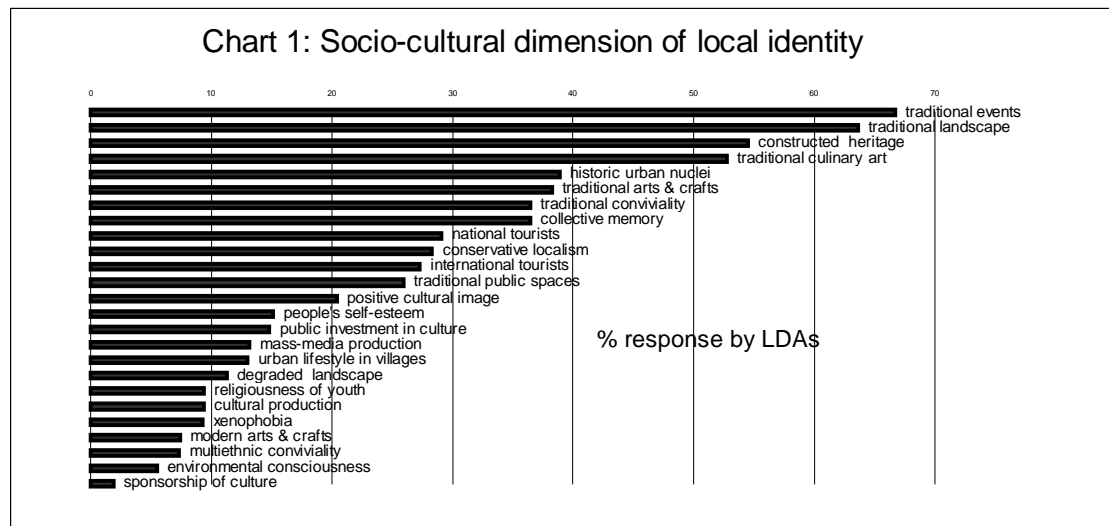
Specifically, the concept of local identity was disaggregated in the KAP questionnaire into three broad clusters: socio-cultural, socio-economic and techno-economic dimensions of identity. Each cluster is composed of twenty-five components that mirror the salient features of rural Portugal, including the already paradigmatic and recently emerging but insufficiently interpreted realities.⁴ Furthermore, references to the global-

local nexus include effects of globalisation of financial capital and investments, markets and competitiveness, communication technologies, consumption patterns and lifestyles and of civic conscientiousness and critical citizenship.

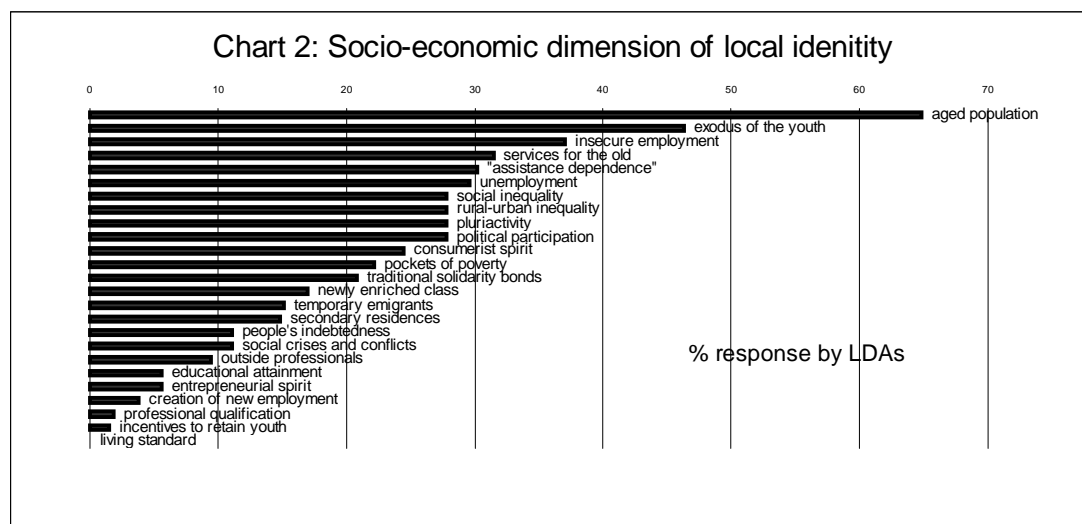
The first KAP survey⁵ addressed a representative sample of fifty-five senior professionals engaged in local and regional development planning and programming, as well as in project formulation and implementation, known as the local development agents (LDAs) in all parts of the country. The preliminary findings are summarised below.

