INTERVIEW

STATE, MARKET AND CIVIL SOCIETY AS ACTORS OF DEVELOPMENT:
THE Challenge of Sustainability in the 21st Century

Interview with Lecturer Heike Doering, PhD
By Priscila De Nadai

In this edition, professor Priscila De Nadai interviewed Heike Doering, PhD in Sociology from Cardiff University (United Kingdom), lecturer at Cardiff Business School and researcher of the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research, also from Cardiff University. In the past few years, she has conducted research about regional development and sustainability management, in emerging economies. One of her research projects is being developed in Espírito Santo in partnership with researchers from our State. In this interview, professor Heike Doering will tell us about her trajectory as a researcher, about her studies and the specific research she is currently conducting in Espírito Santo.

Priscila De Nadai: Tell us about your studying and professional background.

Heike Doering: I studied British Cultural Studies, Economics and Law at the Technical University Dresden in Germany. I wanted to live in the UK after I finished my degree and I was lucky to find a job in the School of History at the University of Nottingham as a researcher. So I learned how to do historical research. Then I went to Cardiff to do my PhD in sociology and now I am working in Cardiff Business School. So I have moved countries, cities and disciplines a couple of times.

Priscila De Nadai: In the last years, we have seen many debates about the concept of sustainability and its importance for economic development. Could you tell us what is this concept and how it emerged?

Heike Doering: Sustainability is a very slippery concept. You are right, there have been many debates about it. The specific word ‘sustainable development’ only goes back to the 1980s, the publication of the Brundtland report. The concept focuses on development that addresses the needs of the present without depleting the resources for future generations. Sustainability then means accepting a long-term perspective and not only following short-term goals. It is also possible to see the publication of Rachel Carson’s ‘Silent Spring’ in 1962 as the starting point for discussions about the environment and its conservations as an important aspect to consider in...
addition to economic growth when talking about development. Similarly, debates in the 1970s and, in particular, the writings of the Club of Rome and their book ‘The Limits to Growth’ need to be seen as influential in contributing to the sustainability debate. And we must not forget the 1992 Rio Earth Summit when talking about the emergence and institutionalization of the concept. At the same time, it is possible to see precursors of ideas of corporate responsibility for more than profits already in the paternalist industrialists of the 19th century.

Priscila De Nadai: How could governments, businesses and the civil society contribute to the sustainable development?

Heike Doering: From my research, first in the UK and now in Brazil, I have learnt that first of all, sustainability needs to be declared (defined) as a priority. Development is often only seen as economic growth or growth in employment. This then neglects or excludes other aspects such as environmental conservation, skills upgrading or social cohesion. This then often means that only governments or potential workers are considered as stakeholders by businesses. When we talk about governments, however, we need to acknowledge that local governments do not necessarily have the same aims as national governments. In addition, in different contexts, businesses as major actors of sustainable development respond to different incentives – whereas in Germany or Scandinavia, businesses might respond well to regulation, businesses in the UK or US tend to prefer their own, ‘voluntary’ forms of action. In this sense, the most important element for sustainable development is governments, businesses and civil society working together to define priorities and objectives. This, however, is a very idealistic notion as in our complex world it is very hard to weigh up and find compromises between multiple agendas.

Priscila De Nadai: Tell us about the research you are conducting here in Espírito Santo. How is sustainability in Espírito Santo?

Heike Doering: I have been learning about ES for two or three years now. I became interested in ES because of the combination of heavy industries (oil, mining, steel, pulp) in a very confined space. I wanted to know how multinational companies, the Brazilian national champions and local governments and citizens work together to achieve sustainable development. I am only at the beginning of this research with my colleague Alexandre Reis Rosa from UFES. So far we have been able to speak to some people in multinationals, local government and civil society. What we have heard is that communication between different actors is a problem. Employers organisations, multinationals, and environmental organisations all work hard to achieve socio-economic transformation but they do not always work together. There are a number of admirable projects but these do not necessarily amount to a coherent sustainable development strategy.

Priscila De Nadai: What is it like to be a German researcher, rooted in the UK, doing a research in Brazil? What are the biggest challenges for an international researcher?

Heike Doering: First of all, I am very fortunate to be able to travel and work across these different cultures. I benefit immensely from experiencing different cultures. That does not mean it is always easy. It is sometimes hard to get away from my own prejudices and stereotypes. Being open to new and unsettling situations is not always comfortable and it can be quite exhausting. It helps to learn different languages to be able to communicate with colleagues and to make friends. It definitely helps to establish relationships with research participants. I also think that the concepts and ideas developed in the Anglo-American context do not always work in a Latin American context. There needs to be more openness to all the interesting and exciting research that is going in Latin America in the ‘North’.