



**Thematic Working Group 1: Targeting territorial
specificities and needs in Rural Development Programmes
Approaches to the definition of Rural Areas in 2007-2013 RDPs**

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Connecting Rural Europe

Approaches to the Definition of Rural Areas in the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programmes

Summary

This article presents an investigation of different approaches utilized in national and regional RDPs to define rural areas. Findings indicate the overwhelming use of alternative (to the OECD) definitions of rural areas. This choice seems to be driven by both different concepts of rurality and policy considerations. As a result of these definitions, there is a significant increase of population and territory classified as rural.

Introduction

This article presents one of the tasks of EN RD Thematic Working Group 1 (TWG1), which has a mandate to pursue the investigation of the extent to which Rural Development Programmes (RDP) for 2007-2013 efficiently target territorial specificities in terms of development needs in the EU. In more detail, the first phase of TWG1 work has reviewed several national and regional RDPs in an attempt to analyse and assess: the definition of rural areas by EU Member States for the general purpose of the RDP; the definition and management of demarcation and complementarity between different EU and national financing tools in these areas; and the extent of targeting of specific rural territories by the RDP, the assessment of their development needs, and the application of measures and resources to meet those needs. Within this context, different approaches utilized by EU Member States and regions for defining rural areas within their RDP, as well as the factors leading to such alternative definitions are presented here. To this end, the next section deals with the different definitions of rurality adopted by Member States and regions. This is followed by an account of factors leading to these definitions. The final section of this article presents the effect of these alternative definitions (in comparison to the OECD classification) on the proportion of land, population and municipalities classified as rural.

Alternative Definitions of Rurality in Rural Development Programmes

For the general purpose of the RDP, the European Commission offered to EU Member States the possibility of using two "horizontal" baseline indicators to define rural areas:

- The OECD definition of three different categories of region (Predominantly Rural, Intermediate Rural, and Predominantly Urban) according to the proportion of the region's population that live in municipalities which have less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometre;
- The importance of rural areas (as defined by the OECD definition), as shown by four factors, namely the percentages of national territory, population, Gross Value Added, and employment located in those rural areas.

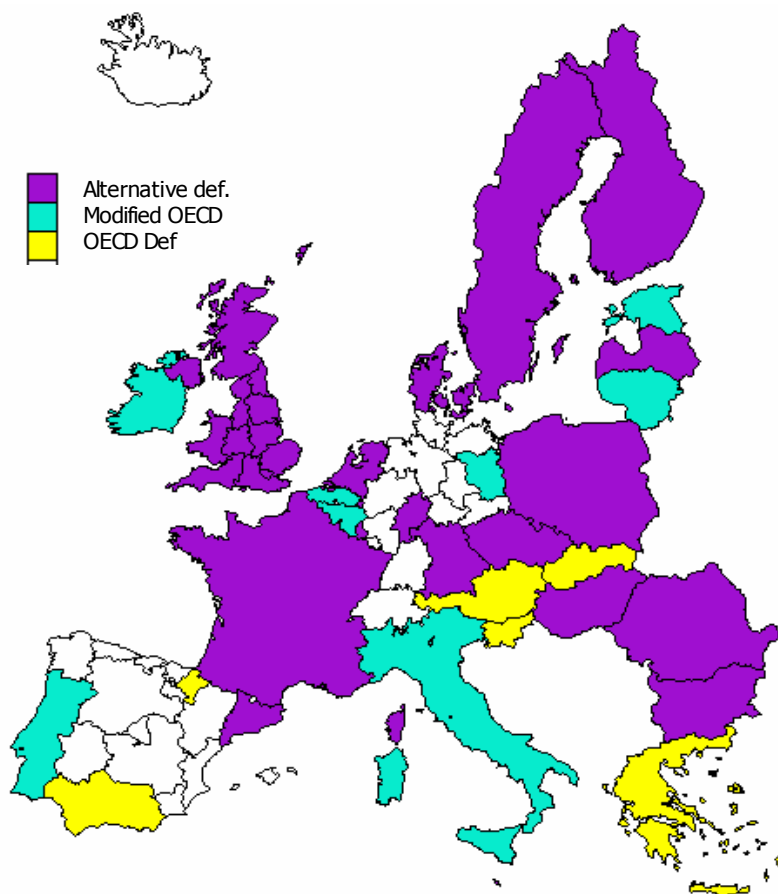
In parallel, Member States were also allowed to adopt their own definition of rural areas, either through modifying the OECD definition or using an alternative basis for defining rural areas, conditional to providing an explanation in their RDP for such a choice.

An investigation of a sample of 23 national and 12 regional RDPs (representing 27 EU Member States) led to finding that in most cases an alternative definition of rural areas was specified; in more detail (Figure 1):

- i) the unmodified OECD definition was used in only 4 national and 2 regional RDPs;
- ii) a modified form of the OECD definition was used in 5 national and 2 regional RDPs;
- iii) alternative definitions of rural areas were used in 20 national and 2 regional RDPs.

