

ACCESSIBILITY AND PROVISION OF SERVICES OF GENERAL INTEREST IN RURAL AREAS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EUROBAROMETER

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I. GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper is to present a state-of-the-art analysis of the provision and access to Services of General Interest (SGI) in rural areas of the European Union. This analysis aims at identifying SGI-related drivers of change, opportunities and constraints that either promote or hinder rural development. The paper reviews various theoretical approaches and carries out empirical analyses based upon different questions included in the Eurobarometer survey, that help to understand the dynamics and state of SGI in rural areas. On this basis, policy recommendations regarding the future of SGI are formulated.

II. COMPETING APPROACHES TO THE PROVISION OF S.E.I.G.

Broadly, the term “SGI” refers to what has been called “public services”. It is called “public” because, for centuries, services such as schools, hospitals, roads, postal service and communications, etc., were provided almost exclusively by public authorities and institutions. However, with the arrival of large-scale privatization of these services, the traditional concept of “public service” was concerned (Banister and Berechman 2000; Nutley 1992). Furthermore, even though some of these services are currently offered by private companies, there are basic differences because, for example, services such as hospital care have distinct connotations that are different to other private services. The “public” has a special interest in certain services (mainly those who belong or used to belong to the public domain) that are called “SGI” (Muscar 2008).

The concept of SGI is used in all strategic documents of the European Union in the field of services. The EU appears to adopt a neutral position toward the issue of the public or

private nature of the provider, while reaffirming that certain services are of particular importance to the quality of life of citizens and the functioning of European economies (COM, 2003, 2008a). Consequently, SeIG would include all services considered of the general interests of a particular society and, therefore, are subject to public service obligations.

Paradoxically, there is no definition or “list” of SGI in Europe. Even the strategic documents of the European Commission on this issue (Green and White Papers) fall short when it comes to providing a listing. This may be due to a cautious attitude of the Commission in order to avoid trespassing their competences through policy statements about services that rely primarily on national, regional or local regulations. Moreover, in the context of the EU there is a degree of diversity as regards cultural traditions, social models and political styles that makes it difficult to reach consensus on what services should be considered of “general interest”.

Clearly related to the provision and use of SGI is the concept of “accessibility”; ie, the link between services and users. Accessibility is a multidimensional concept that includes physical, temporal, economic and socio-cultural aspects. There is consensus in the scientific literature that the concept of mobility has two components that are related to the provision, access and use of the SGI: on the one hand, an objective component related to the quality and availability of infrastructure and transport services; on the other hand, a subjective component referred to different subjective characteristics of those entering (Moseley, 1979; Farrington and Farrington, 2005).

The question of what services are essential to the general welfare of society and, therefore, should be covered or provided by the State, has been the subject of debate for centuries. Different theoretical conceptions of “essential services” are behind. The debate may relate to the general theme of territorial cohesion in which there are competing theories about how cohesion and sustainable development can be achieved. Another set of theories try to explain the best location for different services. In many of these theories the concept of accessibility appears as a central element. Without being exhaustive, this paper delves into a reflection on some of the main theoretical approaches that address the role of SGI.

III. CAUSAL MECHANISMS EXPLAINING THE PROCESS OF CHANGE OF SEIG IN EUROPE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The article undertakes a dual analysis of empirical evidence: first, on the answers to some questions concerning the quality and use of the SGI present in the different editions of the Eurobarometer; on the other hand, research conducts an analysis of the results of studies by different authors in relation to the provision and use of SGI. These analysis have focused on identifying causal mechanisms that explain the processes of change in SGI in Europe.

In the context of a large and diverse rural world, where in most cases, human activity is less intense and the size of settlements smaller, limitations on accessibility are more and greater, especially for disadvantaged social groups (Moseley, 2000). Access to, and use of, SGI, often far from urban quality standards, involves more effort in terms of economic cost, time and energy consumption for both, rural residents, and public and private organizations responsible for their provision and maintenance. The impact of the difficulties described is compounded by the small size of local markets in rural areas and the apparent shortage

in the provision of services. In remote rural areas, for instance, these problems can lead to increased intra- and inter-regional disparities. In these areas, problems related to accessibility are a serious obstacle for sustainable development, including the satisfaction of basic needs, as well as individual and collective expectations. The vast territories characterised as “declining rural areas” in diverse academic and policy documents, offer their residents a reduced possibility for obtaining suitable employment or engage in social activities (Storey and Brannen 2000), as well as an increased risk of social exclusion and personal privacy (Rostami 2005). Therefore, the status, availability and prospects of providing services in rural areas is one of the main drivers of change for sustainable long-term development, and a key issue in terms of its potential contribution to the reduction of regional disparities.

The empirical analysis of accessibility to SGI in rural areas of the EU shows heterogeneous considerations and treatments of the subject depending on the reference sources. While there is abundant literature on demand, availability and access to SGI in rural areas of western European countries, in the case of Mediterranean countries, most of analysis focus upon case studies concerning the problems associated to depopulation of remote and disadvantaged rural areas. Supported by the arguments of efficiency in the use of public resources, many institutions and governments of the European periphery aim, increasingly, at the functional and territorial concentration of services in a limited number of locations selected according to their geographical or demographic relevance. In the best of cases, this is accompanied by the establishment of flexible service delivery networks. In many other cases, extensive rural areas just fall behind. Behind these processes is the recognition of the lack of economic viability of the most isolated and least populated territories, and the difficulty that the, often constitutional, aspiration to equal rights will ever happen.

