

Thomas Dax

Rural development - a challenge for European inter-disciplinary research¹

Abstract

The two most important factors underlying Agenda 2000 which sets the frame for EU policies on agriculture and economic and social cohesion up to 2006, are Eastern enlargement and the Millenium Round of trade talks. Both will lead to a diminution of the importance of sectoral agricultural and forestry policies and an increase in the importance of rural development policies.

Experience from comparative work on rural development issues across Europe has shown that the history and nature of rural development policies and actions differs greatly between European countries (and regions). The diversity of development paths has to be addressed through comparative research work. In this respect, starting from interesting exchange activities of rural researchers (which have evolved over recent years, like REAPER, LEADER Observatory, COST activity "Rural Innovation" and specific thematic conferences) might serve as basis to fill into the recently developed concept of the European Research Area. In particular, the REAPER network ("Social and Economic Research on Rural Development in Western Europe") in which Austria participated through the Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen and ÖAR has served as an impressive exchange between researchers and practitioners. Such an activity contributes to the common understanding of the diversity of rural development problems and policy approaches.

Beyond the increasing research interest in the issue (from EU Commission, OECD, FAO; universities, local and regional actors and public debate) there is major concern for providing an institutional framework for scientific exchange at various national and international levels and organisations. Elaborating a Network of Excellence might be a challenge for the European scientific community. This would allow to address the issues of differentiated development of rural areas and the need for inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary methods. It seems particularly important to reach also local "bottom-up" activities, of which Austria has acquired significant experience. This link to practitioners will be essential to provide appropriate input for the next policy reforms.

¹ A former version of this paper has been presented as poster at the International BOKU-Congress 2001 "Sustain life – Secure survival. Challenges, analyses and solutions", Vienna, 18-21 November 2001.

Introduction

The two most important factors underlying Agenda 2000 which sets the frame for EU policies on agriculture and economic and social cohesion up to 2006, are Eastern enlargement and the Millenium Round of trade talks. Both will lead to a diminution of the importance of sectoral agricultural and forestry policies and an increase in the importance of rural development policies (Blandford 2001).

Rural Policy has been addressed increasingly over the last decade and during the recent policy reform and became a topic of prime concern, especially for agrarian and regional policy. It has been referred to in the European Perspective on Spatial Development (ESDP) and even led to the phrasing of rural development as the "second pillar" of EU agrarian policy. While practise in the EU member states only gradually favours a shift to rural development measures, the issue is not limited to the discussion of EU countries but present in discourse on territorial development of all industrialised countries. For example, since the mid 90s OECD has focused on the unique characteristics of rural amenities as core potential for (economic) development.

Experience from comparative work on rural development issues across Europe, like the EU-network "Social and Economic Research on Rural Development in Western Europe" (REAPER) project and other respective EU research projects have shown that the history and nature of rural development policies and actions differs greatly between European countries (and regions).

The importance of comparative research and analysis for understanding the diverse, and differentiated development paths in rural Europe must be underlined, and is basic for the conceptualisation of research activities. In this respect, EU research and development support plays a crucial role, since very little national research funding is directed at comparative research. Moreover, comparative research is arguably more important in social science research than in research in the natural sciences, and is a vital element of "European value-added".

Research networks

A number of quite interesting exchange activities of rural researchers have taken place over recent years, including the following:

- REAPER - network (1994-1997)
- Assessment of rural development research for the Standing Committee for Agricultural Research (SCAR-committee) at the EU Commission

- the 48th seminar of the European Association of Agricultural Economists in Dijon (20 – 21 March 1997)
- XVII Congress of European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS), 25-29 August 1997, Chania
- XVIII Congress of ESRS, 24-28 August 1999, Lund
- XIX Congress of ESRS, 3-7 September 2001, Dijon
- X World Congress of International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA), 30 July -5 August 2000, Rio de Janeiro
- activities of the European Observatory for the LEADER II Community Initiative
- COST A12 activities, gathering researchers in 5 different thematical working groups, under the heading "Rural Innovation", and
- the Arkleton Centre's international conference "European Rural Policy at the Crossroads", Aberdeen, 29 June – 1 July 2000

The concept of the European Research Area calls for a European view and organisation of research problems. In particular, comparative research work addressing the diversity of rural regions across Europe is based on scientific exchange. It is essential to look into the reasons and nature of these differences and to explore the scope for the basic concepts of "rural areas" and different notions of "development" to be found between European countries, and evolving over time.

