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## EDITORIAL

# New Challenges for Rural Areas in a Fast Moving Environment

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Europe is considered one of the most desirable and healthiest parts of the world according to various indexes of wealth and prosperity as well as being one of the best migration and world-travel destinations. At the same time, it is the most urbanized world region, with an expected growth of urban population in the future (from around 70% living in urban areas today to around 80% in 2020). This anticipated development, which can, in several ways, be a challenge for the European economy, raises the question of the future of rural (and peri-urban) areas. The EU growth strategy for 2020 builds on the ambition to become “a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy”, with smart development strategies based on the exploitation of the related variety of EU areas and their ability to initiate new activities and/or technological fields. Is there a possible smart development for European rural areas in this urbanized environment?

As the move into the twenty-first century coincided with the awareness that over 50% of the global population now lives in cities and that these may be the future of humanity, it might seem surprising to focus on issues pertaining to the development and future of rural areas. Yet, three main reasons lead us to look closely at those areas:

- (1) Rural areas now represent about 49% of the total land mass of the planet, and approximately 3.4 billion inhabitants, making them an essential player in the present and future of humanity and Earth.
- (2) They contain almost all the resources necessary for the existence of human beings, such as their daily food, the sources of energy, the metals and polymers necessary for manufacturing or the oxygen they absorb. They are, therefore, central to the policies and strategies of interest groups and nations.

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- (3) They are highly coveted objects of competition; in constant evolution and characterized by high diversity.

Beyond their historic role or their remaining weight in terms of production volumes or population, rural areas are always placed at the core of the world's future evolution, and are undoubtedly central issues in terms of sustainable development for the future. This is evidenced by the conflicts over questions of land ownership, and in particular by the massive land grabbing by various countries (like China) in the hope of being able to cultivate the acquired land and thus fulfil the food needs of their population. Another, less-obvious example is that of the tremendous demand by urban populations for recreational and natural spaces, or that of the concerns for the future caused by rapid land consumption and artificialization. Another example still is that of the debates on the future of the Amazon region, the green lung and biodiversity reserve of the planet, but also an extraordinary reservoir of mineral and agricultural resources for the populations of the Americas and beyond.

Thus, the future and development of rural areas is an unavoidable question on the agenda of policy- and decision-makers and researchers, and necessitates fine and detailed analysis and prospective studies followed by appropriate development policies. This is precisely the subject of this special issue of *European Planning Studies*, which closely examines the question of rural areas and their future, as well as the role of agriculture and agribusiness activities, which were once predominant and are still very much a part of those territories.

### **Rural Zones with Fuzzy Boundaries**

The first question pertains to the definition of the areas studied. Addressing issues related to rural areas sometimes places the reader—and the public even more—in the realm of fantasy. Very different and sometimes strongly opposed visions of “the rural” emerge, conveyed by media or public authorities, looking for, and rallying around, simple and powerful visions of what “the rural” is.

Halfacree (1993) listed a number of terms synonymous with “rural”, or rather what he calls “spatial imaginaries”, and which all correspond to fantasized representations of those spaces. The words and phrases “countryside, wilderness, outback, periphery, farm belt, village, hamlet, bush, peasant society, pastoral, garden, unincorporated territory, open space” ... refer to different and sometimes conflicting conceptions of rural land, hence contributing to the idea of its fragmentation and to a poor understanding of its somewhat elusive nature.

Thus, if “the rural” presents a seductive but blurred image, it is probably because it refers to a collective imaginary, and reminds each of us of our roots or that of our ancestors. But it is also, and perhaps even more so today, because “the rural” is an evolving world, subject to constant and sometimes contradictory changes. Indeed, rural areas are facing two fundamental types of changes that have slowly but surely disrupted the order of forests and meadows, which for a long time seemed eternal and unchangeable. The image of rural spaces is being transformed under the influence of two major changes.

- (1) *Rural areas are under an increasingly strong influence of cities and urban population* Modern cities produce 80% of the global gross domestic product, occupy 3% of world land surfaces, consume 75% of natural resources and account for 60–80% of global greenhouse

gas emissions. They house populations who do not produce their own means of subsistence, represent most of the demand for food and appear to be strongly linked with rural and peri-urban areas and their inhabitants. Agriculture plays a central role in supplying those cities with food, as well as in recycling processes, especially in developing countries: Food sovereignty is on the public policy agenda and raises the question of sustainability of food supply to urban populations. Moreover, urban people are very aware of rural areas in terms of nature opportunities and tourism activities. Urban populations emphasize the need to develop the potential natural and conservation areas in cities.