According to the obtained records, the LDAs demonstrated far less homogeneity in their attitudes on local identity as a development issue than it might have been expected, given their professional exposure and experience. This only reconfirmed the ambiguity problem in dealing with this concept. A large majority agreed on only one, basic assumption, i.e., that "to care about local identity must be priority in local development interventions", whereas their judgements diverged on all other aspects, especially regarding the suggested "trade-offs" between the traditional and modern, positive and negative, exogenous and endogenous forces of progress *versus* identity.

Requested to portray the area in which they operate by indicating the level of presence of the components of local identity,⁶ the majority of LDAs ranked as highest the traditional events (feasts, fairs), traditional cultural landscape, constructed rural heritage and traditional culinary art (Chart 1). A sizeable share of medium ranks was attributed to collective memory (songs, legends), presence of national tourists, degraded cultural landscape, traditional modes of conviviality, traditional public places, traditional arts and crafts, urban lifestyles in villages, public investments in culture, positive cultural image, conservative localism and to production of local journals. The three lowest ranking components are, reportedly, the multiethnic conviviality, environmental conscientiousness and private sponsorship of culture.

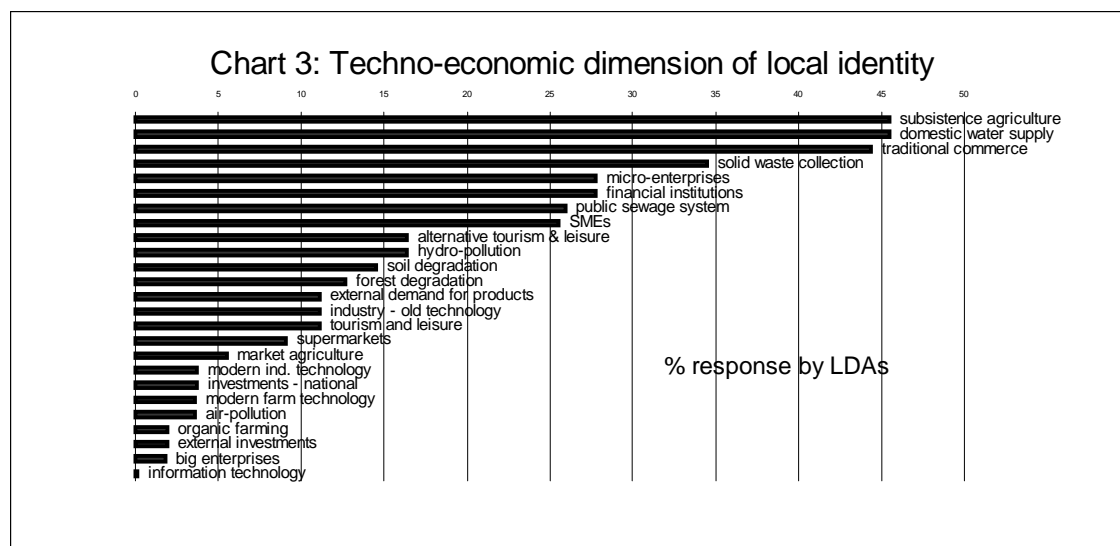


Regarding the socio-economic dimension of local identity, the majority of LDAs attributed the highest rank to the aged population, followed by the components such as exodus of the youth and insecure employment (Chart 2). The medium presence of components such as people's "assistance dependent" spirit, unemployment, rural-urban inequality, traditional solidarity relations, people's consumerist spirit, social inequality and pluriactivity were recorded. Very weak presence of features such as high educational attainment, people's entrepreneurial spirit and incentives to retain youth was indicated.



