

NEW FUNCTIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN RURAL AREAS: THE NEED TO ADAPT TO LONG-TERM SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION METHODS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, European rural areas have been subjected to major changes. These were aimed at avoiding any worsening of their imbalances or break-up of their territorial structures, while attempting at the same time to achieve their social and economic cohesion. The causes that explain these interventions are related to the greater social and economic backwardness of rural zones, as opposed to urban and industrial regions. A range of factors are involved in this backwardness, the most prominent being, above all, those connected with successive economic trends, political actions and the increasing dominance of the principles of globalization.

It is essential to establish appropriate schemes for development in rural areas that are capable of putting a brake on outward flows of people and, indeed, of maintaining population levels in them. This land strategy must serve to improve the financial prospects and diversify the sources of income of country-dwelling families, employing production methods that take full advantage of local resources. Such a model of development must take an overall view of the area. It must strive to attain an economic equilibrium, bringing in all rural zones and paying particular attention to the most backward and those with the greatest break-down in their structures of production. As time has gone by, there has been a move from horizontal and sector-based measures towards initiatives of an overall and integrating nature, with a clear regional component. These have even been incorporated into regional economic policies with the intention of extending development to all the areas within the European Community.

The objectives of this paper are centred on an analysis of the processes of change and development in rural areas in Europe. Such processes require a multi-disciplinary approach that must cover the following aspects: a) interpretation of the dynamics of rural systems

from an integrating perspective, combining at one and the same time social, economic and territorial dimensions; b) consideration of the difficulties presented by market mechanisms when remunerating the functions carried out by rural areas, some of which are acquiring a major social and environmental role; c) finally, the relative inefficiency of public policies in maintaining the rural fabric and achieving what they set out to do. These latter have often led to disruptions of a territorial or economic nature or the loss of social vitality or have encouraged effects that do not coincide with the demands of society. This, in its turn has obliged people to reflect on the validity of the large budgets devoted to the agricultural sector and the way that they do not match the requirements and preoccupations of society. All this should serve to boost integrated rural development, which has become a clear strategy for land use and must strive to attain a relative dynamism of the various rural areas through involving the local population. This should lead to the setting up of initiatives capable of encouraging the diversification of production, stimulating measures protecting the environment and making full use of local resources, while achieving sufficient social dynamism to ensure the multi-functionality of rural areas.

II. NEW FUNCTIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN RURAL AREAS: THEIR MATCH TO CURRENT SOCIAL DEMANDS

In the delimitation of rural areas in the European Union, criteria of differing sorts are used, their heterogeneity being very obvious. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), working from a territorial and demographic perspective, defines three types of area in accordance with their population and the degree to which they are rural: a) predominantly rural regions, representing 13% of the population and 40% of the area of the E.U.; b) regions that are significantly rural or intermediate and include 48% of the population, extending over half the Union's land area; (these first two rural categories together represent 60% of the population and cover 90% of the territory of the Community; c) lastly, predominantly urban zones, comprising 39% of the population and only 10% of the Union's territory.

In another OECD classification, the diversity and striking differences in the patterns of development of rural areas, as indicated by the development of sector by sector employment, are highlighted. This classification complements the previous division, establishing four types: 1) dynamic but remote rural regions: although they are situated far from urban centres, they have abundant natural resources, adequate communication and transport links and a considerable environmental reserve that can have an impact on attracting tourists, new residents or enterprises; 2) remote and backward rural regions, which most closely reflect the traditional image of rural areas in decline, facing major difficulties, as they have deficient access routes, low densities and a marked ageing of population, an insufficient provision of infrastructures and public and private services, while the agricultural sector still holds a major position in their economy as a whole, as may be deduced from the high levels of employment in farming or the structures of agriculture which have undergone little modernization; 3) dynamic intermediate regions, which are more involved in the process of urbanization and enjoy solid links with metropolitan centres, witnessing strong growth in services and often having a presence of specialist businesses, reflected by the creation of jobs; 4) backward

intermediate regions, which are industrial zones or those dependent on public enterprises that are in the midst of progressive restructuring, such regions having good accessibility along with adequate infrastructures and services, which may work in their favour and serve as a basis for attracting new investments, thus contributing to diversification of production.

