

Rural development in the European Union: the concept and the policy

El desarrollo rural en la Unión Europea: el concepto y la política

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas are key elements that underpin the social and economic European territory and shape its landscape. The rural setting is a dynamic concept, able to distinguish three stages on how the European Union (EU) understands “rural”: rural as image, rural as local, and rural as a social construction. The evolution of the concept is reflected in the need to adapt the approach used to address rural issues, and consequently the political design for rural development. Thus, under the term Rural Development, the EU has included and mixed very different issues, supporting measures and equally heterogeneous financial instruments. For the purpose of supporting the European rural world the two main EU policies have come together: the agricultural and the regional policies. So, Rural Development in the EU has been navigating between the sectorial policy and the territorial policy. At a time of redefinition of European priorities and policies for 2013, territorial cohesion, rural/urban articulation, social partnership, institutional cooperation, environmental sustainability, and governance (flexible and multilevel) are the fundamental elements upon which a policy should rest that is addressed to ensure the existence of a living countryside, inhabitable and friendly environment.

Key words: rural, rural territories, territorial development, rural development policies.

RESUMEN

El medio rural es un elemento fundamental que vertebró social y económicamente el territorio europeo y configura su paisaje. Los intensos cambios que pueden observarse en la consideración de lo rural en la Unión Europea (UE) permiten afirmar que la ruralidad es un concepto en evolución, pudiéndose diferenciar tres etapas: lo rural como imagen, como localidad y como construcción social. La evolución del concepto tiene su reflejo en la necesaria adaptación del enfoque utilizado para abordar la problemática rural, y como consecuencia en el diseño político de apoyo a estos territorios. Bajo el término de Desarrollo Rural la UE ha ido incluyendo asuntos muy dispares, apoyándolos con medidas e instrumentos financieros igualmente heterogéneos. Para el objetivo de apoyar al mundo rural han confluído las dos grandes políticas: la agraria y la regional, por lo que la Política de Desarrollo Rural ha venido navegando entre lo sectorial y lo territorial. En un momento de redefinición de las prioridades políticas europeas a partir del 2013, cohesión territorial, articulación rural/urbana, concertación social, cooperación institucional, sostenibilidad ambiental y gobernanza, son elementos fundamentales para una política que se plantee garantizar la continuidad de un medio rural vivo, habitable y respetuoso con el medio ambiente.

Palabras clave: rural, territorios rurales, desarrollo territorial, política de desarrollo rural.

Introduction

To learn the essence of rural development we need a theory to explain what is happening in the rural development practice: new networks, new activities, new territorial identities, new organizations or new leadership in European rural areas. In the first place, it is important to recognize: (i) that European rural development is a complex process that is rooted in the agricultural and development model followed by European Union (EU) countries and surges to a greater extent as a response to the depletion and to the results of the modernization paradigm; (ii) that the rural world has not always been considered by EU community nations in the same manner, regarding its problems, as well as that related to its role in the overall economy.

Consequently, it can be stated that the European Rural Policy has – from the start – been characterized because of its diffuse conceptualization (Delgado, 2004). It has gone from actions directly related to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), to territorial actions seeking to respond to the current situation in rural areas and which recognize the importance of these territories for Europe.

The European rural areas are characterized by the diversity of territories they harbor and by the diversity of functions they fulfill. This diversity includes physical and geomorphological characteristics, biodiversity, landscapes, etc., as well as social characteristics, land uses, culture, traditions, symbolism, etc., and considers it a priority to keep the standardizing of the development model or the practices

Received for publication: 20 May, 2010. Accepted for publication: 13 November, 2010

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and uses from deriving into a reductionist homogenization of these spaces. Also, agriculture, the food industry, and rural development are important allies in the construction of cohesive territories, to improve its surveillance, efficiency, competitiveness, employment generation, social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability, as well as for the governance of such. Because of all this, an important part of the EU common policies has been and is aimed at the rural world.

In recent years, there has been in the European Union a profound reassessment of the rural setting, which has been reflected on the policy decisions regarding these territories. Ever since the EU began explicitly suggesting rural development, conceptual and political changes have been intense in this field. This document gathers some keys and determinant elements of such changes.