No single component of the techno-economic dimension of local identity was considered outstandingly present by the majority of LDAs (Chart 3). The highest ranking are subsistence agriculture, domestic water supply and traditional, atomised commerce. Medium ranks belong to such diverse components as micro-, small and

medium enterprises, alternative tourism and leisure industry, old industrial technology, hydro-pollution, forest and soil degradation and presence of supermarkets. Finally, the weakest presence was ascribed to modern agricultural technology, external investments (both national and foreign), organic farming, external demand for agro-products and adoption of information technology.



The only globalisation-related argument on which a clear majority of LDAs expressed the same kind of attitude is "that it is necessary to challenge globalisation at the local level".⁷ The assertion that globalisation of lifestyles and consumption patterns is a negation of local cultural identity was "totally agreed" by less than a majority, while the views on all other aspects diverged very much, and in all directions. For example, there is equal or nearly equal share of those who "totally agree" and who "disagree more than agree" with the allegations that globalisation is, actually, the "americanisation of the economy and culture", that it is a "positive process for the future of Humanity", or that globalisation of culture "can contribute to the affirmation of the local cultural identity".

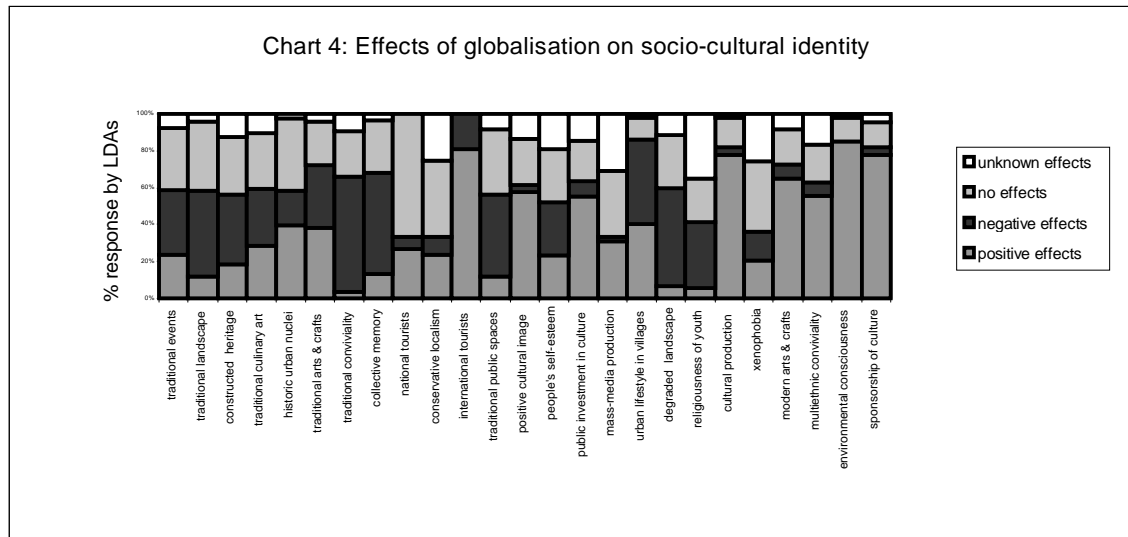
While extremely opposite attitudes were expressed on the issue of whether globalisation of communication technologies is beneficial only to the elite, the two allegations that provoked greatest divergence and indeed scepticism among the LDAs are that "globalisation of markets and competitiveness can contribute to the affirmation of small-scale economy" and that "globalisation is more in favour than against the objectives of local development". Finally, on the issue of whether "globalisation creates ever-greater opportunities for social and economic development in the peripheral

regions” a near majority expressed affirmative views, but this issue provoked also important share of neutral and negative reactions.

