ROUTLEDGE COMPANIONS

The Routledge Companion to Comparative International Planning

Edited by Ela Babalık, Andrea I. Frank, and Olivier Sykes

19

RURAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN EUROPE

The Challenges and Results of a Comparative Approach

Xavier Desjardins and Philippe Estèbe

Introduction

After years of relative absence, rural areas are becoming increasingly present in national and European debates and agendas. In several countries, there is a growing sense of unease, of being forgotten or even discriminated against among rural local authorities and the general population. Farmers are the most vocal, well organised and know how to put pressure on European and national policy makers. But other sections of the rural population are increasingly appearing on the political scene. Governments seem ill-equipped to respond to these demands which are not always clearly articulated, as we saw in the case of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France in 2018–2019. The growing socio-economic differentiation between low-density and high-density areas is reflected in electoral behaviour: low-density places are more likely to vote for populist or anti-system parties than other parts of European countries, although the issue of space in politics is a much-debated topic (Sykes, 2018). In response to this context many European governments have implemented new policies to respond to this ill-defined unease and protest.

The authors' interest in these issues was piqued because, if the support provided by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is considered, then rural areas receive more European money than other places.[1] Furthermore, protests are taking place in many EU countries with different histories. Without trying to explain the reasons for the discontent, we were curious to understand whether "the same causes produce the same effects" in different countries. We tried to write a kind of "parallel history" between six European countries confronting characteristics and national interests with supranational policies. We are convinced that the history, geography, and political and social institutions of European countries are crucial to understanding how supranational policies are implemented in each country.

Conducting this survey in the European context has meant navigating between two pitfalls. The first pitfall is ranking: our aim is to compare, not to judge. Many institutions and studies have produced all kinds of rankings between European countries: there is no need to add to this well-documented work (Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose, 2012; Saraceno, 2013). And ranking may not be relevant to rural development policies: we will show further that rural issues vary

DOI: 10.4324/9781003299004-23

greatly from one country to another; in this case, the usual indicators for ranking seem useless if we want to understand the national and local processes from a comprehensive point of view. The second is the evaluation of public policies. Again, much work has been (and is being) done on this subject (Détang-Dessendre and Guyomard, 2023). And, as we will try to demonstrate below, regarding rural areas, European and national policies appear contradictory, as is illustrated by the two "pillars" of the CAP – subsidies for intensive agriculture on the one hand, and subsidies for the quality of rural life on the other hand. This chapter seeks to explore the tensions between these two dimensions of policy.

We start with three propositions:

- European policies play a crucial role, but they do not erase national specificities while imposing their pace and direction. They are the product of intergovernmental and interprofessional negotiations, and only take effect when they are translated into national and local reference systems.
- The autonomy of the actors is relative: without denying the existence and importance of innovations, the development of agricultural and rural policies is also conditioned by national, geographical, social, and economic contexts.
- Finally, the time frame varies from country to country: the date of accession to the EU is a determining factor, as are national rural histories, changes in political systems, and the impact of economic cycles.

To test these hypotheses, we sought to compare the different ways in which rurality is considered in each country, the political strategies and the actual processes of implementing public policies. We have done this in several research projects collaborating with colleagues between 2018 and 2023. The method was tested on the role of small- and medium-sized towns in regional planning in England, Germany, and Italy in 2019 (Desjardins and Estèbe, 2019), and on the development planning challenges of rural peripheries in Poland, Italy, and Spain (Desjardins and Estèbe, 2022). Finally, in 2022 and 2023, it was used to compare national rural development policies in Poland, Spain, Estonia, France, Ireland, and Germany (Desjardins, Estèbe, and Hodent, 2023). In this chapter, we do not present the results of this work. Rather, we draw on this research to illustrate the advantages and limitations of comparative research in spatial planning. From an epistemological point of view, such an approach draws on geography, and political science, but also on history and economics. From a comparative dimension, spatial planning research is at the crossroads of different components of the vast field of social sciences. From a methodological point of view, such work requires statistical and cartographic processing, to characterise the rural area; a review of the scientific and grey literature, to understand the genesis, objectives, and discussions relating to public policies; and finally, interviews, to assess with experts and practitioners the concrete ways in which public policies are implemented, particularly through case studies. Although English is the most widely used language, not everyone is fluent in it. Moreover, there is a risk of bias if respondents are selected solely on the basis of their knowledge of English. We therefore sometimes used translators.

