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Roses and people: exploring sustainable livelihoods in the Rose valley, Bulgaria

by PRESLAVA NENOVA

Background

I lived in Turnichene, in central Bulgaria, for over a month from May to July 2006. I carried out field research on the social dynamics and processes integral to rose growing-dependent livelihoods in the region.¹ I chose this subject because there has been no significant socio-anthropological research into how social, economic and cultural developments have affected rose growing in the Rose valley since the transition from state socialism.²

The timing was good as it coincided with the rose harvest. I chose Turnichene because it is inhabited by a range of rose producers – those working small family plots and large-scale producers with up to 30 hectares. It is also home to the majority of seasonal labourers who provide vital manual labour. A large part of the population lives in extreme poverty, at least seasonally, despite participating in the annual production of rose oil, a high-value international commodity. Turnichene presented an opportunity to research the co-habitation of the three major ethnic groups in Bulgaria, with a population made up of 12% Turkish, 25% Roma and 63% Bulgarian residents (Ahmed Hodja,



¹ I designed the project as part of my MSc in Anthropology and Ecology of Development at University College London, UK.

² For the most recent ethnographic and historical account (up to 1989), see Zarev (1996).

Mayor of Turnichene, interview).

I gathered comprehensive data from nearly all those whose livelihoods involve the rose crop, and focused on understanding the role of the crop in the lives of those who depend on it most. Working alongside harvesters and small-scale growers was an excellent starting point for my research and gave me a detailed insight into the relationships between the various stakeholders as well as the production process.

The study had a variety of aims and results, but in this article I will focus on describing how, by involving a large sample of the village and through participatory exercises, the project encouraged this ethnically diverse community to articulate their concerns, opinions and knowledge. I used my findings to raise local awareness of the potential usefulness of discussion for clarifying common goals and the possibilities of such discussion at all levels – including amongst the non-literate and those who do not speak the language of contracts and high-level politics.

The adults of Turnichene had been brought up without basic rights and freedom of expression, and many had even been dispossessed of their birth names forcibly by the communist regime. This totalitarian state was superseded by a chaotic restitution and murky processes of transition to a market economy and democracy. Programmes for reducing rural unemployment, introduced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with a degree of coercion, as well as the rife corruption which I witnessed and the illiteracy of many in Turnichene contribute to the stifling of the voices of small-scale and family farmers and poor seasonal labourers.³ They are nonetheless active actors in the dynamic network of power relationships in Turnichene and beyond. The article looks at how I fitted into this and the implications for further research.

Methods

My methods evolved depending on insights I received, relationships I developed and opportunities that arose. I combined planning with a constant rethinking of my approach and integrated myself in the community by living in a Bulgarian household, working on the subsistence plots of a large sample of households as well as alongside harvesters. I also cycled around the village daily, introducing myself and my research objectives to all who were socialising in the square and on their front porches. Many regarded me with curiosity, as my participatory behaviour as a lone stranger was unprecedented. I carefully explained the goals

³ For more information on these government policies and their effects, as well as more information on all issues in this article, see Nenova (2006).

of my study, a personal project, on behalf of a UK University. Seeing me in a neutral light, many were keen to let me know their side of the story. I encountered some initial scepticism when approaching large-scale growers, but they too gladly gave me interviews, giving me their perspectives, presented with fluency and confidence, often during their supervision of the harvest, so that their employees could witness their contact with me.

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted around 100 semi-structured interviews with individuals and focus groups in Turnichene. Bulgarian was spoken well by all in the village and was the dominant language. It is also my first language and I am able to speak village slang or 'folk' Bulgarian, which implied an experience of living in the countryside. Speaking in this familiar way was key in facilitating communication which was spontaneous and relevant to on-going activities. I ensured that I matched my conceptual framework carefully to that of the Turnichene people, for example, by identifying the closest and most easily related to word for 'livelihood' – *pominuk*.⁴ I conducted interviews in an informal and dynamic manner. For example, by tentatively raising a general subject I could judge by the response whether a person had an interest in expanding it. Using open questions helped me see what issues informants wanted to focus on. All interviews took place in the active context of what was being discussed and many were like a prompted running commentary whilst interviewees were working. This meant I was better able to avoid being intrusive and was sensitive to interviewees' time availability and practical limitations to being interviewed.

