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Sociological and cultural developments in the rural areas

Rural economy - The shift of the EU policy framework towards rural development brings in the wider debate about the use of the countryside and the range of non-commodity outputs produced by agriculture as an asset for access, recreation, conservation, amenity, heritage and tourism. It also requires the effects of societal changes such as aging populations, the movement of people from rural to urban areas, etc. to be understood. If rural areas in Europe should acquire new vitality without agricultural production as its economic mainstay, but nevertheless keeping the land in 'good agricultural condition', what are the technical and economic options? What innovations in land use practices, production systems and nature management will be required? Is the knowledge system prepared to provide options for these innovations?

Sociological and cultural developments in the rural areas

In the '90 rural studies have introduced significant innovations in the way we think rurality, the way we study it and consequently the goals and the tools of rural policies. There are at least four aspects which should be considered on this respect:

- empirical evidence showing the process of differentiation of the countryside into very diverse patterns, and the role that restructuring process at global level play; rural areas today range from very specialized agri-food districts to pure recreational spaces;
- the importance that cultural aspects play into rural change; there is an increased awareness that cultural specificity can be mobilized as a resource to differentiate local products, to create notoriety of the place, to stimulate innovation processes;
- increased evidence and understanding that to control rural change is inherently linked to change in policy approaches and in governance patterns; rural policy is increasingly understood as much broader than agricultural policy, as it implies a global and integrated approach. At the same time, the awareness of the importance of cultural aspects shifts the attention to the role of policies on immaterial resources such as knowledge and symbolic capital;
- increased attention by urban groups on the countryside and on the goods it can provide. This means that viability of rural economies is more and more related on the quality and intensity of the links with urban groups;

As an outcome of the debate generated over the aspects illustrated above, the identification of rurality and the distinction between rural and urban is to be understood less and less through 'objective' parameters and more and more through focusing on the socio-spatial patterns resulting from interaction between local and global actors, which are at the basis of discourse creation, distribution of power and flows of resources.

As a consequence of these approaches, speaking of viable rural economies in a globalised world means to give to people living in the countryside appropriate tools and strategies be in control of processes of change and namely of resource flows, of the meanings given to the aspects of rural life, of knowledge generation, of regulation.