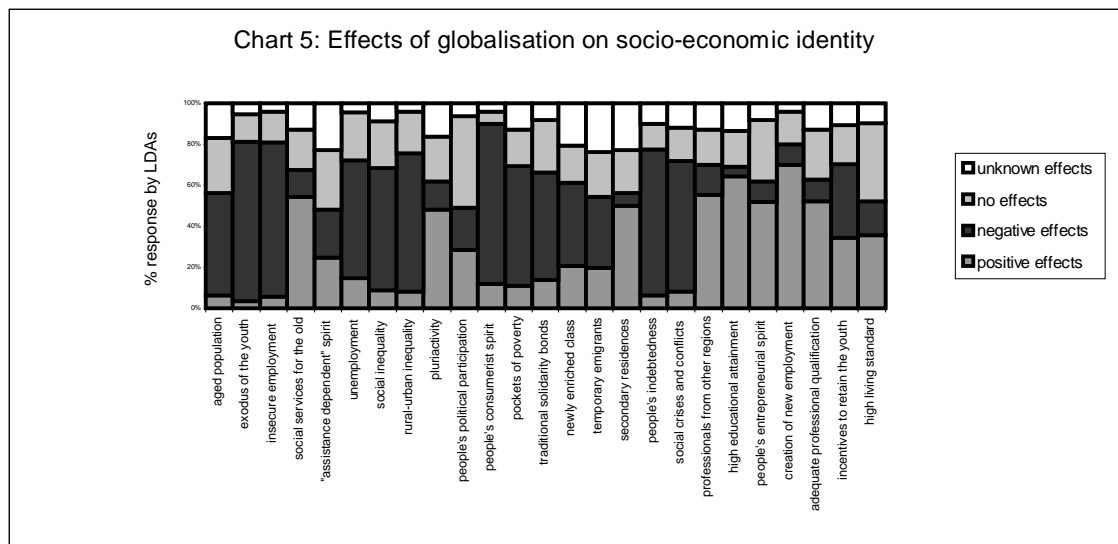
Regarding the effects of specific manifestations of globalisation in Portugal, the LDAs showed greatest unanimity in praising globalisation of communication technologies and of civic conscientiousness and critical citizenship. A less strong, but clear unanimity was shown also in denouncing the effects of globalisation of consumption patterns and lifestyles. A greater inclination towards positive than negative stand was revealed regarding globalisation of financial capital and investments, as well as of markets and competitiveness.

In contrast, regarding effects of globalisation on the area in which they operate, the views of LDAs diverge very much. For example, while a majority praises the globalisation of communication technologies and of civic conscientiousness and critical citizenship, there is also an important share of neutral views on that. Or, while less than a majority considers local effects of globalisation on consumption patterns and lifestyles as "negative" and "very negative", a sizeable share considers such effects "positive" or "uncertain". Greatest levels of uncertain views as well as of division among the LDAs was recorded regarding local effects of globalisation of financial capital and of markets and competitiveness.

It seems that generally more positive than negative effects of globalisation on socio-cultural dimension of identity have been felt in areas in which LDAs operate (Chart 4), particularly as regards the components such as environmental conscientiousness, cultural production, private sponsorship of local culture, presence of international tourists, external cultural image and public investments in local culture. The majority attributed negative effects to only two components of socio-cultural identity, namely traditional modes of conviviality and collective memory (songs, legends, symbols). Other more negatively affected components are, for example, cultural landscape (both traditional and degraded), urban lifestyles in villages and traditional public spaces.

