

Rural European Platform

REP

Increased productivity, or agricultural “intensification” is often seen as a threat to environment and biodiversity, but it may also provide opportunities for multiple purpose farming and biodiversity, because less land is needed for production. The Rural European Platform explores these opportunities on a European scale.

After the World War II, agriculture policy in Europe was synonymous with food security. Cheap agricultural resources provided the basis for a competitive industry, and a continuing intensification. Today, only 30 percent of agricultural land provides 70 percent of the food. Unfortunately, the agricultural intensification has also given negative trade-offs such as water pollution, loss of biodiversity and abandonment of marginal areas. This means challenges but also new opportunities to strengthen social cohesion in rural areas and help to implement the EU environmental policy. The platform will focus on regional opportunities, as regional differences call for region-specific solutions.

The Rural European Platform brings together non-governmental organizations, farmer’s organizations, policy makers and scientific institutions from all over Europe. The Rural European Platform was initiated by Alterra (Wageningen-University & Research Centre) in the Netherlands and the Norwegian Crop Research Institute with the purpose to discuss the challenges and opportunities for different regions and how measures can be financed, either by the regions themselves or through EU interventions. The Minister of Agriculture of Norway Lars Sponheim, is invited to open the workshop..

Background

We will be looking at promising examples in Europe of rural development , trying to work out what the key features of these are, and what the barriers and opportunities there are to extending these approaches.

It should be noted that rural development and decreasing terms of trade of agricultural produce are global issues. The annual public expenditure supporting rural incomes amounts to US\$ 500 billion worldwide. This includes US\$ 400 billion for agricultural subsidies mainly in developed countries and US\$ 50 billion development aid in the developing world.

Part of the money is an unreasonable subsidy where the funding is used to overcome price differences. The WTO discussions are pivotal in this respect, as open markets will result in cheaper food. It is not likely that all agricultural subsidies including income support will be abolished. At least part of the income subsidies will be changed or

replaced by other payments. An interesting point is about the rationale of agri-environmental payments, which may not only result in profitable environmental improvements, but will also foster regional incomes in the EU. This is where public funding becomes venture capital for rural development. Thus, (unreasonable) subsidies can change into direct payments for farmers, foresters and nature organizations managing the land. The question is: how can we ensure such payments are acceptable for the WTO? There is a demand in society for social cohesion, cultural landscapes, biodiversity and food security. How can such payments be supplied to those who provide for the demand in a way that accords with the demand to liberalize trade?

The aim of the Rural European Platform is to highlight regions in the EU where a broader defined agriculture already contributes to improve regional incomes. Ultimately, the platform should explore the evidence to underpin sound arguments to public and private investors for investments in rural areas. It is expected that the outcome of the platform is interesting for policymakers, indicating some of the different expectations and needs for national and EU contributions in Europe.

The platform is NOT a lobby group proposing arguments, but exploring these issues and identifying research needs so that the debate is better informed.

Rural perspectives and job opportunities are rapidly decreasing worldwide in both forestry and agriculture. At the same time, abandonment of agricultural land has become a common feature all over the world. This is mainly the result of the rapid increase of productivity in agriculture. In Europe, employment in agriculture has decreased from over 50% to less than 5% over the last 100 years (except for countries such as Poland, with a higher part of its labor force in agriculture). It is expected that this percentage will even further decrease. At this stage already 70 percent of the farmers depend for their main income on off-farm income. Similar changes can be observed in developing countries. Even in countries where 50 percent of the labor force is officially still employed in agriculture, most of the farmer's income is already off-farm. Land is abandoned also in developing countries. The need to tackle poverty in rural areas of developing economies and loss of biodiversity is an increasing problem in developing countries. Rural people depending for their livelihood on natural resources have no other choice than overexploiting the resources. These rural areas have become poverty traps, which are also a threat to biodiversity, both in natural and man-made landscapes. Pollution in developed countries and degradation of natural resources in developing countries are part of the same story. The question is what actions and research are needed to revitalize the countryside?

In Europe, the decreasing need for agricultural land is resulting in abandonment, and disappearance of open cultural landscapes, leading to a decrease in biodiversity. But, perceptions are not always the same. Abandonment i.e. re-growth of forest is not always considered a problem. Nature people might like this process and call it re-wilding! However, agri-cultural landscapes and biodiversity already have become a pillar for the economic revitalization of the countryside in some regions of Europe. One of the purposes of the REP is to discuss various initiatives in Europe, and to search for common denominators to develop profitable European rural policies, counteracting depopulation and disappearance of cultural landscapes and their biodiversity.

We invite you to a workshop in Norway with a broad composition which has the potential to come up with some real opportunities for rural development, which will not entirely depend on how much money will be available for agri-environmental measures in the EU, but on a business approach and local initiatives already in place. Invitees will present their experiences and solutions. There will be an overview of cases where the agricultural landscape already contributes to strengthen the regional economy and social cohesion.