It has been analysed that research agendas and structures for the support of research have been heavily dominated by agricultural research, with much less attention being paid to the other economic and social dimensions of rural change and development. The marginal position of social science research in this area under the EU Framework Programmes is revealed by the low share in total funds allocated to rural development research (Framework 4: about 4%, Framework 5: about 8%, according to data by Bryden 2001).

Elaborating Theory on Rural Issues

However, a common level of understanding of theoretical and policy issues has evolved among the group of European research institutes active in the field. These persons are partially linked to overseas researchers, too. In particular, the following research and networking activities can be seen as a starting point for elaborating a Network of Excellence, as suggested by the concept of European Research Area as core instrument:

- **REAPER-network** (Social and Economic Research on Rural Development in Western Europe; it was a collaboration between researchers and practitioners in 16 European countries to assess rural social science research activities and needs.)
- **LEADER-observatory** (Liaison entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale)

- **RUREMPLO**, EU-project (Rural Employment Dynamics in the EU)
- **DORA**, EU-project (Dynamics of Rural Areas)
- **IMPACT**, EU-project (The Socio-economic Impact of Rural Development Policies: Realities and Potentials)
- **PRIDE**, EU-project (Partnerships for Rural Integrated Development in Europe)
- **PAYPIRD**, EU-project (Policies and Young People in Rural Development)
- **AsPIRE**, EU-project (Aspatial peripherality, innovation and the rural economy)
- **RESTRIM**, EU-project (Restructuring in Marginal Rural Areas, the Role of Social Capital in Rural Development)
- **Rural Areas NEWSLINK** (Newsletter for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development in Central and Eastern Europe)

At international and national levels there have been specific programmes and initiatives to enhance comparative studies of rural areas and exchange research views towards rural development. These may well go beyond mainstream EU and national research programmes and include innovative actions and co-operative activities by local action groups as well as study programmes by international organisations, like OECD, FAO, University activities or establishing scientific networks under the European Science Foundation (ESF). National working groups, like the Austrian working group on rural development research (organised by Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen) intend to deepen discussion on various issues and research trends.

The challenge of inter-disciplinarity

Research objectives will have to focus on:

- Trends in rural areas at EU level (including Eastern enlargement) and their causes and consequences.
- Level of aggregation for developing new explanations of rural differentiation (local, regional, national, trans-national).
- Survey and comparison on theoretical approaches on rural development
- Assessment of EU (and national) policy programmes and tendencies in a context of increasing globalisation.
- The role of (national) institutional frameworks and shifts in governance between levels and institutional impacts.
- Alterations in the meaning of the "rural" (dynamic view on territory and society) and processes through which social values are constructed.

In many respects inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary methods are at the core of research questions for rural areas. Therefore the adequate link and interrelation to the main research disciplines and the extension towards new fields might signify momentum for the rural debate, particularly required in a ever globalising world.

Involvement of Austrian research

Rural policy in Austria has been more closely related to regional policy than in other European countries when aimed at its territorial meaning. Hence, rural research activities concentrate on the analysis of endogenous development in peripheral rural areas, the role of mountain areas, issues of regional development (e.g. commuting, territorial disparities) and regional impacts of agrarian policy. Indeed very often the term rural development is still not referred to through the territorial and integrative aspect, but closely related with agricultural development. The Austrian Rural Development Plan (2000-2006) which has been adopted as one of the first programmes by the EU Commission sets its priorities in agri-environmental orientation, compensation for farming in less-favoured areas and diversification of agriculture. However, there is a sound basis for local "bottom-up" action which is expressed by the strong commitment for regional activities and programmes like the LEADER+ Community Initiative.

Though only a few research institutes have been involved in rural research at a European level (Dax 1996), interest for international co-operation seems to increase over recent years. The Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen has been central Austrian partner, particularly through the participation in several core EU-projects and activities dealing with rural development perspectives and research. This includes the long-term EU study on pluriactivity and agricultural structures (Rural Change in Europe), the REAPER and RUSSTIC networks, the PAYPIRD project, and expert activities for OECD, FAO and EU-Commission, as well as a tight integration into the international discussion on rural policies and research.