The rural setting in the European Union

Rural development is a complex notion as are the rural world and the social and economic phenomena contained therein. Thus, diversity is an important characteristic of the rural setting in the European Union, highlighting the multiplicity and diversity of all types of elements that conforms it, which explains the difficulty in adequately defining and characterizing it. There are different perceptions of what the rural setting is and what it is not, as well as of the different elements characterizing rural areas (natural, economic, cultural elements, etc.). And this is why there is no global definition of rural development (Clark *et al.*, 1997), which is generally accepted by everyone, for which the notion of rural development has been making strides amid controversy.

The terms “rural” and “rural development” are not only open to diverse interpretations, but rather, as concepts, have evolved intensely in recent decades (Ceña, 1994). In fact, there are completely opposing positions on the matter. While for some it is a process that will end up with the final expropriation of farmers, others see it as a force that will revitalize agriculture (multi-functionality) (Van Broekhuizen *et al.*, 1997). To some observers, Rural Development is merely an addition to the existing pattern of agriculture and rural life, while others anticipate that both are moving toward an important reconstruction. There are those who consider that rural development is a form of local development resulting from the integration of space within economic reasoning. In this sense, local development is considered a notion rich in teachings for the elaboration of a definition of rural development (Le Roi, 1998). Their analysis should, therefore, follow a global approach that

bears in mind all the activities and their relationships at the core of their territory, that is, the specialized economic and social phenomena. Other authors consider that rural development means a new model of development for the agrarian sector (Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000).

However, despite the lack of a “global” definition, there is consensus in considering the rural setting as one of the fundamental elements that socially and economically vertebrate the European territory and set its landscape. An important percentage of the population is concentrated in rural areas², being the physical support of an extensive and varied natural and cultural heritage currently representing one of great values of EU, in addition to constructing the basis of many economic activities that generate significant levels of employment and revenue (Moyano, 2009).

Traditionally, rural areas have been perceived as settings characterized more by their differences regarding the urban environment than their own values or attributes, having been frequently described as a place where the lack of infrastructure and equipment are manifested and where there are no opportunities for social and economic promotion for the population. Nevertheless, differences between the rural and urban settings within EU have been evidently declining in recent decades, tending to match their living standards and intensifying the social and economic interactions among their respective populations; although it is true that there are still rural areas experiencing serious situations of isolation and handicap.

All these changes allow us to state that the rural sense is a concept in evolution, differentiating three stages in the way the rural setting has been understood in EU, which are hereinafter briefly characterized:

The First stage covers the 1950s to the late 1980s. During these years, the rural sense was understood as an image clearly identified with the agrarian setting. Thus, agriculture was the concept encompassing and defining nature and the values penetrating the whole rural space. Rural development was completely identified with agrarian development.

The Second stage extends from 1988 to the late 1990s. In this stage, the rural sense is addressed as “location”. During the 1980s, important changes were produced related to processes of diversification of rural economy and society

² Rural areas in the EU occupy 91% of its surface and are home to 56% of European population.

beyond agriculture. There is a reversal of the deficits of the population and the location of new economic activities.

Thus, the rural setting is now independent of agriculture and also includes “the set of regions or zones with diverse activities (agriculture, handicrafts, small- and mid-sized enterprises [SME], trade, services, etc.) where there are settlements of towns, villages, small cities and regional centers, as well as natural and cultivated areas, the custodian of natural resources and habitats, leisure and key for the equilibrium of ecosystems” (European Commission, 1988).

Therefore, the rural setting was characterized in this stage by the heterogeneity of activities and spaces, by the diversity of local endogenous resources available in the rural environment and somehow became novel as was the “external consumption of rural products”. Agriculture and the rural setting have started to be differentiated from each other during the process of economic development and modernization and no longer coincide and; hence, require policies that respond not only to farmers but also to other functions carried out in such areas with development (Saraceno, 2007).

Finally, the third stage extends from the 1990s to the present day, understanding the rural setting as a “social construction”. At this stage, the rural setting is something that can be seen as symbolic and transformable. Within this context, the rural area goes from being the support for social and functional relations to becoming an agent of social transformation. This territory is contemplated as a specific resource and as a main player of economic development and not merely as a space or framework of economic or social activities. Pecqueur (2000) states: “territory, while a mode of *adapting to globalization*, is considered a *constructed space*, which permits revealing and enhancing specific resources, as opposed to globalization as a convergence of non-reversible models”. At this stage, we can say that the rural territory is the result of a process in which the *players* reach *institutional arrangements* that permit assigning value to *specific resources* (or even create them). Consequential to this definition, the Territorial Approach to Rural Development is the process of *mobilization of players* that leads to elaborating a strategy of adaptation to external constraints, based on a *collective identification* with a culture and a *territory* (Gallardo *et al.*, 2008).