Currently, rural areas in the E.U. fulfil various functions. These functions ought to meet the needs and demands of present-day society, while also complying with commitments made at international levels. While thinking must be at an over-arching level, actions must be local, so as to obtain the greatest benefits from the new economic situation and the possibilities arising from local resources. The European Commission understands this more complex view of the role of agriculture as making it possible to justify intervention by public authorities in agricultural markets. It considers that European agriculture has various parts to play, permitting reference to multi-functionality of production, corresponding to the following functions: a) the production of foodstuffs for human consumption, as fodder for livestock and for industrial uses, as has developed over the ages; b) the preservation of valuable landscapes and the rural environment, as an inheritance and clear evidence of a past laden with history and emotion, these acting as routes for intervening on the land; c) finally, a contribution to the viability of rural areas and to balanced economic development from a regional viewpoint. This is related to the setting in train of measures linked to sustainable development and a model of progression in agriculture based on the application of good agricultural practice and obtaining products of high quality.

These new orientations for rural areas are included in the functions assigned and developed by regions and in the search for complementary economic prospects and alternatives for European agriculture and, by extension, for all rural zones. A territory is a social product, so that each region must have the capacity to set up its own development projects, in which the local population must be involved. Here lies the root of the crucial role that regions have gradually acquired in local and rural development. This is visible in a number of ways: a) the move away from seeing land as no more than a support for production processes; b) the consideration of land as a further economic resource; c) the combination of environmental, economic, social and cultural factors necessary to put forward an appropriate development strategy; d) finally, the boost for development in which regions and the economy attempt to resolve human needs and encourage economic models applying practices that respect the environment.

It is this new evaluation of land that supports the establishment of the varying types of resources that will be fundamental in carrying out an integrated analysis of territories and encouraging initiatives for rural development. Among these the following may be mentioned: 1) natural resources; 2) agricultural resources; 3) historical and cultural resources; 4) environmental and landscape resources; 5) finally, ethnological and anthropological resources. It is the availability of these various resources in a territory that to some degree constitutes the basis for its multi-functionality of production. They are the foundation on which rest the new processes and developments in rural areas, which will serve in designing strategies and alternatives for development and to firm up the new functions of the countryside. Among the latter the following stand out: a) functions of a traditional nature, such as the production of food through arable or pastoral farming, forestry or certain craft activities; b) the provision of alternative incomes for rural communities, coming from countryside tourism, new craft and

service activities or the encouragement of small and medium enterprises; c) encouragement for the appreciation and sale of high-quality local and regional agricultural products; d) favouring development and renovation of the heritage of towns and villages; e) support for investment in rural infrastructures and shared facilities in the countryside; f) encouragement of territorial and ecological balance and boosting of protection of the environment through putting into place good agricultural practices; g) finally, acting as a support for leisure, recreational or cultural activities. These functions doubtless constitute the basis for advances in the direction of the required integrated rural development in accordance with the principles of sustainability. In this, multi-functionality of land and diversification of production must become fundamental objectives in suggesting new approaches and proposing development initiatives in the varied rural areas within the Community.

III. THE DYNAMICS OF INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT: ITS CONSIDERATION AS A REGIONAL STRATEGY IN MOVING TOWARDS MULTI-FUNCTIONALITY OF RURAL AREAS

Boosts for rural areas must be given by considering rural development as an action involving various policies and sectors. They should include a definite commitment to maintaining population levels in the countryside, firm support for the transformation and improvement of the living conditions of the groups of humans who live there, and consideration of criteria for the conservation and rational and sustainable use of material resources.

Rural development must thus be seen as the social and economic structuring and articulation of a region that is primarily rural, using criteria of solidarity, sustainability and cohesion. The local population itself must be involved in all this through the application of a bottom-up procedure. This dynamic for countryside development must bring together agricultural and rural improvements so as to achieve an appropriate linkage between them, in order to enhance the socio-economic dynamism of the various rural areas in the Community.

Rural development has changed over time and gradually adapted to the differing realities and modifications that have affected rural areas in the Community to such an extent. It has become the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as reformed. It has also gained its own status from the clearly integrated and multi-disciplinary approach that assigns a major role to the countryside.

Since the early 1960s the dynamics of rural development have been affected by a number of events, and the approaches and basic objectives that should be pursued in the various rural regions of Europe have taken shape. Among these, there is no doubt that the Salzburg Conference (2003) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), as covered by Regulation 1698/2005, stand out, since they bring together fundamental ideas from previous documents and constitute the framework for the policy of integrated rural development at the start of the new millennium. Hence, rural development occupies a prominent place within the European political agenda. This fresh countryside paradigm and the setting of new value on rural areas are seen as a key factor in land use organization and the search for initiatives with enough capacity to move them on and influence their socio-economic dynamism and in the diversification of production.