The chapter first presents the diversity of rural development issues where we put forward two approaches for comparing situations in Europe. It then sets out an approach based on the aims of development policies, distinguishing three "ideal types" and concludes with three dimensions that emerge from the comparisons.

The issues at stake in rural development

Geographers have long shown that the countryside is not the "poor sibling" of contemporary development, despite a great deal of simplistic rhetoric. Demographic dynamics are highly varied. Ireland is the only European country where rural areas benefit from positive demographic growth. Conversely, 60% of Spanish municipalities are in demographic decline, or are even being deserted (Baron and Loyer, 2015). Estonia, where the farming population has dramatically decreased, is now experiencing a degree of rural revival thanks to the development of second homes, but also because of intense suburbanisation. In France and Germany, some rural regions are losing population (mainly in the east and north of both countries). Other regions, by contrast, benefit from modest or strong demographic growth (particularly in France near the coast). Some rural areas are densely populated, while others are very sparsely populated – especially in mountainous areas and high plateaus. As a result, the nature of rural development issues varies greatly between countries. France is a sparsely populated country, so medium-sized towns are very important for rural areas: when they lose services, inhabitants must find them in larger towns that are often far away. In Spain, many rural regions' feature a population density below 10 inhabitants per km^2. This raises the question of keeping a minimum population base to "maintain" space.

The "rural question" not only differs according to territorial characteristics, but it is also linked to long- and short-term political issues. In Spain, the question of sparsely populated rural areas (Collantes and Pinilla Navarro, 2019) is mainly addressed through the notion of an "empty Spain". This relates to questions over the future of sparsely populated areas in Castilla and Aragon. This territorial issue is in competition with those of other regions that are demanding specific treatment, for example, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, or the Balearic Islands. In France, attention given to rural areas was a key feature at the end of the 19th century. The French Republic was initially born out of urban and Parisian revolts, yet it has paid particular attention to rural areas, notably via their clear over-representation in national bodies, especially in the two chambers of parliament. This has been key to the longevity of the Republic (Hervieu and Viard, 2001). In Italy, conversely, the debate between town and country has never been as intense. This follows both from later unification (1860) and from much more pronounced inter-regional imbalances. Even when it is muted, the north-south imbalance lies at the heart of the Italian state's concerns (González, 2011). In short, the attention paid to the rural question, and how this question is raised, goes back to the history of state-building.

The public debate on rural issues can also be explained in political terms. In many countries, rural voters have specific preferences (Gardin, 2017). For several years now, rural voters in Germany have shown a growing preference for the anti-European AfD (*Alternativ für Deutschland* – Alternative for Germany) party. In Poland, the electorate is clearly divided between the "liberal" preferences expressed by urban voters and the "populist" preferences firmly rooted in rural areas. In Spain, ruralist parties have emerged in recent years and are finding their way to parliament, bringing the feeling of abandonment and the reality of desertification to the heart of national politics. These rural political preferences do not have the same effects everywhere. In Germany, the AfD vote is interpreted as anti-system, protest and populist, like the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France. In Spain, the programme of the ruralist parties is not explicitly anti-system, but calls for the specific treatment for rural areas, to halt or even reverse the population haemorrhage. In Poland, the rural vote is strongly in favour of the right-wing party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS). The political consequences of electoral behaviour are thus diverse. In Germany, debate has picked up again over the goal of ensuring "*Gleichwertigkeit der Lebensbedingungen*" (equivalent living standards, a constitutional principle). In Spain, despite the creation of a government department to

deal with demographic issues (*Ministerio par la transicion ecologica y el rete demografico* – Ministry for ecological transition and demographic challenge), perplexity prevails in the face of the scale of the challenge: how can the trend be reversed given widespread desertification? In Poland, governments oscillate between following policies to speed up the modernisation of agriculture, and concerns about maintaining the rural population. In Ireland, the electoral divide is not as clear-cut, but the recent rural renaissance has revived the debate on spatial justice. Governments hesitate on how to address rural issues: can they really address the roots of this (which are complex and may be disruptive) or is it easier to calm the discontent with some subsidies?

