

# PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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## Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Meaning of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Europe
  - 2.1. Rural Regions in Europe
  - 2.2 Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development
3. Constraints on Sustainable Development in Rural Regions
  - 3.1. The Restructuring of Agriculture
  - 3.2. Rural Socioeconomic Processes of Change
4. Indicators of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development
5. Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development
  - 5.1. Promoting Sustainable Agriculture
  - 5.2. Promoting Sustainable Rural Development
6. The Effects of Policies Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development
  - 6.1. Agricultural Effects
  - 6.2. Rural Development Effects
7. Conclusion
- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Biographical Sketch

## Summary

Sustainable rural development can be contextualized to three types of region: periurban, productive agricultural lowland, and economic periphery. A range of indicators confirm the contemporary absence of sustainable agriculture and rural development in Europe, although the constraints on sustainable development vary among the three types of rural region. Sustainable rural development can no longer be equated solely with agricultural development in rural regions, and a new balance is being sought between farming and restructuring economies and societies. A distinction can be drawn between top-down and bottom-up processes in the promotion of sustainable development, with networks of institutions in rural regions playing an increasingly influential role. However, state policies to promote sustainability in rural regions are commonly overridden by other policy imperatives concerned with economic growth and global competition.

## 1. Introduction

Until the last three decades of the twentieth century, it was possible to equate rural development with agricultural development throughout much of Europe. On the one hand, even if direct employment in agriculture was declining, socioeconomic life in most rural regions still revolved around the positive multiplier effect of demand from the farm sector for both services, such as veterinary practices, agricultural advice, farm machinery supplies and maintenance, agrichemical supplies, shops, schools, and health facilities, and the marketing of farm products, including associated transport companies, abattoirs, food-processing factories, and auction markets. On the other hand, land use and the management of the natural environment in rural regions were still dominated by agriculture, and development in the countryside remained an essentially farm-based issue. For example, in the 1980s, 80% of the surface area of the European Union (EU) remained in rural use, contained 25% of the population, but gave direct agricultural employment to only 6% of the workforce.

However, the association of the rural, and its sustainability, with agriculture, has been severely weakened in a majority of European regions. First, as the logic of an industrial model of development has restructured agriculture in both Western and Eastern Europe, so the mainly urban population, with its emerging green consumerism, has been made aware of the associated financial costs of farm subsidies, the damaging environmental consequences of farming practices, the problematic health and safety characteristics of the food produced, and the relatively small contribution to employment and gross national (as opposed to regional) product that agriculture now makes. Second, rural regions have come under increasing pressure to absorb new space and resource demands emanating from the growing urban population. The countryside is now increasingly sought as a place to live, to set up businesses (industrial and service), to provide tourist facilities, to generate water supplies, and to implement programs of habitat conservation. Thus, increasing numbers of rural regions in Europe are becoming more dependent on developments in their nonagricultural, as compared with agricultural, sectors regarding land use change, employment structure, and social composition of the population. Indeed it is now commonplace to regard rural regions as places of consumption as much as places of production.

Consequently, the promotion of sustainable development in rural regions throughout Europe must now incorporate nonagricultural and agricultural components, with the former concerned with communities that owe more to relations with urban areas than to their rural locations. With the increasing urbanization of the countryside in Europe, the promotion of sustainable rural development involves the repositioning of agriculture within regional economies and societies undergoing transformation.

## **2. The Meaning of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Europe**

### **2.1. Rural Regions in Europe**

The rural areas of Europe should not be looked upon as homogeneous. Rather, the European countryside comprises a rich mosaic of differentiated regions, which vary in their population characteristics, land use structures, economic dynamism, and service provision. For example, the proportion of the population living in rural areas within the EU varies from 48% in Ireland, to 30% in Spain, to 16% in Denmark. To generalize,

however, three broad categories of region can be identified, covering both Eastern and Western Europe.

First, within daily commuting range of all urban centers are rural regions heavily influenced by the processes of urbanization (i.e. periurban areas made up of urban hinterlands). These processes include the transfer of rural land to urban uses (e.g., transport, housing, landfill sites, industry, retail and office space), the market opportunities offered to the farm sector (e.g., fresh farm produce, farm-based recreation, and direct farm sales), and the outspilling of the urban population to occupy the farmhouses, villages, and new housing located in the countryside. In Western Europe, such processes have been constrained by physical planning procedures with their roots in social democracy. In most Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), by contrast, the urbanization of the countryside has been regulated by centralized, socialist planning principles until the last decade of the twentieth century.