At the same time, and paradoxically, urban sprawl leads to a huge consumption of agricultural land, often chosen for its qualities in relation to primary city locations. Finally, urban growth has given rise to a peri-urbanization phenomenon: city peripheries are increasingly made up of spaces that can be described as partially urbanized, and mostly result from an interpenetration of residential areas, transport infrastructure, natural areas, gardens and farmland. The term “rural” must now be placed side-by-side with the term “peri-urban” to define the areas in which the interpenetration of city and countryside reaches various degrees but still does not allow a clear distinction between the two types of entities.

As a consequence, the countryside no longer plays the dominant role it once played and instead has become an equal partner to cities and is now dependent on the development, preferences and potential demand of cities. Where rural growth occurs, it is due to the expansion of nearby cities or more long-distance urban demand for rural products, for example, rural tourism and experiences. This has important implications for rural development policies. Traditional rural resources, arable land and growing forests, are used for the production of agricultural and wood products in competitive industries that employ fewer and fewer people. In the global and urban knowledge economy, other resources are necessary for the development of the countryside. Most of all, in developed countries, it is no longer resources for primary production that matter, but resources that can create an attractive living and leisure environment, and that have development potential for the residential, tourism and experiential industries. The new urban–rural relations are not primarily based on the biological need to get food, wood for building houses, or fuel for cooking and heating. Instead, they are mainly based on “social” needs and demands.

*(2) Competition for natural resources located in rural areas, including land, plays a key role in current development policies and will determine the future strategic development of rural areas*

Rural areas are subject to increasing competition between various land uses or intentions for land uses. This intense competition has its origins in both the populations’ behaviours and the characteristics of these areas. With regard to populations, urban area residents’ desire for nature and for new spaces for tourism and recreation causes them to covet rural land, for holiday or conservation purposes or to turn them into tourist areas. At the same time, extraordinary amounts of resources are present in those areas, turning them into goods of great consumption based on two main categories of resources: the land itself, first of all, over which the different types of land users compete; this applies to agricultural areas, forests, as well as zones intended for construction of housing, transport infrastructure or industrial facilities. But the underground is also very much sought after, for the water and extractive resources it contains.

This wide variety of land uses and increasing demands from urban populations can lead to local tensions and sometimes land use conflicts of various forms. It raises, first, the issue of controlling urban sprawl, and therefore also the issue of peri-urbanization, reflected in the development of infrastructure and of residential and business areas and the management of their construction and of their maintenance costs. But access to land is also crucial, especially for the preservation of agricultural and forestry activities. With respect to the social dimension, it also raises the question of the social capital, segregation, structuring communities or rural exodus. Finally, in environmental terms, it raises the question of the relation between the localization of activities, ecological system regulation and the consequences of land artificialization. This increasing complexity raises the question of governance or management of rural and peri-urban land and of its role in development processes that can benefit local populations while contributing to regionally equitable growth.

### **Land Areas Undergoing Profound Changes**

Thus, rural land is undergoing profound changes, some of the most significant of which have been the reduction of agricultural activities, the rise of residential and service activities, and farmland abandonment, which now appears to be reversed and to give way to new and different activities and practices. Land is divided into different zones for various uses—including residential and recreational activities or agricultural or industrial production—and is acutely affected by global economic and environmental changes such as the productive and financial crisis, climate change, problems pertaining to water scarcity or biodiversity.

The era when land consisted mostly of farmland and natural areas is mostly over. We observe, instead, specialization of rural land around other dominant uses. Of course there are land areas specialized in farming or consisting of natural spaces, particularly in traditional rural or remote areas which are still mostly populated by people who have historically lived there. But there are also, as mentioned above, “peri-urban” areas, or areas devoted to tourism and recreational activities, and experiencing major population changes through the arrival of new types of residents, of “rurbans”, retired people. It is the case, for example, of rural French or Spanish villages in which communities of wealthy English immigrants move and develop. Situated at varying distances from cities, these places are varied and have different comparative advantages, which make them attractive to various types of populations with different needs and expectations.

Moreover, there is increasing competition in rural areas between the various land uses or intentions of land uses, competition which leads to local tensions and sometimes land use conflicts. The following activities compete: agriculture, business, tourism and urban sprawl. What governance systems are needed to manage this increasing complexity and to involve rural and peri-urban areas in smart development processes?

Those transformations are paralleled by changes in the behaviours of farmers, farming and agribusiness companies, confronted with the need to preserve biotopes and maintain the quality of ecosystems; they are expected to supply countryside and city residents with food, while coping with land pressure and complying with landscape management rules, and must ensure the transition of agricultural systems into ecologically intensive or low-input farming systems. Those changes clearly suggest that there is as yet no dominant model of rural and peri-urban areas. The rural situation could, rather, be likened to a mosaic in that it is characterized by a heterogeneity of socio-economic configurations

and of the latter's spatial distribution, as well as by a diversity of development paths and relations with cities. There exist many possibilities for rural and peri-urban areas—namely agriculture, natural areas, forests, transport infrastructures, waste plants, business and industry infrastructure, tourism infrastructures—and the expansion of urban areas into surrounding areas plays a central role.

