

Contribution to the 2020 Consultation “Long-term vision for rural areas” by the secretariat of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the EU (COMECE)

An important step in the right direction: a long-term vision for rural areas¹

Rural areas in Europe are first and foremost characterised by their *diversity* in many respects - geographical, topographical, climatic, biological, economic, social and cultural. They are, even more than European cities, a sign of *European diversity*.

At the same time, they are linked by the fact that the relationship between 'city' and 'countryside', between urban agglomerations and rural areas in the EU is marked by a strong disparity: while almost 90% of the EU's territory is still 'rural', they are inhabited by only a quarter of the EU's population – 26%. This means that the ratio has almost completely reversed since the turn of the century before last, in 1900. The role and importance of rural areas is undergoing an equally strong change.

In the first instance, rural areas were '*living spaces for people*', capable of living largely self-sufficiently in economic and cultural terms. These areas were therefore characterised by a network of very different relationships and businesses - above all agriculture, crafts, services, and various forms of settlement - villages and small-town communities with extensive self-administration. A fundamental restructuring of agriculture after the Second World War through mechanisation, industrialisation and a concentration of the available land in ever fewer and ever larger farms and the resulting migration of the population to the urban agglomerations set off a negative development. It led to an impoverishment of the rural infrastructure - the closure of small businesses and service providers, including public facilities such as post offices, schools and medical care, a reduction in public transport, but also the abandonment of self-sufficiency in various areas (such as village self-administration or small-scale, partly local energy supply). In sum: these developments have caused *lasting disruption or destruction of existing networks*. In addition, there is a public perception (and representation) of these spaces as 'backward' and therefore 'to be developed' according to modern views.

What rural areas need

In our opinion, the most urgent need in rural areas lies in a *far-reaching reversal* of this development. To this end, rural areas must be perceived as independent of and equivalent to urban centres, and not only 'stock and provide resources for the urban areas' (food, water, energy, recreation). In the first instance, these areas are 'living spaces for people with their own needs' with their own culture and traditions which, in their own way, must be reconciled with the challenges of an ecologically and socially just transition. *This requires a change of perspective*: Rural areas are not 'objects for satisfying urban needs', but 'subjects', 'spaces with their own needs', which elude this externally determined object character.

¹ Weiterführende Hintergrundliteratur:

le Goff, J.-P.: La fin du village. Paris 2012

Henkel G.: Das Dorf. Landleben in Deutschland - gestern und heute. Bonn 2014

Papst Franziskus.: Enzyklika Laudato Si'. Über die Sorge für das gemeinsame Haus. Vatikanstadt 2015 van der Woud, A.: Het Landschap, de Mensen. Nederland 1850-1940. Amsterdam 2020

Rural areas have a great potential

In comparison with urban agglomerations, rural areas have a greater *resilience* with regard to sustainability: Rural areas have "sustainability advantages".² These are determined by:

- 'Ecological sustainability cores': remaining, undestroyed or currently unused infrastructure that can be reactivated (such as mills, remnants of small power plants, railway infrastructure that has not been dismantled; marketing structures)
- Broader elements of traditional sustainability (renewable energy, agriculture, construction, heating, recycling, etc.);
- Experience in sustainable management and traditional techniques;
- Greater scope for actual self-design in village and small-town settlement structures;
- Still existing small structures for new sustainable models (businesses, cooperative structures, associations etc.);
- Awareness of structural change and dismantling, development of counter-strategies.

These existing potentials of rural areas must be taken up, promoted and cultivated. They are a 'social resource' in the original sense: a source that can support and strengthen an economic and social transition that is necessary in view of climate change and its consequences. A balance must be found between the economic, cultural and social needs and interests of people in rural areas on the one hand and the 'ecological ceiling' (the carrying capacity of the Earth) on the other, in the sense of an 'integral ecology' capable of combining an 'ecology as environment' with a 'human ecology as lifeworld'.

This does not mean a 'nostalgic return' to the conditions of past centuries but includes an openness to new technological developments - such as the necessary transition to digital technology - taking into account the two limitations just mentioned.

Agriculture has to change again -to become sustainable

This applies in particular to a comprehensive reform of agriculture (and thus, more broadly, to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy). The industrialization of agriculture and its one-sided, almost exclusive orientation towards market economy criteria has contributed to the decline of rural areas, thus transforming 'habitats' into 'production areas' (with the associated environmental damage such as pollution of water and soil and the loss of biodiversity). What therefore is needed is a reorientation of agriculture towards the criteria of an 'integral ecology' which is up to the challenges of climate change and the new social demands associated with it. Such a change can also contribute to a new diversity in rural areas. In this sense, rural areas really do need a 'long-term vision' that gives people (especially farmers) planning security and thus makes sustainability possible. Then rural areas will literally have a future again and will be significant for society as a whole.

² Herrenknecht, A. und J. Wohlfahrt.: Auf dem Weg ins «Nachhaltigkeit-Land»? Was hat der ländliche Raum von der Nachhaltigkeitsdebatte zu erwarten? In: Pro Regio H20-21/1997, 5-35

A guiding role for rural areas

"One of the main social tasks of rural areas in future will be to create 'peace with nature'.³ This means reflecting on a comprehensive 'agricultural culture'⁴ which includes a way of life and economic activity that is compatible with nature but also humane and socially just. This requires, not least, agricultural production (including processing and marketing) which uses both modern and traditional techniques and experience, and which always seeks to conserve the resources of soil, water, climate and energy as far as possible. With a holistic agricultural culture and the implementation of an endogenous policy with regional and local responsibility, rural areas can not only make optimum economic use of their best resources for themselves (in terms of profitability and jobs), but can also play a certain, even essential guiding role in the future development and renewal of industrial society.

In (...) Europe and globally, rural areas contain a substantial part of the natural and cultural potential.⁵ They therefore deserve increased support and respect from politics, society and science".⁶

³ Meyer-Abich, K.M.: Wege zum Frieden mit der Natur. München 1984

⁴ Priebe, H.: Die subventionierte Naturzerstörung. Plädoyer für eine neue Agrarkultur, München 1990

⁵ Henkel G., Rettet das Dorf! Was jetzt zu tun ist. München 2018

⁶ G. Henkel, Der Ländliche Raum. Stuttgart 2020, S. 406