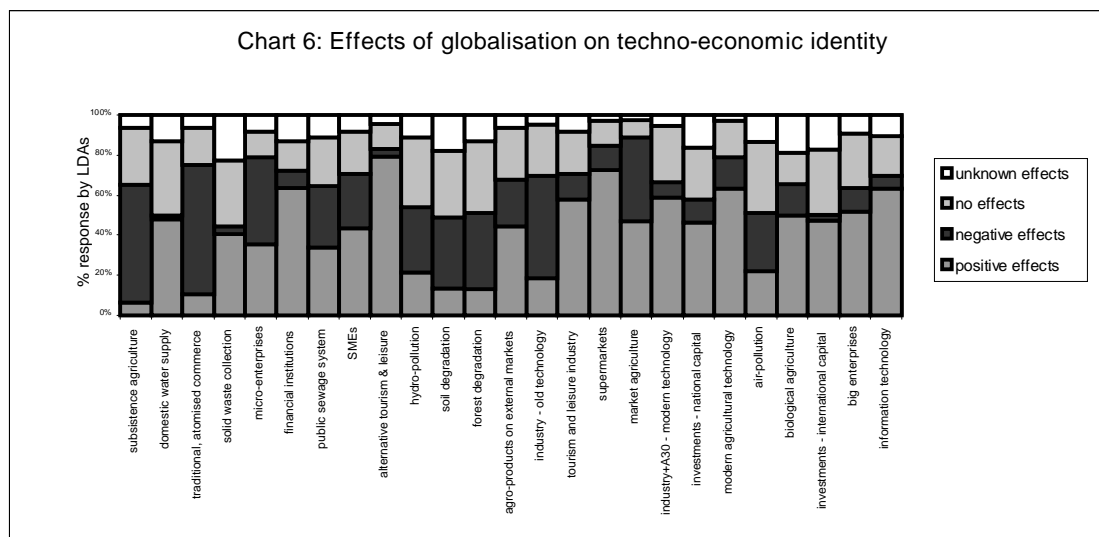


Regarding the socio-economic dimension of identity (Chart 5), the LDAs indicated a much smaller number of positively than negatively affected components. The majority reported positive effects only on creation of new employment opportunities, educational attainment, people's entrepreneurial spirit and presence of professionals from other regions. Negative effects were indicated by the majority on the components such as exodus of the youth, people's consumer spirit, insecure employment, rural-urban inequality, peoples' indebtedness, social crises and conflicts (drugs, crime), social inequality, unemployment, pockets of poverty and traditional solidarity relations.



Finally, the LDAs consider that generally more positive than negative effects of globalisation are felt on techno-economic dimension of local identity (Chart 6). The majority claims that the positively affected components are alternative tourism and

leisure industry, role of financial institutions, adoption of information technology and modern agricultural technology. As to the negatively affected components, the majority identified traditional, atomised commerce and subsistence agriculture.



Regarding the involvement of LDAs in activities that have to do with local identity, two encouraging features were detected from the KAP survey records. First, compared with past, the currently on-going interventions in which LDAs participate seem better focused on the alleviation of negative and assimilation of positive social and economic effects of globalisation. Additional studies should clarify whether such change in priorities has to do with changing nature of local-global nexus, or with redistribution of roles among the existing and emerging new development stakeholders, such as external financial institutions, large entrepreneurs, external experts, secondary residents (often ex-urbanites), emigrants and returnees, and tourists.

Second positive feature is that the LDAs seem eager to engage in the future in exactly those aspects of local identity that are currently underrepresented in their on-going development interventions, such as preoccupations with traditional cultural landscape, positive cultural image, social integration, rural-urban cohesion, people's consumerism and indebtedness, care for the elderly, efforts towards restraining the exodus of the youth, adoption of information technology, strengthening of external demand for local products, biological agriculture, and protecting forests and soils from degradation.

The above-presented survey records indicate that practically all of the high ranking "strongly present" features of local identity related to cultural traditions, socio-

demographic change and structure of rural economy have been affected much more negatively than positively by globalisation. The situation seems particularly preoccupying in respect to the imminent loss of some "uniquely Portuguese", thus potentially competitive assets of the socio-cultural identity such as traditional cultural landscape, traditional events and habits and collective memory.

Furthermore, the survey records show that while the socio-economic identity components such as traditional modes of conviviality, public spaces, subsistence agriculture and traditional, atomised commerce have all been extremely negatively hit by globalisation, the effects on other sectors of local society and economy seem to be less clear cut. For example, the strongly present components of local identity such as micro enterprises, SMEs and financial institutions have been affected equally in positive and negative ways by globalisation.

Some expressly negative features such as xenophobia and conservative localism seem to lose ground, but other, such as over-indebtedness of population, social inequality, rural-urban gap and environmental degradation are actually being reinforced by globalisation.

On the other, more encouraging side, the still very weakly or medium present and/or emerging local identity components such as market agriculture and external demand for local products, alternative tourism and leisure industry, presence of international tourists, cultural production and, linked to all that, creation of new employment opportunities, are all much more positively than negatively associated with impacts of globalisation.

It is, however, encouraging that, though still very weakly present, a number of more dynamic and innovative components of local identity - such as environmental consciousness, people's self-esteem and entrepreneurial spirit, adequate professional qualification, incentives to retain the youth, modernisation of agriculture (including biological farming), external investments and adoption of information technology - have all been more positive than negatively affected by economic and cultural globalisation.