My first step was to join harvesters at the rose plantations early in the mornings, and to help by picking the flowers alongside them. This not only meant learning through doing and tackling issues as they arose, but also the help I provided went some way towards repaying the interviewees for their assistance with the research, and practically demonstrated an interest in forging a bond of solidarity. At this stage I met key informants and experienced working conditions at the small and large plantations. One day, I witnessed a workers' rebellion in which a large group of Roma employees left the field at midday, costing the large-scale rose grower a significant loss of harvest. This spurred informative discussions and commentary in the village in the ensuing days.

⁴ This word has interesting connotations. One Bulgarian interviewee commented that before the regime change the word had become redundant because the state provided for all and forced people into work, and no one had to worry about day-to-day survival and livelihood security.

Participatory mapping of sources of annual livelihood security with Roma informants.



Photos: Preslava Nenova

Participatory mapping by Turkish and Bulgarian informants.



Photo: Preslava Nenova

I visited all rose producers in the village. The small-scale growers were ones with 15dc (decares) or less. This group of producers use their own family labour, and the area of 15dc is small enough to make viable ways of working the land which are not adequate for larger areas.⁵

I also created detailed family portraits, following Cochrane (2005) for six families. Three of these worked with roses only as paid labourers, and three were small-scale rose growers. Each category included one family from the Roma, Turkish and Bulgarian ethnic groups.

Participatory mapping

The second major step in my methodology was asking focus groups to take part in participatory village mapping and other mapping exercises. There was no official map of Turnichene at the mayor's office or in the municipal administrative offices and so the maps produced served a very immediate purpose (Figures 1 and 2). Equipped with these I carried out focused participant observation as well as transect walks to look out for poverty indicators, which had been brought out by focus group discussions. During the drawing of the map in Figure 1 the participants gave their perspectives on the significance of the distribution of water resources. The detailed account raised further questions for the research, which has been documented in my thesis.

Eight adults from five Roma families from the poorest quarter created the seasonal map shown in Table 1. (I filled in the writing.) It captures the importance of various non-timber forest products and the dire situation in the winter months when there

Figure 1: Map of Turnichene made by a group of four Romany in the village centre (one of whom was literate)

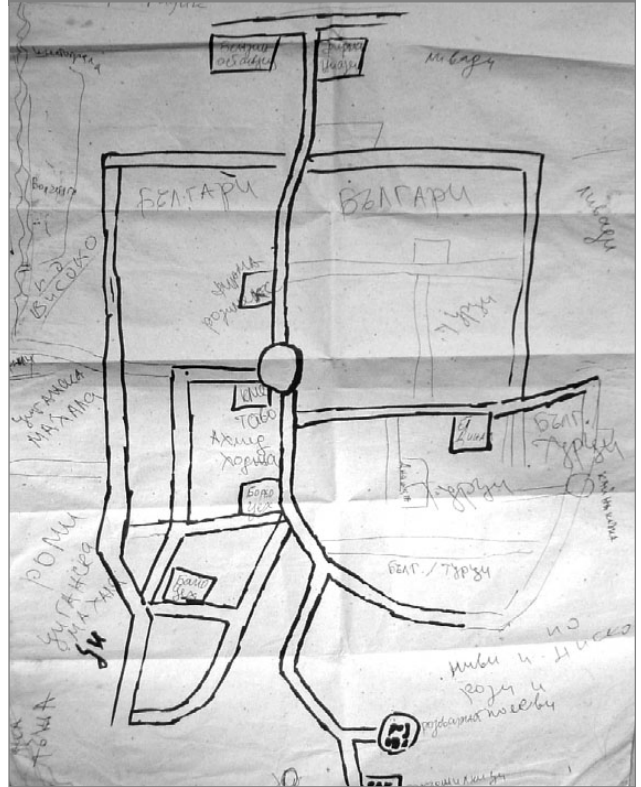


Figure 2: Map of Turnichene made by a group of Bulgarian and Turkish informants (rose pickers)



⁵ 1 decare (dc) = 0.1 hectare = 1000 m². For the purpose of the discussion dc will be used since this is what is used by the respondents.