Beyond the increasing research interest in the issue (from EU Commission, OECD,FAO; universities, local and regional actors and public debate) there is major concern for providing an institutional framework for scientific exchange at various national and international levels and organisations. Elaborating a Network of Excellence might be a challenge for the European scientific community. This would allow to address the issues of differentiated development of rural areas and the need for inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary methods. It seems particularly important to reach also local "bottom-up" activities, of which Austria has

acquired significant experience. This link to practitioners will be essential to provide appropriate input for the next policy reforms.

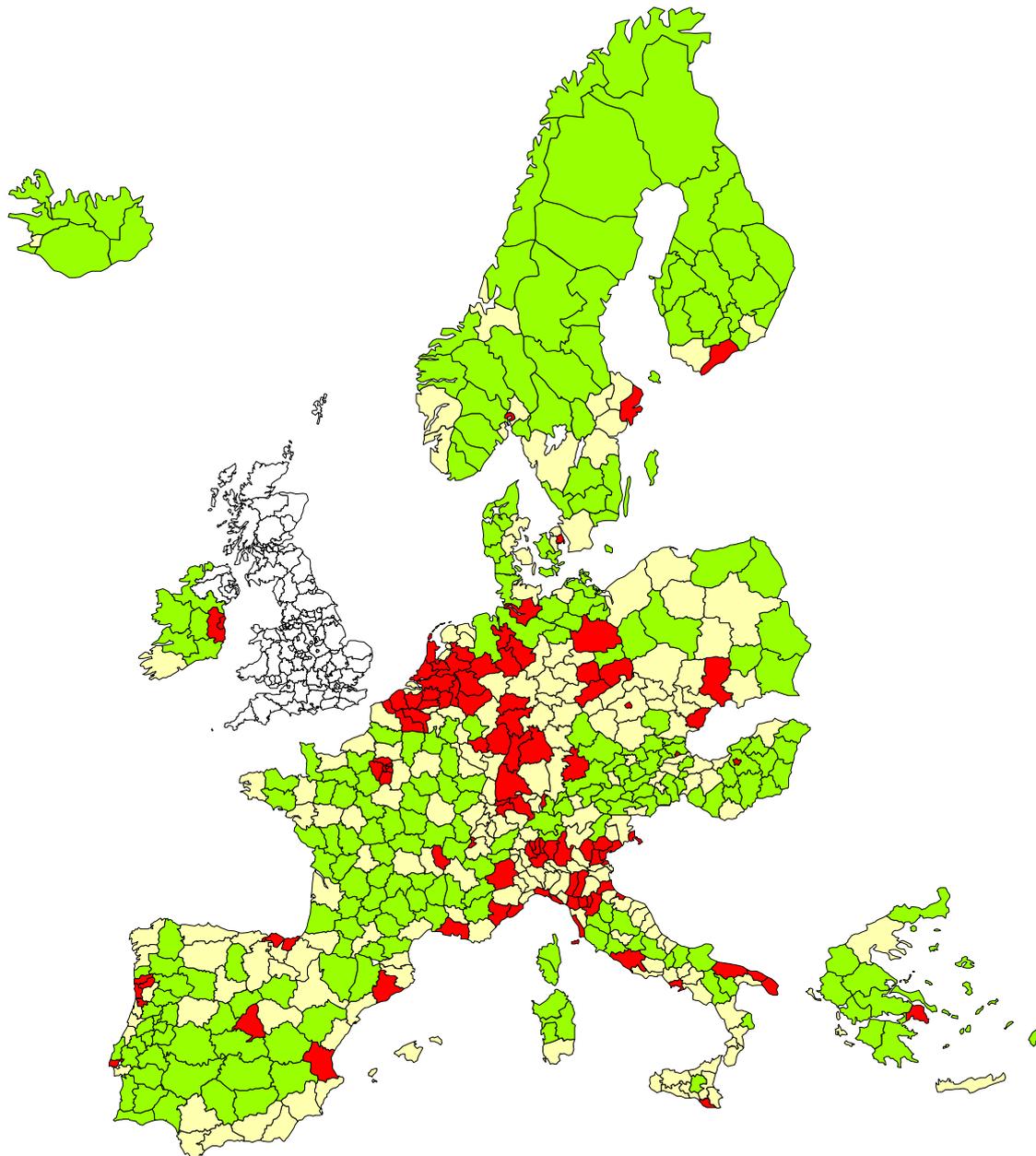
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Contact information