Further, it is worth noting that the choice of the definition approach is not necessarily homogeneous within Member States. Indicatively, alternative definitions of rural areas were found to apply in different German *Länder*; in Spain, the OECD definition was used in the NSP, but some regions retained this definition in the second level of the regional typology, while some others adopted a modified form of the OECD definition.

Figure 1: Basis for defining rural areas for the general purpose of the 2007-2013 RDP



In more detail, main modifications to the OECD definition were based on different specifications of the threshold of population density; the size of administrative area to which the definition was applied; and adaptations to fit national policy priorities, for example, the exclusion of large cities or inclusion of small towns. Indicatively, Flanders used a very high population threshold to define rural areas; Portugal applied the OECD density threshold at the municipality level. Also, in Ireland several rural towns which did not meet the OECD criteria were defined as rural, while in Italy, a classification based on the OECD definition and taking altitude zones into account was used.

Also six countries/regions using the OECD (modified or not) definition have drawn a distinction (for descriptive and/or policy purposes within the RDP) between Predominantly Rural Regions (PR), Intermediate Regions (IR), and Predominantly Urban (PU) Regions, while 7 countries/regions have chosen not to apply such a distinction.

As already mentioned, in the vast majority of cases (21 out of 35 examined), the OECD definition was "abandoned" rather than modified. Indicatively, Bulgaria adopted a national definition, already used in the SAPARD programme, whereby rural areas are the municipalities (LAU 1) in which no settlement has a population of more than 30,000. The Czech Republic preferred a definition used in previous rural development programmes. Denmark opted for a classification system based on 14 indicators, while Estonia classified rural area as consisting of the territory of all rural municipalities.

Finland specified a three-part classification of rural municipalities, dividing them into urban-adjacent rural areas, rural heartland areas and sparsely populated rural areas, in order to focus rural policy on specific regional needs. In Germany, responsibility for RDPs (and rural areas definition) is held by the Länder and a variety of choices have been made according to the national classification of settlement structure, the need to exclude urban agglomerations, etc. An approach that defines non-urban space was also applied in Hungary, Poland, Romania and England, while a definition of remote areas was the main driver of the rural areas definitions utilized in Sweden and Scotland.

Factors Leading to Different Definitions of Rural Areas

Several reasons were provided in the RDPs in order to justify the choice of an alternative (to the OECD) definition of rural areas. These include the "limited" (in several cases) ability of the OECD definition to portray the socio-geographical needs of the country or regional heterogeneity, the desire for a more relevant (nationally) distinction between rural and urban areas, a commitment to earlier national definitions, and the desire to utilize a more policy-priorities-driven tool for the identification of area-specific development needs.

Indicatively, Bulgaria saw the OECD definition as unrealistic to apply, because it would bring 98.8% of the national territory and 84.3% of the population into PR or IR regions. In Cyprus, if the OECD definition was used, many areas with relatively large population and small surface which are regarded as rural would not be classified as such, while others with large population and large surface would be characterised as rural; there would be differences in the classification of neighbouring communities, and this would cause problems. The limited capacity of the OECD definition to include rural areas with development needs was the reason for a different choice in Denmark, Northern Ireland and Wales. In Finland and Sweden, both sparsely populated Member States, the whole country would be either predominantly or significantly rural under the OECD definition. In contrast, being a densely-populated country with hardly any predominantly rural area, the Netherlands opted for a distinction between rural and urban as being more appropriate than one between peri-urban and intermediate rural areas. France chose not to use the OECD definition, mainly for the reason that rural areas so defined would exclude significant parts of the peri-urban zone, which includes a third of France's agricultural land, 35% of its farms and the homes of 39% of the metropolitan population, while distinction according to urbanization was the main reason for choices made by Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

Further to the above-mentioned factors which determined the definition of "rural" another less "explicit" reason for national "choices" is associated with the fact that RDPs are not only territorial programmes, but also sectoral ones, as they include in axes 1 and 2 significant 'horizontal' measures aimed at farms and forest lands. This tends to push Member States to extend the definition of rural areas to include farm or forest land wherever it is found. Only in few RDPs is this reason provided for in an explicit manner for extending defined rural areas beyond what would emerge from straight use of the OECD definition. Indicatively, France states, as one reason for defining much of the peri-urban zone as 'rural', that it includes a third of France's agricultural land and 35% of its farms. The regional government of Wallonia defines as rural those communes in which the density is more than 150 inhabitants per km² but in which 'rural spaces' (including farmland and woodland) cover more than 80% of the whole commune's area. Further, the national definition of rural areas used by Italy rather aims at the "extension" of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA), eligible for RDP support.

Behind the reasons officially provided (in an explicit or implicit manner) to justify the use of alternative (to the OECD typology) definitions of rural areas, one cannot ignore the importance of

the existing wide variation in rurality concepts amongst Member States. This variation can be embodied in “determinant” (indicator-based) factors such as population density, size of communes or municipalities (which considerably differ between countries or regions and give rise to different specifications of “non-urban” areas), remoteness and accessibility, rural and peri-urban areas, in countries where out-migration from cities is bringing people to live in places which they conceive to be still rural, structure of land use, etc. Other factors are more-policy-based, including areas which have specific development needs that can be served by the RDPs; or showing an intricate mosaic of areas, defined by reference to multiple factors.

