

Winning Rural Development Strategies from the European Union

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From:

**Spreading Prosperity to
the “Other Maines”**
*Reflections on
Regional Disparities*

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**Maine Center for
Economic Policy**

November 2005

Like rural United States, rural Europe has an older and poorer population and faces similar challenges of deteriorating infrastructures, loss of amenities, and youth flight. Unlike the U.S., however, there seems to be agreement among the 25 European Union nations that sustaining rural life and rural areas matters. Ruralness means “waiting to be developed.” It is not looked down upon as archaic and uncompetitive, but as a collection of places and people that contribute to everyone’s betterment. This is due in part to the fact that population densities are much higher in Europe and that there is a greater sense that the landscape has both a private and public

value. This ethos of support for place – especially rural places – is reflected in the EU’s many policies for rural regions.

Policy

In November 1996 in Cork, Ireland, a Conference of European Rural Development resulted in “The Cork Declaration – A Living Countryside.”¹ Foremost among its declarations was that,

Sustainable rural development must be put at the top of the agenda of the European Union, and become the fundamental principle that underpins all rural policy in the immediate future and after enlargement. This aims at reversing rural out-migration, combating poverty, stimulating employment and equality of opportunity, and responding to growing requests for more quality, health, safety, personal development and leisure, and improving rural well-being. The need to preserve and improve the quality of the rural environment must be integrated into all Community policies that relate to rural development. There must be a fairer balance of public spending, infrastructure investments and educational, health and communications services between rural and urban areas. A growing share of available resources should be used for promoting rural development and securing environmental objectives.

These principles are reflected in the Common Agriculture Program (CAP). CAP supports the countryside as a source of “public goods,” including food production, forest, field and hillside landscapes, and recreational opportunities for urban dwellers. This is called *multifunctionality of the land* and it justifies the expansion and/or continuation of rural support. Multifunctionality represents the idea that when any commodity is produced, the act of production also commonly leads to side effects or “joint products”, some bad and some good. In the EU it has become a major justification for the continuation of the Common Agricultural Policy and related subsidy payments to farmers. It has also become one of the policy tools used to deal with “public bads” produced by over-intensive farming. Further, it has been a key plank in the EU’s foreign

policy, and specifically of its stance in the current WTO Trade Round. Increasingly, as international and internal pressures mount to remove subsidies encouraging excess commodity production, multifunctionality is becoming a key foundation of what the EU calls its “rural development policy”. Agri-environmental schemes, in particular, have become an increasingly important part of this policy.²

With a commitment to support the countryside and with policies in place, what can be done to improve the well-being of rural people and places, over a vast and ever expanding landscape? An influential Europe-wide movement has emerged. It is diverse and led by broad-based organizations that represent rural, environmental, and consumer interests in national and European legislatures. These bring together under a single tent, farmers, environmentalists, women’s organizations, civic groups, youth organizations and many others to ensure that rural people and the rural way of life are taken into account and their interests advanced as policy is formulated. This movement is partially supported by EU programs but also depends on local leadership and ingenuity.

Leadership

Leader+ is one of four initiatives financed by EU’s “Structural Funds.”³ It is designed to help rural stakeholders consider the long-term potential of their local region. Encouraging the implementation of integrated, high-quality and original strategies for sustainable development, it has a strong focus on partnerships and networks, as illustrated below.

The *Leader I* phase marked the beginning of a new territorially-based rural development policy approach that is integrated and participatory. Its successor, *Leader II* has seen the approach put to more widespread use, with an emphasis on the innovative aspects of projects. Leader+ continues to be a laboratory, encouraging the testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development. Replication of successful initiatives will be encouraged on a wider front.

Leader+ is structured around three activities, in addition to technical assistance:

- Support for integrated regional development strategies of a pilot nature, based on a bottom-up organizational approach.
- Support for cooperation between rural territories.
- Networking among interest groups.

