

8 keys to understand

Producing a White Paper on European rurality is nowadays an urgent need

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The territorial importance of rurality in the EU makes it a major part of the European project. Rural areas, including peri-urban ones, host 58% of the population of the E.U. and 56% of its jobs. 80% of the European territory is rural or semi-rural. (CAP Context Indicators 2014 update – DG Agri).

The added value and the potential for creativity and innovation that rural areas can bring, in all their diversity, are significant. Twenty-first century rural areas are made up of a diversity of multi-sectoral and multi-actor territories whose assets go beyond just the primary sector. Rural Europe today has evolved. Its economy is diversified. Agriculture remains a vital economic and territorial activity, but the secondary and tertiary sectors (services, tourism, SMEs, technological and industrial sectors,...) play a major role in terms of economy and employment.

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The contributions that rural territories can make to the inclusive, sustainable and smart growth aimed at by the Europe 2020 Strategy are under-recognised and under-exploited and the current European policies fail to develop all their potential. The ways in which European measures are implemented in national and regional policies very often generate a shift of financial resources towards densely populated areas. But the objectives of the Strategy will be only achieved by making rural territories partners in European growth and innovation. Taking rural areas into account as development and innovation poles would strengthen their involvement in EU programmes and make the most of their potential.

New technologies have an important role in realizing rural potential, as they reduce some of the limitations imposed by location. They allow networking and offer new methods for delocalising and personalising of production. However, to achieve this aim of “smart territory”, it is necessary that rural areas are equipped with appropriate infrastructure and smart platforms in a comparable way to urban ones.

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Current development systems generate significant regional imbalances and these are growing. This loss of cohesion - social, economic, territorial, - takes many forms, as do rural areas : aging of the population, loss of farmland, imbalance in the ratio of commuter / local workers, difficulties in transportation and movement, human migration,... But the vitality of rural areas is essential to this well-being of both rural and urban populations. And the expected development of E.U. policies must ensure rural-urban balance and the well-being of its peoples (Articles 3 and 174 of the Treaty).

The inequality of residents and local stakeholders in terms of access to public services is growing. The same applies with the quality of the basic infrastructure necessary for development, such as high-speed broadband. That imbalance is especially damaging in economic, social and cultural terms, as Europe has turned more and more to developing a digital society in which the ability to communicate is essential to produce, to sell or to consume.

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The falling levels of health, transport and safety services in rural territories gives inhabitants cause for concern and frequently results in a feeling of abandonment: this is a common observation in rural territories albeit felt in varying degrees in different types of rural areas. This feeling can in turn lead to a more general feeling of alienation from the European project more broadly.

The implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and rural development Fund in the current programming period illustrates the limits of the E.U. approach. The content of the operational and rural development programmes has shown that new integrative tools such as CLLD or ITI, have not been sufficiently implemented by the Member States or Regions. The inclusion of financial measures for rural development within the second pillar of the CAP has also raised tensions with agricultural stakeholders. More adequate responses must be made at relevant territorial scales to generate or to support local dynamics of development.

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- ▶ **The realities and the prospects of rural areas do not comply with the objectives expressed in the Treaty on European Union and in the Europe 2020 Strategy as regards territorial cohesion, harmonious development and sustainable, inclusive and smart growth.**
- ▶ **The potential of rural areas, with their diversity, is insufficiently recognised or exploited in support of these objectives.**
- ▶ **Preparatory work for the post-2020 programming period will begin in 2016-2017. It is important that genuine consideration be given to rurality so that policy post-2020 genuinely takes more and better account of rural areas.**

The production of a White Paper on rurality by the European Commission is nowadays a strategic step and a urgent need for the success of the broader European project and the well-being of its inhabitants !

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