In order to be able to develop typologies of involved processes and gain a clearer picture of policy-relevant linkages between them, the recorded evidence of the nature of local identity and effects of globalisation need to be analysed in the context of specific local geographical and developmental contexts across the country, as well as against the

established and emerging interests and roles of development stakeholders, both individual and institutional ones. This should be also useful in gaining a better insight into local identity features that are known as significant in rural Portugal (e.g., people's "assistance-dependent" spirit, traditional solidarity relations, temporary emigration, growing presence of national tourists, etc.) but, according to the records from the KAP Survey, have not been significantly affected by globalisation

Conclusions

The need to reaffirm local identity as a means of coping with impacts of globalisation has been widely accepted in rural development policies, but much more rhetorically than in operational terms. This largely reflects the fact that development policies and programmes do not rely on comprehensive empirical evidence of the changing content and nature of local identity, as well as of their representations by local development stakeholders. The problem is, however, that recording and assessing such evidence largely depend on ways the apparently simple, but actually cryptic and subjective, thus ambiguous concept of local identity is deciphered into a credible analytical category.

The preliminary results from the first KAP survey on local identity and globalisation and the role of local and regional development agents (LDAs) in rural Portugal have revealed a possible way out of this methodological problem. By breaking down, classifying and clustering the studied phenomena into specific major, readily discernible and verifiable manifestations, dimensions and components, it was possible to record diversified, statistically reliable and analytically viable field-level evidence of LDAs' representations of local identity, globalisation and role of development stakeholders.

The LDAs revealed a quasi-total lack of agreement on a wide range of globalisation-related issues. In a way, this mirrors the diversity of approaches and controversy of interpretations in the waste literature on globalisation. Surprisingly or not, but certainly preoccupying is the fact that the LDAs in their responses on globalisation, demonstrated a great deal of perplexity, scepticism and even pessimism, and too little optimism about the prospects for the affirmation and competitiveness of local culture and socio-economy.

This restrained attitude is in discrepancy with the commonly accredited, politically, financially and otherwise supported concept of promoting local identity as a

strategically important rural development policy option. To what extent this discrepancy has to do with the LDAs' realism that rests on their daily grassroots practice and experience, or with the idealistic exaggerations that tend to accompany the top-down conceived development concepts and policies, only future research will tell.

Endnotes

- 1 There is no commonly accepted definition of the notion of local identity. Depending on the scope, context and purpose of the analyses, the notion of "local" is sometimes referred to as "territorial", "regional", or "community", while the "identity" usually means "culture", "character", or "uniqueness". A mayor breakthrough in clarifying the complexities involved in interpreting this notion was brought about by Rose (1995).
- 2 The project is being implemented by the Centre for Population, Environment and Development Studies at the *Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias*, Lisbon, with the financial support from the Foundation for Science and Technology of Portugal.
- 3 Here the term "stakeholders" designates all individuals or groups of people and institutions that directly or indirectly stand to gain or lose given a particular development course or activity (Roca 1999).
- 4 The environmental and social components are integrated in more than one cluster since they cut across all spheres of life. The inclusion of variety of production- and business-related components has to do with the expectation that, first, "firms now have geographical imaginations that privilege regions and localities as the geographical scales of choice in making decisions about investments rather than the national territories that once dominated their geographical mindset (e.g. Hocking 1997 Elcock 1997 Jones 1997 but see Wright 1998)" (Agnew 2000) and, second, that the importance of local embedding (workforce, information-gathering, markets, finance, etc.) and networks are changing, "since a considerable number of SMEs are also engaged in international and global markets and networks and parts of large firms are also linked to the local environment" (Todtling 1994, 82-83).
- 5 This KAP survey, carried out from February to May 2000, has had the following objectives: (i) to detect and verify the parameters and criteria used by the LDAs in representing the identity of places and regions; (ii) to determine the LDAs' attitudes in relation to the local effects of globalisation of economy and culture; and (iii) to examine the capacity and role of the LDAs in valorising local identity as a development potential of places and regions in which they operate.
- 6 The concept of local identity was presented in the KAP questionnaire as "a set of cultural, social, economic, technological and other specificities of places and regions".
- 7 The phenomenon of globalisation was introduced in the KAP questionnaire as "a process of rapidly growing interdependence, at the planetary scale, of tendencies, problems, values, decision-making and behavioural patterns".

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