Table 1: Seasonal mapping exercise

Spring	March The [seasonal farm labour] contracts start (hoeing the roses)	April More hoeing employment	May Only rose harvesting	June Rose harvesting; Second half of the month – cherry picking
Summer	July Lavender harvesting (but now there will be much less income from this because of new harvester machines)	August Raspberry picking	September Raspberry picking Walnut gathering and selling	October Walnut gathering
Winter	November We steal wood. ¹ We collect scrap metal; Survive on what we have accumulated from the summer. ²	December Same as November and we 'write in the shop's book' (shopping on credit from the few local shops)	January Same as November and December	February We dig up wild 'grumotrun' (<i>Ononis campestris</i>) Spiny Restharrow roots from the forest to sell

¹ This refers to the illegal felling of trees from the nearby mountain forests for the purpose of heating of homes and cooking. Most rely on firewood for cooking.

² Not just money but also preserves, which Roma households prepare when a particular vegetable or fruit is abundant, although to a lesser degree than the Bulgarians and the Turkish.

Table 2: Participatory map showing proportional importance of sources of annual livelihood security

Importance This Year (2006)	Importance 5 Years Ago (2001)	This Year (2006)	5 Years Ago (2001)
Medium	Medium		
High	High		
Medium	Low		
High	Medium		
Low	Low		
Low	High		

“..the project encouraged this ethnically diverse community to articulate their concerns, opinions and knowledge.”

is no employment or income.⁶ For May ‘only rose harvesting’ was mentioned. There are no crops fruiting as early as May and no other major agricultural tasks occur.

In Table 2, two cups of equal number of beans were used for the two columns, to reflect on the relative significance of incomes, with each cup representing a year of livelihood. Beans are a very important part of the diet and so are useful symbols. The participants in this exercise were all non-literate.

Social dynamics and lessons learnt

Living in Turnichene, I entered a dynamic social landscape, in which I had to remain neutral. I had no problem getting accepted by people and with them opening up about poverty, indigenous technical knowledge, criminality and many other sensitive issues. Employees even spoke to me openly about their employers, small-scale growers about large-scale neighbours etc. This was because most trusted me to a degree to which they were confident that I would not publicly disclose information which would jeopardise their relationships or livelihoods. This enabled them to raise issues which they even wanted me to convey to other parties, while keeping the source anonymous. In the case where an employer openly spoke of his key role in environmentally and socially detrimental large-scale corruption, his lack of concern was based on having security independent of my knowledge, as well as the fact that most in the village were aware of this and complicit themselves.

However, the same closeness which allowed me to create family portraits and study livelihood strategies in detail was also a constraint in the long term, as with time my presence in various households on an equal basis became unacceptable to informants who had expected me to base my research on a distinct group, rather than sustaining the same interest in all.⁷ When I spent time with key informants, partic-

ularly ones who were from the Roma community, this was seen by the Bulgarian and Turkish community as encouraging the antisocial behaviour of the Roma in the village. Furthermore, other Roma saw this as favouritism which I practised towards some Roma families as opposed to others. In effect, my activity affected village power dynamics, in some cases exacerbating hostilities, and in others forging a sense of communal solidarity. I believe the latter occurred whenever I successfully organised and carried out group mapping or interviews. However, this required an existing good relationship between participants. Outside of their family circles Bulgarian and Turkish villagers did not demonstrate the willingness and availability to spend the dedicated time that a mapping or group interview requires.