Implementation is through *Local Action Groups* selected in an open procedure based on criteria that include the territories' rural nature, their physical, economic and social homogeneity, and integrated and innovative plan concepts. Economic and social associations must make up at least 50% of the local partnership, and the partnership's effectiveness is also taken into account.

Priority themes laid down by the European Commission include:

- Making the best use of natural and cultural resources, including enhancing the value of sites.
- Improving rural quality of life.
- Adding value to local products, in particular by facilitating access to markets for small production units via cooperatives and other collective actions.
- The use of new know-how and new technologies to make rural products and services more competitive.

Rural Development Strategies

What follows are four examples of successful rural development initiatives in telecommunications, medical information systems, food safety certification, and tourism.

The rural environment and social vitality are main concerns of European citizens, along with a safe food system, jobs, and economic growth. The current lack of economic growth affects all; pensions, salaries and the standard of living considerably suffer from it.

The EU's Heads of State and Government, meeting in Lisbon in 2000, launched a series of ambitious reforms at the national and European levels. By establishing an effective internal market, boosting research and innovation, and improving rural education through telecommunication networks, they aimed to make the European Union "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world" by 2010. *eEurope* was one of these reforms.

European Information Society - 2010 is an initiative that will provide an integrated approach to information society and audio-visual policies in the EU, covering regulation, research, deployment, and promotion of cultural diversity. It will look for fast and visible results, building on the optimistic outlook for information and communication technology (ICT) industries and markets. It will encourage fast growth built around the convergence at the levels of networks, services and devices. Its objective is to ensure that Europe's citizens, businesses, and governments make the best use of ICTs in order to improve industrial competitiveness, support growth and job creation and to help address key societal challenges. This is a public response to the telecommunication needs of all of Europe, urban as well as remote. Recommendations by the eEurope Advisory Group call for, "Bridging the digital divide in terms of broadband territorial coverage in rural areas across the European Union by making the structural funds available for e-government, e-health, e-education, e-etc."

The Danish Centre for Health Telematics⁵

With the geographic spread of telecommunication technologies, *tele-work* and *tele-medicine* are available through most of Europe. (Poland, for example, as a new member of the EU, has 80% broadband coverage and is continually increasing the area.) The Danish tele-health system not only uses technology for medical procedures and monitoring, but also for patient record management. Today, the primary focus of the

Health Care Data Network is to transmit electronic communications between parties in the health sector: pharmacies, general practitioners, municipalities and hospitals.

In addition, *VisInfo* (“Show Information”), a restricted homepage, to which only hospitals and general practitioners have access, contains information on waiting times for hospital admittance, treatment and visitation guidelines, and patient information. This system also has a data consultant service, which offers support for generation and analyses of data from the general practitioner’s system for quality assurance and treatment.

These technologies can improve patient care and outcomes that are non-place dependent and streamline care from the primary physician to the specialist, whether in Copenhagen or a remote Danish island.

EUREPGAP:⁶ A Private Sector Initiative to Ensure Food Safety⁷

One of the strongest forces shaping new ways of thinking about the role of farmers in Europe is widespread consumer demand for assurance that their food is safe. Over the past few years a series of incidents in the European food sector have created public uncertainty and discomfort. Because of these perceived assaults on the personal health of consumers, and the immense potential cost to European farmers, food processors, and grocers, food safety has risen to the top of the European food policy agenda. The questions are: Who is responsible for guaranteeing safe food, and what is the best way to guarantee that the food supply is safe? While many entities are focusing resources on answering these two questions, each organization, depending on its stakeholders, has a slightly different approach.

The European food system is being divided into four components for strategic safety management: farms, manufacturers, distributors and retailers. Management systems to guarantee food safety at the manufacturing stage have been in place for several years. More recently, a number of different systems have been initiated to address food safety at the farm level. One initiative that is developing a global following,

EUREPGAP, is directed at producers and is strongly supported by the retail sector as part of its response to food safety concerns.