The Rural Development policy of the European Union

The evolution of the concept already described briefly is reflected on the necessary adaptation of the approach used

to address rural issues, and – consequently – in the political design for support to these territories.

Under the term of Rural Development, the European Union has been including and mixing disparate issues, supporting them with equally heterogeneous financial measures and instruments. For the purpose of supporting the European rural world, the two major EU policies have converged: agrarian and regional, meaning that the Rural Development policy in the EU has been navigating between both waters, that of sectorial policy and territorial policy. Thus, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has tried to link the policy of agricultural structures with development aspects up to the 1988 reform of Structural Funds, while the Regional Policy, in addition to integrating the EAGGF³ – guidance, has been articulating a Community Initiative on Rural Development (LEADER⁴) with its same structural funds.

Within this agrarian/regional context, the EU rural development policy has evolved from being centered on the structural problems of the agrarian sector to considering the multiple roles agriculture plays in society, which is akin to saying that it has been transformed from an exclusively sectorial perspective to a territorial approach. At the core of this evolution there is an exogenous governance model (European Guidelines), coexisting with a dynamic of endogenous development (the territory as a common and unifying element) (Castillo and Ramos, 2010). This double contradictory dynamic joins others of conceptual or strategic type that do not aid in clarifying the role of the current rural policy (Compés and García, 2009).

Rural Development did not explicitly emerge in the European Union until the late 80s, with a double objective: 1) one external, consisting of improving the CAP perception by third countries and 2) another internal, upon proposing measures to mitigate internal socioeconomic effects of a CAP reform necessary within the framework of evolution toward the Economic and Monetary Union in need of a great regional policy.

Until then, the rural debate was non-existent. The European rural model at the moment could be assimilated to the concern for existing rural imbalance, given that specific problems of rural areas had not yet been manifested linked to problems different from those purely agrarian (Delgado,

³ European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund.

⁴ « Liaison entre activités de développement de l'économie rurale ». Links among activities of rural economy development.

2004). Because of the identification of the rural context with the agrarian setting in this first stage, the proceedings connected with the modernization of agricultural structures are what could be denominated as Rural Policy.

The situation changed in 1988 with the publication of the document: “The Future of the Rural World” (European Commission, 1988). This document can be considered the end of the Agricultural Policy, and gives rise to a long process of reflections, debates, and contributions on the objectives, the mechanisms and the effects of public intervention in favor of the rural environment, with a new approach able to overcome the unwanted effects of the sectorial policy. This document confirms the profound changes that had been produced in the rural world and the risk of breaking the balance among the distinct functions it carried out, making it necessary to design specific rural activities. The importance of European rural areas is recognized, along with the need to address its problems in comprehensive manner.

In this new context, the LEADER Community Initiative (European Commission, 1991) was approved in 1991, which promoted the design and application of rural policies focused on the territory, and markedly endogenous. This Community Initiative is considered by many authors as the seed for a true territorial development policy in the European rural environment. The LEADER objective was to drive the endogenous development of rural areas through the creation of a Network of Local Action Groups⁵ (LAG) that had to trigger innovative initiatives of local rural development with demonstrative value throughout the rural areas, and based on integration among the distinct sectorial measures and on active participation from economic and social agents. These groups also had to promote transnational cooperation and exchange of information and experience of interest through the European Rural Development Network. The LEADER contribution to the definition of a European rural model revolves around what has been denominated as the LEADER specificities: territorial approach, creation of a horizontal partnership, participation from the population, innovation, integrated approach, decentralized management and Network cooperation (Sumpsi, 2000).

In 1994, a new edition of the LEADER Community Initiative (LEADER II) was approved, broadening and consoli-

dating experiences from the previous edition. This edition was fundamentally characterized by the search for innovation in all its aspects, for the purpose of struggling against the decline observed in numerous European rural areas.