In contrast to the Roma, who would engage daily in social interaction in the village square, the Bulgarian and Turkish villagers would not be seen spending leisure time in the street. However, the street is the classic setting for participatory mapping exercises as it is a communal area, supposedly representing free access for all to participate and ensuring the transparency of the exercise. Indeed with the Roma this was possible, and with the exception of the Seasonal Poverty Mapping, I facilitated all Roma group mapping exercises in the central square. There was only one opportunity to carry out a mapping exercise with a mixture of Turkish, Bulgarian and one Roma woman. This was possible because of a celebration of the end of the harvest where a group of about eight employees had gathered around the outdoor table of their rose harvest employer’s cafe. I used this opportunity to carry out the participatory landscape mapping and a group semi-structured interview.

The majority of seasonal labourers, including all Roma, felt vulnerable due to their illiteracy. They also felt isolated because of their particular accents and language. Insecurity showed in all transactions with the job centre, money-lenders and employers. Therefore all such dealings were consciously or otherwise kept to a minimum, and informal relationships such as patron-client ones were welcomed and sought. These, however, did not help with breaking cycles of impoverishment, illiteracy and a general feeling of being at odds with *darjavata* (the state).⁸ This was why many found the way in which they were induced to enter employment contracts arranged between the job centre and large-scale employers disconcerting. Mistrust of the objectives and assumptions

⁶ I suspect unemployment benefits were not mentioned because the participants got the impression I wanted to know about their particular income-generating activities and because the seasonality of benefits was ambiguous. This map also omits some of the variety within the group livelihoods because the participants were aiming to say things which were common to all of them, therefore using ‘we’.

⁷ Discourse as an ongoing argument between conflicting sides can be an organising element in a rural community. This is what the researcher needs to interpret: ‘what is common in a community is not shared values or common understanding so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument, the same *raisonnement*, the same *Rede*, the same discourse, in which alternative strategies, misunderstanding, conflicting goals and values are thrashed out.’ (Sabean, 1984 in Nuijten, 1992, p 205).

⁸ There was a shared view among the poorest that the state must be held responsible for supporting them and that it is the state that had failed them. This recurring concept of the state harks back to the totalitarian state of the communists, centralised power and bureaucracy.

behind the government programme for employment was clear. Many were confused by the paperwork passed between the employers, the job centre and themselves.

In this context I believe that my participatory study served the very useful purpose of stimulating a desire and confidence for expression. Another clear outcome was the clarification of common priorities and obstacles for the various stakeholders. Because people were talking to me as an outsider and re-telling their stories and plights anew, issues had the chance to re-emerge which had otherwise been taken for granted as a fact of life in Turnichene. I believe that the suspicion aroused during my focus on certain groups and families in the village could have been avoided to a significant extent if I had been accompanied by a second researcher. This would have helped dissociate the research from any one individual researcher's personal motives and interests in the eyes of participants. With a number of people working with different groups, hostility could be avoided and, having gained the trust of respective groups, researchers could have brought them together more easily for exercises. A more outcome-driven project, designed to deliver tangible benefits to the community, rather than personal research, may have a better chance of getting Bulgarian and Turkish residents to participate in group interviews and mapping.

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Conclusion

I shared my findings with the Turnichene people as they arose and issues were raised within the community without having to be associated with a particular person or family. This heightened communication, with me as a mediator, seemed to be a positive factor, despite the fact that I facilitated limited direct discussion between different groups of stakeholders. In the context of a disunited and disheartened community I observed the potential to build on the latent capacity of seasonal labourers and small-scale farmers to use their grassroots power to safeguard their rights. Although the exercises I conducted had an empowering effect on certain groups, they did little to disturb existing power relationships, although at times my activity seemed to reinforce existing trends of hostility or group solidarity. Throughout Bulgaria civil society is young and I believe my work gave many in Turnichene a stronger sense that they were not alone and must endeavour to determine their own environment and livelihoods.

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