Aside from the general sense of vulnerability raised by food safety scares, concern within the supermarket sector in Northern Europe was alerted by two recent Dutch consumer surveys. One poll asked, “Who is responsible for food safety?” The answers startled the grocery industry. Though 63% named government and public inspections, a significant number (25%) said that food retailers were responsible for food safety. The *Centraal Bureau Levensmiddelenhandel* (CBL), a private association of major Dutch supermarket chains, oversees 5,000 outlets employing 200,000 workers. Responding to consumer expectations, it decided to take a leadership role in Holland and in Europe. Following CBL’s lead, the major Dutch, English and Scandinavian supermarket chains, as well as many European agricultural suppliers, food processors and distributors created EUREP – the Euro Retailer Produce Working Group. EUREP then established on-farm agriculture production standards, referred to as Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). Producers who want to be *EUREPGAP*-certified must meet these standards. Standards are currently applied to fruits and vegetables, animals, animal feed, and cut flowers; standards for coffee are being developed.

As of September, 2003, EUREPGAP had recruited over 200 member companies from around the world. It has certified over 12,000 growers in more than 20 countries, with a combined production capacity covering 975,000 acres. The largest numbers of certified growers are in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, followed by Spain, South Africa, Israel and Belgium. In Holland, 100% of supermarkets now participate in EUREPGAP, and 85% of all fruits and vegetables sold in Dutch retail stores are covered by the EUREPGAP protocols.

Convincing European consumers that food sold in supermarkets complies with strict, objective measures of food safety is clearly the driving force behind EUREPGAP. Its long-term goal is to arrive at a single international set of enforceable standards. Since food trade is international, food safety is a global issue that does not respect national boundaries. Many of EUREPGAP’s members are large global players in the retail food industry who cannot afford to operate with different standards for each source. They are starting to push for common international recognition of single standards.

Polish Tourism: The Upper Narew River Community Association⁸

Poland is one of the ten new EU members and a recipient of Leader+ Program support. The Upper Narew River Community Association in the province of Podlasie, is an example of a Leader+'s bottom-up approach to rural community development. This province, located in the northeastern corner of Poland, borders Lithuania, Belorussia and Russia. Like other Polish provinces it is divided into districts with 20 to 40 villages. The Leader+ effort includes several community and local development projects in Turosn Koscielna district, which includes parts of Narwianski National Park.

The Park encompasses the seasonal flood plain of the River Narew. The plain floods each spring, creating rich grassland that traditionally was heavily farmed but is difficult to work with heavy modern equipment. It is scenic and ecologically interesting, but when agriculture ceases, the grassland reverts to brush. Rural projects seek to keep the landscape open and develop agricultural niche markets, thus encouraging tourism and strengthening village community life.

The village of Zawady has used EU funds to convert an old frame school into a village hall, refurbish two small parks used by the village's Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox families for religious observances, and subsidize a privately-owned observation platform for wildlife viewing in the national park. After a fire consumed the community hall in Zawady, it was replaced with an attractive new masonry hall constructed with volunteer labor. The villagers hope to finance building maintenance by renting camping space on the grounds.

In another nearby village, EU funds supplemented farmers' self-help efforts to build a new Catholic church. Tourism development efforts include private rental dwellings and eco-friendly cheese making, as well as public beach, volleyball and boating facilities.

With generous support programs, emphasizing the role of local leadership and stakeholder networks, the European Union has shaped winning rural development strategies.

Endnotes

¹ The Cork Declaration. http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/rur/cork/_en.htm

² Bryden, J.M., (2005) *Multifunctionality, Rural Development , and Policy Adjustments in the European Union*.

³ Leader+. http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_en.htm

⁴ eEurope. http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/2005/index_en.htm

⁵ The Danish Centre for Health Telematics. <http://cfstuk.temp.fybs-amt.dk/wm50975>

⁶ Eurepgap. http://eurep.org/Languages/English/index_html.

⁷ Glassheim, Eliot, Nagel, Jerry and Roele, Cees D., (September 2004)The New Marketplace in European Agriculture: Environmental and Social Values within the Food Chain

⁸ The Upper Narew River Community Association. <http://www.zb.eco.pl/gb/9/narew.htm>