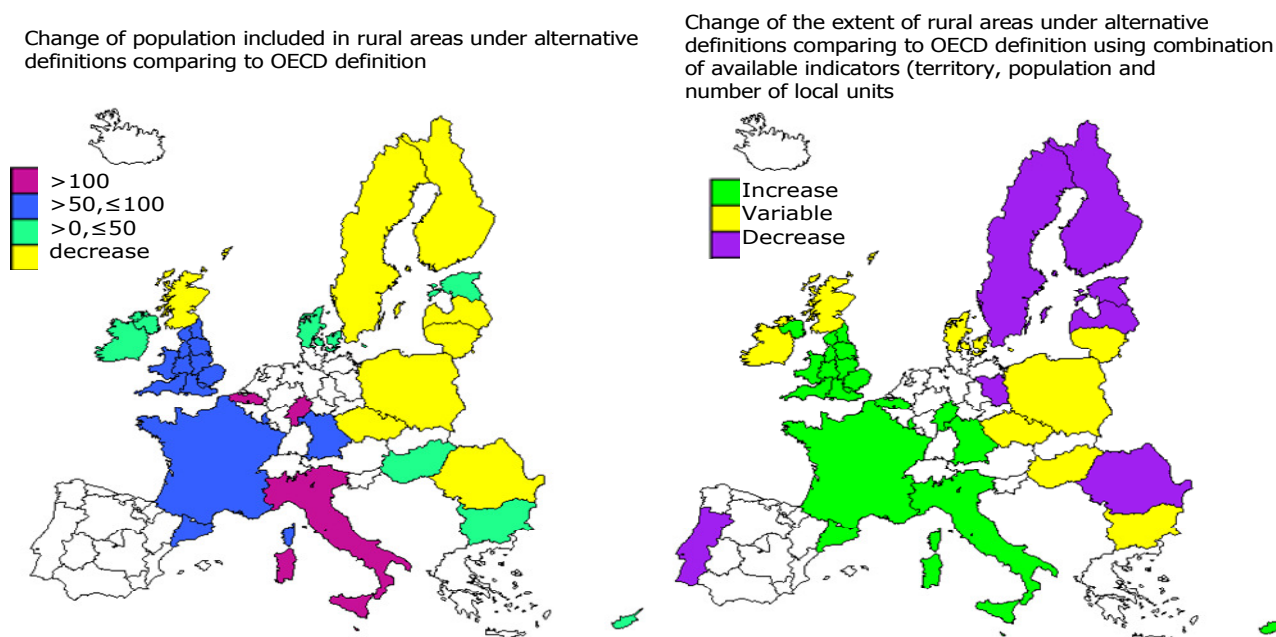
Also, several EU Member States or/and regions have used a combination of such factors to identify a gradation of areas, from central to peripheral or similar concepts. This process is driven by the desire to identify areas which have distinct needs or relative priorities in terms of policy and the application of measures. Often, these gradations include urban areas, and thus assist the basic distinction between urban and rural areas: but they also identify (in a way that is specific to each country or region) different types of rural area. Some of these gradations are close to the three-part OECD distinction between Predominantly Urban, Intermediate and Predominantly Rural Regions.

Indicatively, in the Czech Republic rural areas are distinguished into suburban, intermediate and remote (i.e. areas which have ‘adverse socio-economic characteristics’); Denmark defines intermediate, rural and peripheral (with strong RDP emphasis on the last two categories); in France peri-urban crowns, predominantly rural space, and other rural communes are defined, while Greece defines dynamic rural areas, mountainous, disadvantaged or problematic rural areas, and island rural areas. In Italy there is differentiation between rural areas with specialised intensive agriculture, intermediate rural areas and rural areas with complex problems of development; finally, in Scotland accessible rural areas are distinguished from remote ones.

Effects of Alternative Rural Definitions

As rather expected, the modification of the OECD definition and the use of alternative definitions of rural areas have resulted into the rather significant increase of the proportion of national territory and population classified as rural (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change of the extent of rural areas under alternative definitions



In some cases, the non-use of the OECD definition is associated with a decrease in territory or population defined as rural (e.g. the -12% of territory so defined in Bulgaria or the -12% of population so defined in Finland). However, most deviations from the OECD norm are associated with an increase in the territory and population, defined as rural. On average, these increases range between 8% and 10% of national territory and 9% and 20% of population, respectively; however, in some cases increases are of a much higher magnitude. Indicatively, these include Italy (+21% of territory, + 38% of population), Hessen (+36% of territory, + 36% of population), Flanders (+48% of territory, + 38% of population, +61% of municipalities) and Malta (+89% of territory, + 64% of population, +68% of municipalities).

In overall the effect of these deviations are a 2% increase of EU rural territory, a 44% increase of rural population and a 2% in the number of rural municipalities.