Finally, a third edition of this Community Initiative was approved, denominated LEADER+, for the 2000-2006 period, aimed at diversifying the economic activities of rural areas by practicing integrated and participatory innovative regional development strategies. LEADER + is articulated around the three following chapters:

- Chapter 1: support to integrated pilot territorial strategies of rural development, based on the ascending approach and horizontal cooperation;
- Chapter 2: support to inter-territorial and transnational cooperation;
- Chapter 3: creation of a network of all the rural areas of the Community, beneficiaries or not of the LEADER+ initiative, and of all those leading rural development.

The LEADER initiative, in its distinct LEADER I, LEADER II, and LEADER + generations, has been a very important instrument, it may be said emblematic for the EU rural world, which has served for other more financially important policies to assume the so-called LEADER approach. In spite its difficulties and aspects that could be improved, we can state that the LEADER initiative has been a flexible, efficient and cost-effective instrument to promote the sustainable creation of social capital, productive investments, employment, revenue, and demonstrative effects in backward areas.

In addition to the LEADER Community Initiative, Rural Development became part, since 1988, of one of the priority policies of the European Union like the Regional Policy. The objective of this Policy was to enhance economic and social cohesion in the EU, reducing development disparities among regions. This policy was financed through the Structural Funds⁶, whose 1988 reform changes Rural Development into a priority action objective of these financial instruments.

Simultaneously, the Common Agrarian Policy (CAP) continues evolving and incorporating complementary aspects

⁵ LAGs are a set of public and private partners who define a common strategy and a series of innovative actions for the development of a rural area with local dimensions (less than 100-thousand inhabitants) (European Commission, 1991).

⁶ European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Social Fund (ESF) and European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF).

to those traditionally linked with regulation of prices and markets. Thus, this process remarks the incorporation, in 1992, of the “Agri-environmental Measures” and above all, we must note the approval in 1999 of a substantial reform for the consideration of Rural Development in the European Union. This Reform was called the *2000 Agenda*, which converted Rural Development into the second pillar of CAP. Its fundamental principles were: 1) The multifunctionality of agriculture, 2) The multi-sectorial and integrated approach of rural economy, 3) The flexibility of rural development aid based on the principle of subsidies to favor the decentralization of decisions, consultations with the regions and agreeing on them as a working method, and 4) Simplification.

This agrarian policy with greater rural leadership sought to establish a coherent and sustainable framework for the future of rural areas, trying to complement the reforms introduced in markets, promoting a competitive and multifunctional agrarian sector, integrated onto the rural development strategy. As of that moment, interventions in Rural Development Policy could be grouped into three main orientations:

- Measures associated to restructuring and improving competitiveness of agriculture and forest areas
- Measures with environmental and land management objectives
- Measures of diversification of rural economy and support to rural communities

In 2003, the CAP was reformed; reinforcing measures and the budget destined for rural development through the “Modulation” of agrarian subsidies. It may be said that with the successive reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy, rural development began being strategically positioned within the core of the CAP (Gallardo and Ramos, 2009).

After the CAP reform in 2003, the Agricultural Council adopted, in September 2005, a fundamental reform in the Policy of rural development for the period covering 2007–2013⁷. A new regulatory framework was introduced, which insisted on the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and employment, and on the Gothenburg Strategy for development and sustainability. Thus, in the current

stage, the EU Policy of Rural Development revolves around the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and complemented in Spain with the start of some pilot experiences in the application of the Legislation for Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment⁸. The objectives of the new the new Policy for Rural Development financed by EFARDE are:

- 1) To increase the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry through aid to restructuring, development, and innovation (Line 1),
- 2) To improve the environment and the rural setting through aids for land management (Line 2),
- 3) To improve the quality of life in rural areas and promote the diversification of economic activity (Line 3).

In general, the new Guideline emphasizes on being an instrument of Rural Development and not merely of agrarian restructuring. These objectives correspond to three action lines to which a fourth line is added, denominated “LEADER” based on the experience with the LEADER Community Initiative that introduces the possibility of applying the “LEADER approach” in part of the actions carried out within the the scope of this policy.

The great European rural diversity translates to different responses from the Member States to the menu of 401 rural development measures offered by EFARDE. This has been reflected on how budget percentages have been distributed among the lines of their national Rural Development Programs (RDPs). The strategic decisions the different Member States have expressed in their RDPs objectively express the needs that have been prioritized in each nation, as well as the political will and financial availability to co-finance them (Ramos and Gallardo, 2009).