On the contrary, still in Mediterranean but also in NMS countries, we hardly find references to the situation of supply and access to SGI in accessible rural areas, largely getting the consequences of rapid urban growth as a result of the relocation of productive and residential activities. Moreover, this usually happens in regions where rapid changes are occurring in the traditional territorial configuration; changes that are not always guided by proper planning, thus threatening territorial rationality of the resulting models. Also, once again, the arrival of “newcomers” to the rural environment poses the challenge of how to combine the different cultures of demand and access to services.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The article highlights some aspects and processes that must be considered when developing proper planning of available resources and planned investments in the field of SGI. It is essential to know the real needs and demands of the population before implementing plans and programs that may not be relevant to those involved in territorial development. A flexible approach to the interpretation of the nature of the territory is needed in order to be able to understand the dynamics of rural diversity. In this way, many contextual elements that influence mobility and accessibility may emerge.

A better knowledge of the factors and processes that condition the access to services in rural areas shall result in several potential benefits: first, to understand the diversity of rural accessibility problems in line with the diversity of rural areas; second, to establish an strate-

gic prioritisation of public and private services according to their relevance in terms of maintaining social fabric in rural areas, in order to prioritise their conservation and improvement in adequate accessibility conditions for rural residents; third, to determine success and/or innovative solutions for provision of SGI (public and private) in rural areas; fourth, to set up adequate procedures to implement these solutions; fifth, to propose methods and procedures to develop strategies to counteract real and potential problems of social exclusion associated to bad accessibility to services in rural areas. According to this reasoning, it seems both unavoidable and justified a public intervention to improve accessibility conditions. In the case of extensive rural lagging and/or remote areas the goal is to ensure equal opportunities of access to SGI in relation to other more advantaged locations. In rural areas close to cities the challenge is to contribute to a more rational and efficient territorial organisation in the context of quick changes that put at risk natural and cultural resources. As such this is acknowledged by several strategic documents of the EU (COM 1991 and 2004) that also recognises the specific circumstances and difficulties associated to access and provision to services in rural areas.

In any case, an improvement in accessibility conditions to SGI in rural areas will contribute to the goal of equal opportunities and to reduce regional disparities. It is, therefore, logical that some authors point to several accessibility issues among the key elements for the strategies of insertion of rural areas in the global economy (Silva Pérez 2002): improved access to IST technologies, new accessibility demands derived from an increased presence of urban-based cultures, intense territorial modifications in suburban areas and accessibility needs derived, new forms of governance (from Keynesian to Schumpeterian model) and an increased capacity for action for local governments, etc. (Ferraio, 1997).

The free market habituates mechanisms for well-being consecution as long as two conditions exist: on the one hand, that the economic profitability is ensured; on the other hand, linked to the economic profitability there must be a minimum “critical mass” demand. If one of these conditions fails (ie. population below profit thresholds, reduced accessibility that increases costs, lack of “critical mass” for a particular need even if basic, etc.) the service losses quality or disappears. Hence, it depends on the dominant constitutional model of each state whether principles of “equal opportunities” or “territorial equivalence” are considered and pursued. According to the profitability driven rules of the free market, it seems clear that any State or region pursuing territorial equivalence will need to undertake some kind of intervention in order to guarantee adequate provision and accessibility to services of general interest for all citizens regardless their place of residence.

The role of the state in relation to the provision and accessibility to SGI must be adaptive to the particular requirements and demands in each territory, and consequent with its social and technological evolution. In a context of an increasing liberalization and internationalization in the provision of SGI, governments must guarantee the principles of territorial equivalence and equal opportunities. The European Union constitutes one of the political environments which more evident positioning in relation to the achievement of regional cohesion, and the principles of equal opportunities and territorial equivalence, as shown by different declarations from the Foundational Treaty to the Lisbon Strategy (The Future of Rural Areas, 1987; The European Spatial Development Perspective, 1994; the Agenda 2000 and 2000+; Cohesion Reports, etc.) and implemented in multiple policies and programs whose objective is social and territorial cohesion, and the reduction of regional disparities.

Provision and access to SGI are central to the EU cohesion and regional policy, reflecting the goal of territorially equilibrated development. However, the objectives of “territorial equivalence” and equal opportunities in relation to services does not depend only on the existence of a particular service but also on other key factors (Muscar 2007) like the capacity and quality of the equipment, its location and hinterland, or its accessibility. An adequate understanding of the previous factors will allow for the identification of gaps and improvement needs.

Provision and accessibility to SGI is a primary driver of change for rural areas. There is little doubt that the state of provision and accessibility to SGI in rural areas will largely condition their capacity to maintain and attract population and to break the rural deprivation “vicious circle”. In most cases rural areas are characterized by small settlements with reduced local markets and highly aged population, unable to generate and sustain an adequate provision and accessibility to basic services based on market criteria. It is necessary a public action focused on territorial cohesion that continues and boosts efforts already carried out by different administrations.

The traditional configuration of public administrations (sectorial, hierarchical, bureaucratic, not cooperative) favours non coordinated and sectorial policy design and implementation. New forms of governance more cooperative, coordinated, participative, integrated, territorial-based, and less hierarchical and bureaucratic, have arose during last 15 years thanks to the impulse of EU policies and programs. In this case, rural areas were pioneer in the implementation of territorial based policies (i.e. LEADER method) that have been extended later to other policy areas. A more effective and relevant delivery of services in rural areas will need policies designed and implemented on the basis of the territorial system concept. These policies will need to consider all elements that have influence or are influenced by the provision and access to services (i.e. transport policy, demographic structure, cultures of mobility, available income, etc.).