Second, beyond the daily commuting range of large cities lie productive, lowland farming regions, which, to varying degrees, are also receiving a new exurban population under a process termed counterurbanization. Such repopulation of the countryside is more evident in Western as compared with Eastern European rural regions, with many of the latter still suffering from depopulation as the transition to a capitalist economy continues. Three groups of exurban migrants can be identified: those following new nonagricultural employment opportunities into the countryside, the retired, and those seeking a rural idyll removed from the congestion, pollution, and crime levels of urban areas. The presence of these three groups changes the employment structure toward professional, managerial, and service categories, alters the social composition of the population toward the service class, and transforms social attitudes toward the environment and the interpretation of sustainability for rural communities.

A third group of regions comprises the economic periphery of national economies, characteristically the mountain and hill areas in both Eastern and Western Europe, but also including coastal margins, as in the west of Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, and Southern Europe. Many of these regions are influenced more by depopulation than repopulation and retain the greatest degree of rurality in association with land-based industries such as agriculture, fishing, forestry, and mineral extraction. Other peripheral regions, by contrast, are benefiting from the development of mass tourism and enjoy a buoyant economy and society, for instance the skiing valleys of the Alps and Pyrenees mountains and the coastal areas adjacent to the Mediterranean beaches of Europe. The argument to be made here, therefore, is that sustainable rural development in Europe has different meanings not just between the agricultural and nonagricultural sectors of economy and society, but also among the three different types of regions with their characteristics of socioeconomic growth or decline. However, limitations of space prevent a systematic development of this argument, and in the following discussion the three different types of rural regions have been considered together.

## **2.2 Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development**

Both the purposive development of agriculture and rural economy and society have been pursued for many decades, but often separately rather than together. Indeed for a

long time rural development was conducted on a sector-by-sector basis. For example, transport provision would be developed independently of programs to provide electricity or water supplies to rural areas. However, the concept of integrated rural development has gradually emerged, whereby interrelations between agriculture and other sectors of economy and society form the basis for more holistic systems and network approaches to development. Sustainability, as another integrative concept, has served to underpin this hybrid approach (i.e. natural and human systems taken together) to the promotion of rural development (see *Strengthening the Role of Farmers and Transfer to and Within Europe's Rural Areas*).

The meaning of sustainability for agriculture and rural development contains three widely recognized dimensions: environment, economy, and society. In more detail, the main *environmental* dimension includes: (1) utilization of natural capital, such as soil (land), water, and mineral resources, so that their use is reproducible over succeeding generations; (2) the improvement of biodiversity; and (3) recycling of wastes and nutrients that does not cause pollution of the biosphere, especially water resources. In the *economic* dimension, emphasis is given to maintaining agricultural raw materials and services to the nonfarm population by means that provide satisfactory economic returns to land, labor, and capital, even though the definition of satisfactory is contested and is socially and politically determined. The maintenance of economically viable employment opportunities is extended to other nonfarm, land-based industries (e.g., forestry, mineral extraction, and fishing), manufacturing, and services (e.g., tourism) located in rural regions. With regard to the *social* dimension, sustainable development includes the long-term retention of an optimum level of population, the maintenance of an acceptable quality of life, the equitable distribution of material benefits from economic growth, and the building of capacity in the community to participate in the development process, including the use of knowledge to create new choices and options over time. In the promotion of *sustainable* agriculture and rural development, these interrelated environmental, economic, and social dimensions are pursued simultaneously rather than separately; the latter conform to conventional agriculture and rural development approaches and lie outside the following discussion.

### **3. Constraints on Sustainable Development in Rural Regions**

The constraints on sustainable agriculture and rural development can be analyzed conveniently by separating agricultural restructuring from broader processes of socioeconomic change.