The foundations of a true policy for rural development in the E.U. began to be laid in the agreements on programmes emerging from the Salzburg Conference. In them, among other points, the following principles were accepted: a) maintaining a living countryside, which will benefit all of society; b) preservation of the diversity of the European countryside so as to retain the rich and varying heritages of rural landscapes; c) ensuring rural development policies correspond to the needs of rural society and are applied throughout the E.U.; d) making sure rural development policy is implemented through active participation by public and private organizations, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity; e) finally, handing over greater responsibility to associations or local action groups when formulating and applying general strategies, particularly by means of the creation of networks and the exchange of details of good practice.

To cover the financial requirements of rural development policy, the EAFRD was created, incorporating the philosophy and guidelines of this new policy. Its approval has opened up many possibilities for the various rural areas in the Community, as it has corrected the dissociation of agriculture from rural development that existed in earlier years, and it will also contribute to the promotion of sustainable development throughout the E.U.. The measures laid out in the Regulation are the following: a) the first axis refers to improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors through assistance for restructuring, development and innovation, coinciding in general terms with the traditional policy for agricultural structures; b) the second axis refers to the improvement of the environment and natural surroundings, in which aid aimed at land use organization should contribute to sustainable development, ensuring that farmers and forestry entrepreneurs manage land, applying methods compatible with the preservation of landscapes and the protection of natural resources; c) the third axis is devoted to the diversification of rural economies and improving the quality of life in the countryside so as to move towards multi-functionality of production and keep rural areas structured and alive; d) lastly, the fourth axis concentrates on transverse application of the Leader method to the previous three actions, as a regional, multi-sector, participatory, bottom-up and innovatory approach, which constitutes a clear recognition of this methodology.

For these reasons, the future of European rural development policy will show greater efficiency from having been set in the context of E.U. policies, provided, of course that it finds the necessary support within national and regional policies. Rural zones have become areas for action that require firm interventions, appropriately combining land use balance, local and sustainable development, and they are obliging the various governments concerned to adopt measures intended to adjust institutional frameworks so as to achieve the greatest possible advantages. If the results attained are positive, European rural areas will benefit and have available to them opportunities for development that will allow their inhabitants to take advantage of the benefits accruing from the proper exploitation of their resources and permit the creation of wealth and jobs that will help keep population in rural areas. This decision making will highlight the various capacities of rural development groups to adapt to successive social and economic trends, which will doubtless become initiatives and specific projects to encourage dynamism and multi-functionality of production in European rural areas.

IV. BY WAY OF FINAL EVALUATION

Integrated rural development must be structured by means of long-term planning on the basis of appropriate land use. In this way, actions, besides fitting the resources and potentials of an area, will hold within themselves a guarantee of future conservation of resources.

So that the new economic functions associated with an expanded rural development policy will take root in the various countryside areas of Europe, it is necessary for the measures undertaken by the local population to follow a harmonious and sustainable progression. They must take into account the following actions: a) ensuring an appropriate combination of the agricultural and territorial dimensions; b) encouraging regional and structural policies for social, economic and territorial cohesion so as to integrate them into sustainable rural development; c) development of transport and information and communication technology infrastructures; d) provision of public services in the various rural areas, so as to avoid any increase in socio-economic and territorial inequalities; e) getting full benefit from of rural assets and resources, which should contribute to economic development and the building up of the socio-economic and territorial fabric; f) strengthening of the multi-functionality of production of European rural areas with the aim of ensuring that correct use is made of the range of local resources and of encouraging new economic functions; g) improving the farming and forestry sectors, so that they will be able to provide sufficient income to create employment and offer better living, working and production conditions, while giving rural areas a spatial structure; h) protection of the environment and natural surroundings by keeping a balance between conservation and exploitation of natural resources; i) conservation of the cultural heritage as a clear witness to what has been inherited from the past; j) encouragement for rural enterprise development that will contribute to the diversification of the socio-economic fabric, such enterprises being principally based on making use of, processing and selling local resources; k) support for procedures leading to the training of, and the achievement of vocational qualifications by, the local population, especially those linked to the knowledge society, agricultural good practice and the encouragement of local networks and rural development groups.

The rural areas of Europe are affected by many uncertainties and must face many challenges and threats. The local populations must respond to these not through its own capabilities and internal dynamics alone, but also needs the participation of outside forces, so as to answer present-day demands and match the requirements of the global economy. For all these reasons, throughout the varying rural zones of the Community, regional strategies for integrated rural development must be able to set in train initiatives of various sorts. At the same time they must show their potential to render rural economies more dynamic and their promise for the future by encouraging activities aimed at boosting multi-functionality of production and the application of production methods that are sustainable and respectful of the conservation of resources and inherited cultural patrimony, in this way achieving a clear social commitment to future generations.