Given the diversity of rural features and the very different interpretations of the political and social issues involved in rural development, how is it possible to move beyond this irremediable diversity? We set out two rubrics for comparison: the first is based on public policy objectives, which allows us to distinguish three periods, albeit with some overlap; the second concerns public policy instruments, showing whether they are all used in each country, and whether they are used in different ways.

Three stages of rural development

Agricultural modernisation

The first stage through which all countries go is the modernisation of agricultural policies, which can be compared to an industrialisation process (Muller, 2000). Rural policies are entirely driven by this objective. Their broad outlines are: support for agriculture (production and development), investment in equipment and techniques; rising productivity; the development of technical and scientific ecosystems supporting production; the development of *agribusinesses* and the growth of agro-industrial firms; growth in agricultural productivity, reduction in the number of farmers and growth in the average farm size. During this phase, rural areas are largely shaped to support productive agriculture.

Germany is the most successful example of this in Europe. Along with France, it is the biggest agricultural power on the continent, with a small number of farmers and very high productivity. Spain appears to be less productive but has seen record growth in agricultural production since joining the EU, with increasing specialisation in a few areas (pork, early fruit and vegetables, and wine), to the detriment of areas that are difficult to develop. In Ireland, limited modernisation has occurred, despite being a long-standing EU Member State (since 1973), partly due to the importance of livestock farming. Its production and productivity remain modest. After the end of the Communist regime and even before joining the EU, Estonia underwent shock therapy, resulting first in a dramatic fall in its agricultural population, and then, after joining the EU, rapid productivity growth. As a result, Estonia's productivity now equals that of Spain. Poland retains many small farms (the national average size is 10 ha) with very low productivity. Finally, it should be noted that the Communist regimes acted as a conservatory of historical agrarian structures, preserving large farms where they already existed, without, however, significantly reducing the number of smallholders, particularly in Poland (Mackré, 2011). Large estates, a feudal heritage, became state farms that have since been privatised.

The period of local development

In some countries, such as Germany and France, the emergence of autonomous rural policies is the result of spontaneous "bottom-up" movements (Barca, 2019). We can also see that

the idea of rural development is an indirect consequence of the modernisation of agriculture. The decline in the farming population and the increase in productivity are leading, almost automatically, to the emergence of social and economic diversity in rural areas as agriculture is no longer the dominant element, neither from a demographic point of view nor in terms of the value produced. Other factors may also be conducive to the emergence of non-agricultural interpretations of rurality, including: the sprawl of "peri-urbanisation" in a growing number of rural communities; the development of mountain and coastal tourism, and of agro-tourism, which has contributed to the specialisation of certain rural communities. Lastly, countries are also taking note, albeit at different rates, of the "backwardness" of certain rural areas relative to their average, national levels of development, expressed in terms of income, educational attainment, and employment.

As such, rural policies are paradoxically emerging from the successes of the CAP on the one hand, and its inability to ensure rural development commensurate with the transformations taking place in various countries on the other hand. Again, the role of the European Union is decisive, because national rural development policies have emerged almost everywhere at the same pace as the LEADER programmes[2] – depending on countries' date of entry into the EU. For the countries that joined the EU most recently, rural development policy boils down to the implementation of LEADER initiatives (Estonia and Poland), while in other countries (Ireland, Germany, and Spain), "national" policies are being implemented in addition or parallel to the LEADER programmes.