Mr. Thomas Dax
Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen
Möllwaldplatz 5
A-1040 Wien
Tel: +43 (01) 504 88 69 0
Fax: +43 (01) 504 88 69 39
e-mail: thomas.dax@babf.bmlf.gv.at
<http://www.babf.bmlf.gv.at>

Types of regions in Europe



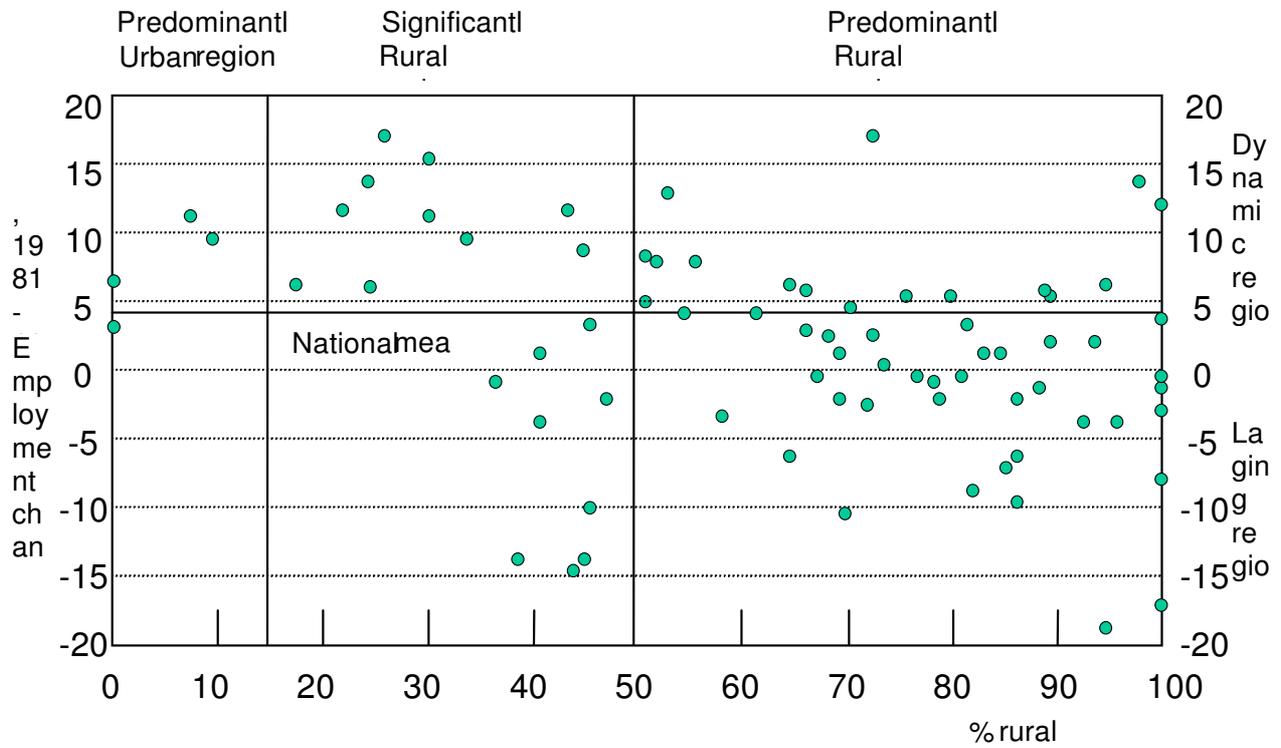
OECD regional typology in Europe

at territorial levels 3 (TL 2 for Poland)

- *Predominantly Rural regions*
- *Intermediate regions*
- *Predominantly Urban regions*

Source: OECD 2000

Figure 1: Rurality and employment in Austria 1981 - Regions by share of rural population and employment change



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