



EU's Common Agricultural Policy Reforms as an Opportunity to Strengthen Sustainable Rural Development

**Third REP Symposium
Boxtel, October 25-26, 2007**

Intensification and Abandonment

Intensification of European agriculture has led to the concentration of the majority of European food production on 30% of available land. On the remaining 70%, agriculture is no longer economically profitable. Many farmers have already abandoned their land, with a number of negative results:

- culturally valuable landscapes and rural communities are disappearing at an alarming rate.
- ecologically valuable (open) landscapes are disappearing and are being replaced by forests with less biodiversity. A major part of Europe's biodiversity is linked to (extensive) agriculture.
- costs for managing nature in Europe are starting to exceed available funds, as management by nature conservation organisation tends to become far more expensive than traditional management by farmers.

Opportunities for Investment in Rural Development

But we also see innovative initiatives that counteract the trend of abandonment and that manage to create a profitable mix of extensive agriculture and a number of activities that bring added value to the farmer and the region:

- combining diversified agriculture with opportunities in nature development, tourism and social services
- Environment friendly intensive farming systems
- regional 'branding', setting up regional supply chains, marketing regional products with an attractive added value.

The most attractive options for sustainable rural development and the protection of biodiversity cannot be found within the traditional boundaries of agriculture and nature conservation only. They increasingly require cooperation and creative partnerships between a variety of regional and local interests and their representatives, including, for example, health care organisations, chambers of commerce and private investors.

The best opportunities for creating added value for extensive farming, nature development, regional branding, etc., are found in the vicinity of urban areas, where there is a strong demand for 'natural' rural open space and related products and services. In many cases, (private) investments in rural development in these areas can be a profitable activity.

The Future of Agri-Environmental Payments

Managing the growing areas of extensive farmland and abandoned land is a major issue in today's agricultural and nature conservation policies. The current reform of the Common Agricultural Policy is providing positive opportunities for allocating public money more effectively and efficiently for promoting balanced rural development.

- In some areas, especially those close to urban centres, the public contribution to investment in rural development may be limited or even be absent, as there is a strong private business case.
- In other areas, there is a more important role to play for agri-environmental payments.

Effective policies for stimulating rural development and the protection of biodiversity must go beyond the traditional boundaries of agricultural and nature conservation policies. Only through creating new links between a variety of policy areas, can European policy optimally stimulate effective rural development at the level of regional cooperation and partnerships.

REP's role

There is a growing body of knowledge and experience on the issue of rural development in Europe. There are many successful examples of diversified agriculture, development of tourism, regional branding etc. that can inspire other regions in their further development.

REP (Rural European Platform, www.ruraleuropeanplatform.org) is the platform for exchanging information about successful examples and for discussing their relevance for implementing a Common Agricultural Policy in the near future. In REP, farmers (farmer organisations), land owners, nature conservation organisations, governmental and administrative organisations and research institutions are cooperating on the basis of the following mission statement:

- REP is at the forefront of knowledge exchange and policy formulation for sustainable rural development in Europe : development that creates added economic value at the local and regional level, protects and develops biodiversity and contributes to social cohesion.
- REP is connecting knowledge and practical experience on the ground with policy development and implementation at the European and national level.
- REP is the network for effective and innovative solutions by creating the right conditions for financing sustainable rural development through co-operation between the public and the private sector. REP is providing a basis for maximising the performance of public money for rural development and agriculture.

<http://ruraleuropeanplatform.org/mission.html>

The Third REP Symposium: linking grassroots to policy

During the first REP symposium in Lien (Svartdal, Norway, 2004), the idea of REP was born. During the second REP symposium (Falenty, Poland, 2006), a number of highly relevant regional cases from different countries (including the Netherlands, UK, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Ukraine) were discussed and were the basis for establishing a mission statement and clear objectives for developing REP into the leading European platform for sustainable rural development.

REP's third symposium will bring together policy makers on different levels, farmer organisations, nature protection organisations and different experts from a variety of European countries, including 'new' EU countries and EU's neighbours (such as Ukraine). The policy relevance of experiences at the 'grassroots' level, notably experiences from many entrepreneurial projects that create new economic value in rural areas through new forms of cooperation, partnership and financing solutions, will be at the center of the discussion in Boxtel. For the policy makers, the central question will be how to re-allocate the existing EUR 40 billion to stimulate optimal rural development, optimally making use of existing entrepreneurship and innovative trends.

The outcomes of the Third REP Symposium will be presented to EU policy makers, especially as an authoritative input into the Common Agricultural Policy's Health Check that is planned for 2008.

Program

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