Ireland, for example, has a comprehensive strategy for rural areas titled *Our Rural Future 2021-2025* (Irish Government, 2019), which values their contribution to economic development and the quality of life of the country. This programme aims at equipping the countryside digitally, supporting the creation of activities, and providing aid for the renovation/regeneration of villages and small towns. In parallel to the LEADER programmes, which are piloted by local communities, Spain has created a national programme to combat demographic decline, targeting the rural areas most affected by depopulation. Germany has designed and implemented a federal pilot programme for rural development, since 2016, called "BULE" (*Bundesprogramm Ländliche Entwicklung*), to support initiatives in some rural areas. It is directly managed by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food, with the aim of building on "model regions" to experiment with new practices and prototypes that can be applied in other rural areas. France has a long-standing rural policy (1995), including specific tax relief zoning (for rural regeneration zones) and a rural agenda, accompanied by targeted measures, particularly for small towns.

Time for the ecological transition

More recently, and under the European Green Deal[3] policies have come under renewed scrutiny. This is based on the observation that sparsely populated rural areas are becoming a prime location for "support" investments in the energy transition and ecological protection. Open, sparsely populated areas are increasingly sought after by renewable energy operators, and agriculture is being called upon for reasons of food sovereignty, as well as for producing biogas, wood energy, etc. At the same time, rural areas are confirming their logistical role near major transport routes, while also being dedicated as nature reserves and protected ecosystems. Consequently, rural areas are subject to contradictory yet pressing demands, such as space for energy generation, food production, biodiversity, logistics centres, residential areas, and tourism. These tensions have always existed to a greater or lesser extent but are now taking on considerable proportions and undoubtedly calling for a next, that is, third stage in rural policies, in which the issues of land and ecological values are becoming central.

These challenges create uncertainties for the future of European rural policies. Indeed, the inhabitants of rural areas know that many aspects of their way of life are being called into question by the ecological transition, the reliance on individual automobiles, and also certain hunting and heating practices. Moreover, the economic activities of rural areas are especially challenged by ecological concerns in agriculture, forestry, and new industries such as energy production and the search for rare metals. In short, rural society and the rural economy will be profoundly transformed over the coming decade. Ecological planning following the EU's Green Deal specifies the expectations for various economic sectors such as building, energy, and transport across the whole EU. However, the central issue of land and value sharing and its implications for planning, is for now not up for discussion, either at the European level, or by Member States.[4]

Areas of action

Attracting public money

The first area of action involves attracting public funding to rural areas. Powerful welfare state systems for education, health, and old age are deployed in all European countries. Many economists have taken an interest in the invisible circulation of wealth through these welfare mechanisms (Davezies, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Their results converge for all European countries noting that such mechanisms play a positive role in redistribution towards disadvantaged territories, especially rural areas. These mechanisms are almost universally based on the principle of financing according to the ability of households and businesses to contribute. Also, as public services such as education, health, and culture are provided relatively uniformly across countries, welfare systems tax more in rich areas (where household income is above average) to redistribute resources more equally. It is therefore not entirely by chance that some regions in Europe like Northern Italy, Catalonia, and Flanders are often calling for the regionalisation of welfare state mechanisms: they know that they are paying more into the system than they are receiving. This "equalisation mechanism" is well known, yet all territories seek *at the very least* to keep their place in the distribution of public funding, or to gain a better one.

In many rural areas, there is an expressed concern about the downward trend in their share of public funding. This concern is fuelled by the recent reorganisations of many public services. Throughout Europe, neighbourhood healthcare establishments such as maternity hospitals, and clinics are being scaled back. The highly technical nature of medicine and the desire for a more collegial approach to practice are driving the concentration of healthcare. The same applies to secondary and higher education. After a strong wave of decentralisation in the 1990s, the trend today is towards a strengthening of the major centres, due to the desire by students to have a wider choice of courses and options, and by educational establishments seeking more exchanges between peers. Similar developments are occurring in the justice system, the police and many other services. The paradox is that residents are both calling for and complaining about these trends, because they provide a more comprehensive range of services and more comfortable working conditions on the one hand, but inexorably push services further away from low-density areas on the other hand. In Aragon (an inland region in northeast Spain), a school can open with only five pupils in both nursery and primary school levels together. This is certainly one of the lowest thresholds in Europe which reflects the very low population densities in the Aragonese countryside. However, during our field survey in Spain, we met some elected representatives who explained that they would prefer not to open a school with only five pupils, as they feared that this would lead to schoolchildren losing the experience of mixing.