#### **3.1. The Restructuring of Agriculture**

European agriculture has become increasingly unsustainable through the widespread development of the industrial model of agricultural development. In summary, the trajectory of European agriculture since the end of World War II has been toward farming systems having characteristics normally associated with the manufacturing industry, namely the creation of scale economies at the farm level (i.e. fewer but larger farms), a reliance on purchased agri-inputs manufactured in other sectors of the economy (i.e. farm plant and machinery, agrichemicals, fertilizers), resource substitution (i.e. capital for labor), specialization of labor, and mechanization of production methods. Significantly, these trends can be found in both capitalist and (former) socialist farming systems. The

term industrialization describes this trajectory of development in agriculture, with modern pig, poultry, beef feedlot, and greenhouse horticulture probably representing the most industrialized sectors of agriculture. The industrial model of agricultural development can be usefully summarized under the following three terms: intensification, concentration, and specialization.

The term *intensification* can be used to describe the rising level of purchased agri-inputs (e.g., farm machinery, agrichemicals, fertilizers) and increases in output per hectare of farmland. These trends are readily observable in the rising per hectare application of fertilizers and the increasing average yields of most crops and grass throughout Europe. One secondary result of this capitalization of agriculture has been the displacement of labor from agriculture by machinery and other purchased inputs—initially the hired workers and then by owner-occupiers (farm families). The competitive market process that drives the least economically successful farm businesses out of agriculture also enables their land to be purchased by the remaining, more successful businesses. Businesses with large land holdings tend to be able to out-compete smaller farms in the land market, and so there is a tendency for farmland to become *concentrated* in fewer but larger farm businesses and for the number of smaller farms to decline. Another way of gaining economies of scale is to limit production to fewer products on the farm and so concentrate the costs of production on a narrow range of items. In addition, in an increasingly sophisticated technological environment, there are management advantages in learning and applying specialist skills and knowledge. This process of *specialization* on a narrow range of crops and livestock, when aggregated for groups of farms, produced the increasingly specialized agricultural regions observable throughout Europe.

Equally important have been the developing relations between agriculture and capital inputs *external* to the farm sector (e.g., agri-inputs, food processing, banking and credit capital). On the one hand lays the partial but persistent transformation into industrial activities of certain *inputs* to the agricultural production process, and their subsequent reintroduction in the form of purchased farm inputs. The replacement of farm animals by tractors and farmyard manure by artificial fertilizers provide two examples of this process. On the other hand, nonfarm capital replaces natural agricultural *outputs* with chemical and synthetic raw materials and so eliminates the rural base of agriculture. This process is most advanced in the substitution of natural fibers, such as cotton and wool, by synthetic fibers, such as rayon and nylon. Agri-inputs and food processing firms have also contributed to the restructuring of the agricultural sector by favoring larger farm businesses with production contracts and intensive, technologically advanced farming practices, thereby further marginalizing smaller businesses and traditional farming methods. Restructuring of agri-food firms has also brought about concentration in large national and multinational agrifood corporations.

Compared with other parts of the world economy, European agriculture has been relatively sheltered from global markets by the protectionist farm policies of individual states in the CEECs and by the European Union's (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Western Europe. In the former, for example, the farm sector was protected against imports from capitalist countries and received subsidies on the costs of production, for example energy costs (petroleum). Consumers in their turn received price subsidies on basic foods. Within the Member States of the EU, imports of lower-

priced agricultural produce were also restricted (by variable import levies), domestic farm prices were maintained above world market prices by intervention buying agencies, and many farm producers received direct income supports, for example in the hill and mountain areas. In addition, any production surplus to domestic demand was exported onto world markets through food aid programs and export subsidies. Given these circumstances, state intervention can be interpreted as actively supporting the process of the industrialization of agriculture so as to create security of food supply for the population of Europe.

One by-product of this state-supported industrialization of agriculture, in both Eastern and Western Europe, has been the pressure placed on natural resources and the environment. Countries with the highest levels of state support and intervention have tended to develop the most intensive farming systems, with damaging environmental consequences. One contributory factor has been the failure of the market system to reflect the external costs of agricultural change (e.g., environmental pollution and habitat loss), including the consumption of nonrenewable resources (e.g., petroleum). Environmental gains are expected from more extensive agricultural systems following the recent withdrawal of state subsidies throughout Europe. However, such gains have been made uncertain by the parallel exposure of European farming to global competition: the industrial model of agricultural development may well be strengthened by the competitive international organization of farming capital.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Professor Ian Bowler** is in the Department of Geography, University of Leicester, England. He is the author of several books and numerous research papers on agriculture in advanced economies, and was Chair of the International Geographical Union's Commission on Sustainable Rural Systems.