And so, as a result, the question of the future and development of rural areas can be likened to a complex and sometimes intriguing puzzle. Moreover, beyond the key role they will continue to play in a globalised and highly uncertain future, they can hardly be considered to be a harmonious and homogeneous whole. The differences and disparities between them are significant and can be divided into three main categories of inequality:

- Living standards in those rural regions clearly vary depending on whether they are part of developed, emerging countries or countries whose development is lagging behind. And those inequalities correspond to those observed in cities and therefore, other types of areas on the planet.
- The highly diverse ground and underground resources and climates imply that the different areas are used for different functions, thus turning them into various types of areas, ranging from veritable Eldorados to relegation or desertification areas.
- The varying distances between rural areas and cities or urban agglomerations cause strong inequalities, including the fact that poor and rich populations settle in specific types of areas. While some rural areas remain isolated and remote from the great human thoroughfare and tourist activities—to such an extent that they remain concentrations of poverty subject to massive depopulation—others, on the contrary become holiday hotspots or retirement destinations, and gain in wealth by capturing revenues generated by the work and productions performed in other regions (this is the case, in particular, of coastal areas, subject to strong constraints, including land pressure and competition between land uses).

### **Public Policies Dedicated to Rural Development Faced with Strong Changes**

Given those important changes and evolutions, what policies should be implemented to promote those regions, their activities and development? A historical examination of rural development policies and related analyses can be conducted around the idea that development policies have, since the 1960s, been structured according to principles specific to each decade. The paradigm of modernization and technicism of the 1960s was succeeded by that of public intervention on markets and for low-income populations, and by market liberalization in the 1980s, followed by the rise of the participation and empowerment principles, and finally, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, by growing concerns about the environment and the sustainability of our livelihoods. However, a closer examination shows that each of those structuring precepts must be regarded in combination with earlier and somewhat surviving paradigms, with their effects and the intervention mechanisms implemented. Moreover, those precepts do not manifest in the form of revolutions but rather in slowly growing preoccupations and social and political structuring processes, which eventually lead to their prevalence.

In addition, policies specifically targeting rural regions were developed relatively slowly, and consisted initially of little more than the management of resources in those

areas, in the form of intensive farming, for example. Change was only gradual, and manifested in (a) measures targeting agriculture less exclusively, and intended for other activities (tourism, manufacturing, ICT industry, etc.), (b) in stronger attention on local populations, their needs, their demands (c) in decentralization (and regionalization?) processes; actions which have slowly taken root since the 1980s. One may justifiably wonder if the same old public policy instruments are not being used, and simply applied to rural regions.

However, whereas the primary objective of traditional policies was to reduce regional inequalities, increase agricultural incomes and improve farms' competitiveness, new policies are now more based on the territorial dimension and are intended to foster competitiveness in rural areas, optimize local resources and exploit little-used resources. This change has taken the form of new types of support measures and intervention, such as subsidies to direct investments or targeted aid to already implemented investments. Finally, it is the governance of these policies that has probably changed the most. Negotiations between governments and representatives of the main farmers' unions have given way—to a greater or lesser extent depending on the countries and infra-regional territories—to multi-level governance that includes local communities and in the case of Europe the supranational authorities in decision-making processes (Torre & Wallet, 2013). We also note the increasing diversity of public, private and associative stakeholders at each of these levels, starting with the local level.

Many authors now consider that a new paradigm of rural development is emerging; it breaks from the dominant agro-industrial production paradigm and includes strong links between rural areas and the increasing evidence of urbanization (Marsden, 2006; Röling & de Jong, 1998). Accompanied by the rise of agro-ecology (Gliessman, 1990), this paradigm is thought to be emerging both in the practices and interventions of actors in the field and in public policies: rural development is seen as a multi-level, multi-actor- and multi-dimensional process (van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000). The new paradigm calls for a new scientific approach to these areas. It incorporates the question of the modes of territorial governance, to help better understand how decision-making and rural development projects involve various stakeholders (Pierre, 2000; Torre & Traversac, 2011).

In the EU, rural development is an integral component of EU policies and one of the pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). A substantial part of the national and regional rural development policies are found in the CAP, which not only includes measures pertaining to agriculture, but also extends to institutional and economic issues. But, in recent years, there has been growing agreement that the rural sector approaches have not achieved the expected results (Barca *et al.*, 2012), and a growing demand for policies involving territorial dimensions (place-based policies) to better reflect the new challenges and differentiated growth potential of EU rural spaces. The recognition of the multifaceted nature of rural areas highlights the necessity to assess not only the agricultural development and its impact in terms of externalities or agro-ecology, but also the other dimensions of rural areas, be there business, services, tourism or nature (Brouwer & Sas-Pazt, 2011). All this also fits in a context of increased territorial competition, pressure on public funding for agriculture and claims for administrative and fiscal decentralization, putting a greater emphasis on local actors' ability to renew their proximity relations and connect to external networks.