Ireland and Spain also experienced sharp contractions in public spending following the 2008 financial crisis and its repercussions on the financing of public debt. This budgetary situation has exacerbated competition for access to diminishing resources. In Spain, the share of public spending fell from 48.5% of GDP in 2012 to 41.3% in 2017. In Ireland, austerity has been even more severe. After reaching a peak equal to 64.9% of GDP in 2010 under the combined effect of bank bailouts, income support, and the contraction in GDP, public spending was subsequently brought down to 24.3% in 2019. By contrast, in Germany, France, and Poland, the ratio of public spending to GDP remained more stable during the 2010s.

In all European countries, rural areas want to negotiate a better position in the social redistribution system. In each country, the upper chamber of national parliaments represents "territories" rather than "inhabitants" and echoes the concerns of the countryside. The "regionalist" parties also contribute to raising territorial concerns. In Spain, in addition to the now traditional parties representing the interests of regions, "localist" parties have emerged, such as *Teruel Existe* (Terruel Exists). This is less the case in Germany, where only Bavaria has a "regional "party (the long-established Bavarian branch of Germany's Christian Democrats). These parties are almost non-existent in Poland, Ireland, and France. In France, the local interests – especially in the countryside – are covered by associations of locally elected representatives, notably the Association des maires ruraux de France (Association of Rural Mayors of France).

Faced with demands for a "fair" territorial redistribution of public subsidies, there is strong pressure to know precisely how money is spent across territories. In Spain, exercises are carried out to determine the precise inter-regional balance of public money flows (Baron, 2010). This is linked to very strong pressure from the regionalists, who are worried that "Madrid" might take "too" much tax at their expense. Exercises in transparency are useful, but run into methodological obstacles that make them highly perilous: for example, should a university education in a large city for a young adult whose parents live in the countryside and telework be considered as "rural" or "urban" spending? The mechanics of such evaluations may lead to insoluble incongruities: as people move around – should the location of spending be identified with where they live, or where they "consume" a public service, where they work, or where they benefit from social redistribution?

To avoid the pitfall of "numerical estimates", an alternative approach is testing the effect of public policies on rural areas, the so-called "Rural Proofing". Rural proofing is a tool for policy makers, used to estimate the impacts of sectoral policies on rural living conditions. It was first used in the United Kingdom (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2015). In Germany, it has led to the establishment of a commission on the equivalence of living conditions. In Ireland, a recent report (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2023) has proposed to evaluate all public policies in the light of their different impacts on rural and urban areas, and make proposals to reduce any negative effects on rural areas. Additionally, various public policies have been subjected to detailed rural impact analyses. The report also recommends that the relationship should be reversed, and that not only the negative impacts be measured, but also that potential assets of rural areas be identified to implement certain objectives. However, Sherry and Shortall (2019) have been critical of this approach as it does not precisely define its aims and principles, ignores the diversity of rural areas, and contributes to creating a false distinction between "urban" and "rural". Despite these criticisms, in 2016 it was adopted as a general framework by the European Commission.

The "veil of ignorance" about the territorial effects of social redistribution is being questioned in all European countries: should the territorialisation of public spending be monitored closely? If

so, how? And what are the effects? This is certainly an emerging debate about public development policies where there is scope for comparative research.