Finally, the CAP Health Check (2009) recognized a set of new challenges (climate change, bio-fuels, water management, biodiversity, and innovation) in Rural Development programming. The Member States are obligated to incorporate in the Rural Development Programs operations related to these new challenges.

The main lessons learnt from this long period center on the need to make the policy of rural development clear and

⁷ Council regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (Council of the European Union, 2005).

⁸ Legislation 45/2007 of 13 December for Sustainable Rural Development (MARM, 2007).

visible and for it to be as simple as possible, to where respect for diversity and the principle of subsidies permit. As a consequence of these lessons financing of this policy has been simplified through a single financial instrument (the EFARDE). And because of the same reason, the Lines and Community Strategic Guidelines have been designed to promote collaboration and synergies between the two pillars.

To Conclude: Reflections for the Future

It may be concluded that the rural development experience in the European Union currently responds, more than in the past, to the two functions – sectorial and territorial, which the rural areas need, understanding that they do not coincide and that they should be complementary. Hence, the multiplicity of functions and possible guidelines for rural zones should not be seen as alternatives and in competition amongst each other, given that there are positive relationships that are mutually enhanced.

Evolution of policies of rural development has been the consequence of some intense changes in the rural environment and in the consequential conceptualization of the development of these territories. As has been pointed out throughout this document, traditionally, rural setting has been perceived as a space more characterized by its differences regarding the urban setting, than by its own values and attributes. Nevertheless, the differences between the rural and urban environments at the core of the EU have been evidently diminished in recent decades, tending to equate their living standards and to intensify the social and economic interactions between their respective populations⁹.

Besides, said integration is not currently conducted within the terms of subordination and dependency of yesteryear, given that it is taking place within the framework of an interesting process of reassessment of rural territories as areas of welfare and quality of life for the population. It is within this interesting and renovated process of rural/urban synthesis economic and social dynamics are produced, which are today characteristics of European territories. Sharing this position, the public policies should open their field of action, contemplating all the sectors and stakeholders in the territory from a global and comprehensive perspective and within a flexible governance context in its

multiple levels. The new policies should drive cooperation strategies between the rural and urban environments favoring the necessary synergies between both populations, and all this with the purpose of availing of endogenous and exogenous resources, to place them on the path that will lead them to the sustainable development of said territories.

This is the most complete and comprehensive way to address the development of rural areas, because it overcomes the identification between rural development and the “second pillar” of the CAP, and also overcomes the rural/urban division that has marked these policies; now decisively waging on economic and social cohesion to reduce current imbalance among different European rural or urban territories. These ideas are in synch with those formulated in the Green Book of Territorial Cohesion (European Commission, 2008), a document that, as it also occurred with the Report on the Future of the Rural World in the 1980s and 1990s, suggests interesting reflections on the road that should be taken by the future territorial development policy in the EU.

Among the dynamics today setting off the rural territories, it is worth highlighting: the strong rural/urban interactions; the broad development of roadway communications in the rural environment; the great expansion of the new information technologies (IT) and knowledge; the new insight into the meaning of the rural setting by the whole population; the change in nature of migratory flows; the new social demands regarding natural spaces; consumer demands in terms of health and food safety; disambiguation of environmental and landscape aspects required from all the sectorial actions, and, of course, the growing number of economic activities that could currently be installed in the rural environment and those the use of clean energy and the consideration of its implications on the surroundings with play a leading role when having to condition their installation to an adequate and necessary territorial planning.

This constitutes for all policy design as of 2013 a significant change of scenario when addressing the development of European rural territories. Going from rural development to territorial development does not imply homogenization of public policies, but the contrary: including diversity in the logic that should inspire policies of territorial development. In fact, as indicated in the already mentioned Green Book of Territorial Cohesion, the great value of the European territories lies in its diversity, upon which the future of the European policy of territorial development should be constructed. This policy should rest, in addition, on the

⁹ The reflections hereinafter exposed regarding the future of UE Rural and Territorial Policy belong to the document “FROM RURAL DEVELOPMENT TO TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT; reflections from the Spanish experience” of the IESA forum on the Cohesion of Rural Territories to which the author belongs.

adequate cooperation between players and institutions as fundamental elements of a flexible governance system.

Hence, territorial cohesion, rural/urban articulation, social partnership, institutional cooperation, environmental sustainability and governance are fundamental elements for a policy suggested to guarantee the continuity of a rural environment alive, inhabitable, and respectful with the environment.

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