There is a great uncertainty about the possible future of European agriculture policy. This policy, including the CAP, faces a number of challenges already addressed by the



European Commission. For the CAP, a number of specific challenges has been identified such as (1) increased globalization and integration of national economies, expected to increase competition in the agriculture sector, (2) increased price volatility for agricultural products, (3) increased environmental pressure on agriculture and rural areas and, (4) increase attention to food security issues. This redefinition of the objectives of the CAP questioned the contribution of agriculture and forestry and wider rural areas to the Horizon 2020 growth strategy set by the EU. It also raises the question of the coherence of the objectives and modalities of coordination between the CAP and regional and territorial policies, in a context where a number of studies have reported conflicting orientations between the territorial impacts of the CAP and the objectives of regional policy.

### Special Issue on “Rural Areas” and “Agrofood Business”

In order to understand these developments and meet the growing challenges facing rural areas, the need arises for a regional and territorial approach, adapted to the size and peculiarities of rural areas. The growing number of fields of analysis and application of the research conducted makes rural areas perfect candidates for analysis; analysis performed by examining issues pertaining to territories, networks, innovation, governance, local or sustainable development.

The plurality and rapid emergence of these dimensions give these approaches solidity and scientific substance and speak in favour of addressing rural issues from the perspective of development processes analysis.

However, despite a huge amount of sophisticated research contributions about regional and territorial development (Capello, 2007; Stimson *et al.*, 2006), the notion of rural development, which connotes overall development of rural areas with a view to improving the quality of life of rural people, is sometimes poorly defined in the literature. Singh (2009) identifies no fewer than four alternative meanings: a process, a phenomenon, a strategy or a discipline. Numerous studies relate to the question of learning and skill and knowledge acquisition by local populations, at the individual or collective level (Falk & Harrison, 1998; Richardson, 2005). Others refer to the capacity and empowerment dimensions, and bring to the fore the improvement of the capacities and skills (following Sen, 1999) of rural populations (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002; Nussbaum, 2000). A third group accords a key role to civil society, by including not only farmers and public authorities, but also a whole range of mostly local actors (Berger, 2003; Jordan *et al.*, 2005) in local development projects and decision-making processes.

This issue is intended as a plea for a territorial approach to the changes affecting rural and farming regions, based on concepts such as governance, territorial resources, learning, networks of stakeholders or business strategies. The use and operationalization of these concepts are the best testimony of the advantage of analysing rural development processes, as well as of the relevance of a territorial approach to analysing and understanding these rapidly changing regions. The articles bear witness to those changes, as well as to the possibility of analysing the functioning of, and changes in, rural areas and processes of agricultural and agribusiness development, making use of the tools and approaches of regional economics.

Torre and Wallet's (2014) article provides an update on the issue of regional and territorial development in rural areas. It contributes to an analysis of the main categories of development applied to the particularities of rural areas and examines the changes in

the policies which have shifted from promoting agricultural productivity to encouraging the involvement of local stakeholders in sustainable development processes. Akgün *et al.*'s (2014) paper also looks at the issue of rural development, focusing more particularly on Europe. It suggests future paths to development in rural areas, with a particular focus on enhancing sustainability. This reflection is continued in the article by Eliasson *et al.* (2014), which addresses the question of peri-urban areas and in particular that of the process of "rurbanization", and analyses the increasing movements between city and countryside, on the fringes of Swedish cities.

In the following three articles, attention is focused more on the role of agriculture and agribusiness in rural regions, activities which long dominated those areas and still occupy most of the land surface. Filippi *et al.*'s (2014) article deals with the Spatial Distribution of French Agricultural Cooperatives and is based on an analysis covering the entire French territory. It reveals how crucial a role cooperatives play in rural areas and shows that they constitute key components of local development processes, in rural zones and beyond. Vaz *et al.*'s (2014) paper on *The Algarve* brings to light how agricultural production in that region is being threatened by urban expansion and by growing pressure from tourism. Thus, it raises the question of how farming activities can survive in regions undergoing strong growth, growth which actually depends relatively little on agriculture, but is characterized by serious uncertainty in terms of sustainability. Similar questions in terms of land use, land scarcity and the resulting conflicts between different land uses—production, leisure or other activities—are explored in Cazals *et al.*'s (2014) study which raises the question of environment-related conflicts in the Arcachon Bay area. The environmental dimension is also central in this region, which is marked by the strong imprint of urban expansion and the programmed disappearance of the farming dimension.

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