

Professor Laurent Van Depoele, Catholic University of Leuven
Socio-economic and political changes in EU-rural areas.

« Aware that rural areas...are characterised by a unique cultural, economic and social fabric, an extraordinary patchwork of activities, and a great variety of landscapes... Believing that rural areas and their inhabitants are a real asset to the European Union, and have the capacity to be competitive..... » The Cork Declaration, 9th November 1996.

INTRODUCTION

Rural people have the feeling that they are facing a period of considerable changes.

1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES

EU enlargement, increasing globalisation of trade, reducing transport costs and the changing consumer demands have led to a new context for agricultural policy and consequently for rural policy : agriculture and local rural economies now find themselves in a rapidly changing environment :

- outside pressures (expanding world markets, WTO, consumers;
- decline in agricultural employment;
- reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the unevenly distribution of support across regions and producers;
- a more critical public opinion on the role and the cost of the CAP and the problematic relationship between farmers and civil society ;
- growing awareness of the quality of life, the value of rural amenities and the nature of local public goods ;
- diversification of the rural economy ;
- demographics and migration patterns ;
- urban-rural relationships and peri-urban problems.

2. CHANGES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

In historical terms « rural development » is a rather new phenomenon.

1987 Single European Act (single market)

1988 European Commission paper « Future of Rural Society »

(L'avenir du monde rural) set out the foundation of EU rural development policy and stated that the objective to be pursued is not only that of speeding up economic development in rural areas but also that of strengthening the protection of the rural environment.

WHY rural development became important:

- quantitative and qualitative arguments
- decline in agriculture
- necessity for economic and social cohesion

In November 1996 the Cork Conference on Rural Development helped shape Agenda 2000 and rural development policy as the second pillar of the CAP.

In November 2003 the Salzburg Conference suggested some guiding principles for the future rural policy as from 2007. These include :

- a reinforced commitment to the economically, environmentally and socially sustainable development of all rural areas that are so vital to the EU ;
- an agreement that some rural areas lag behind others in terms of services, infrastructure, employment and development potential, and that assistance to them needs to be reinforced ;
- the simplification of the delivery of rural development support, including the funding aspects ;

Over the years EU policies targeting the wider needs of rural areas have been growing in importance. The rural development policy has shifted from a sectoral to a territorial approach, from subsidies to investment, from top-down to more bottom-up, from centralised administration to more regionalism, and to more attention to public goods.

Today the territorial dimension of the future cohesion policy and its aim to contribute to growth and jobs in the light of the renewed Lisbon agenda is also very important for rural areas. The concept of territorial cohesion, as laid down in the constitutional treaty, extends beyond the notion of economic and social cohesion, and aims at achieving a more balanced development, to build sustainable communities and to seek greater consistency with other sectoral policies which have a spatial impact. This involves improving territorial integration and encouraging cooperation between and within regions. Policies aiming at identifying and targeting regional/ local economic opportunities became more important since the 1990's by focussing more on endogenous assets than on exogenous transfers.

New approaches such as multi-level governance, good governance regionalism and the bottom-up approach have given clear prove of the importance of local actors in rural development and have been driving forces behind public sector reforms.