Attracting private money

Rural areas struggle to attract private small- and middle-sized businesses, and not only agribusiness and energy producers. Tools to overcome this challenge interestingly vary little from one country to another. Targeted instruments include direct or indirect aid through reductions in social security contributions or taxes. France has embarked on this path as early as 1995, notably with Zones de revitalisation rurales (rural regeneration zones or ZRR). ZRRs are designed to support the development of rural areas, mainly through tax and social measures such as temporary reductions in corporation tax and other specific economic development measures. The aim is to concentrate state aid measures from the central government on businesses for creating jobs in rural areas most affected by demographic and economic decline. The precise geographical definition of these zones is often debated because no local authority wants to be "excluded" from this scheme, having once benefited from it. In Spain, the central government has looked at cutting social security contributions for companies based in Spain's "empty" territories. Most studies on the effect of tax incentives on rural area growth offer cautious evaluations of their impacts, at least for rich countries (Ambroziak, 2014). Some studies show that the efficiency of tax incentives is determined by the quality of the environment, the price of land for business, accessibility, and by the skills of the local workforce. In other words, the economic attractiveness of rural areas depends on a range of factors, of which tax incentives – where they exist – are a small part (Slattery and Zidar, 2020).

Reinvesting rural centres

Rural development also has a "spatial and land use planning" component. The aim is to stop sprawl, and promote new constructions in existing village and town centres, that is, revitalising villages and towns while protecting agricultural land and preserving biodiversity.

Patterns of soil artificialisation[5] differ a lot across European countries; they are related to rural heritage, and vary between countries with scattered or more concentrated settlement structures. Over recent years, the six countries we have studied can be distinguished according to the rate of soil artificialisation, which is moderate in Germany and Spain, significant in Ireland and France, and rapidly progressing in Poland and Estonia.

For example, in Poland, after communism there is a strong appetite for spacious, individual homes. Polish local authorities have little incentive to draft urban planning documents as the law obliges local authorities to compensate property owners for loss of value caused by planning regulation. Consequently there is no encouragement to produce such documents. Additionally, for future urbanisation projects, municipalities must create road infrastructure before buildings. By contrast, piecemeal urban development, without large-scale operations, is less costly for municipal finances. All these factors combine to encourage fragmented and poorly coordinated urbanisation. Between 2000 and 2014, Poland's built-up area increased by 14%, while the country's population fell by 5%. In Estonia, according to official statistics in 2018, almost 25% of rural houses are vacant, one of the highest rates worldwide. The situation is explained by the budgetary difficulties faced by local authorities, their reluctance to draw up town planning documents and their reduced power to intervene in real estate and land use.

In France and Ireland, the dynamics of urban sprawl and dispersion have been fuelled by generally low population density and the residential attractiveness policies implemented by many rural

municipalities, particularly in the vicinity of major cities. Both countries have launched similar programmes to renew the attractiveness of town and village centres, that is, France's programme *Petites villes de demain* (Small Towns of Tomorrow) and *Villages d'avenir* (Villages of the future) and Ireland's Town and Village Renewal Scheme and Town Centre First initiative. These programmes subsidise building restoration and recycling of derelict land, and implement incentives to revitalise commercial activities, to improve public spaces, and to slow sprawl. However, in both countries, the impact of these policies is often disappointing, for they try to reverse trends that have been underway for decades.

In Germany and Spain, policies are stronger. They are facilitated by different residential dynamics. In Spain, peri-urban or rural homes are much less popular, whereas in Germany, the country's high population densities led to a very early decision to restrict the use of "de-densification". In addition, policies to support "reinvestment" in villages and towns are older and stronger. The latter are mainly funded by Germany's *Länder*, but there is also a federal programme of *Dorferneuerung* (village renewal) which backs up regional initiatives.

Lessons from a comparison

This comparison of rural dynamics and rural policies reveals three common dimensions. These manifest themselves with different intensities from one country to another, due to countries' date of entry into the European Union, their population density and institutional configuration:

- Paradoxically, the uniformity of policies and instruments from one country to another is producing new diversifications in rural areas.
- Everywhere, we are witnessing the return of central governments as direct players in rural development policies.
- All rural areas are facing three fundamental trends that are likely to transform them far more rapidly than rural development policies: the competition for arable land, the production of energy and raw materials, and the search for areas to be protected.

The diversity of rural areas and the uniformity of rural development policies and instruments

Rural development policies in Europe are caught between the extreme diversity of the evolution of rural areas and the standardisation resulting from European policies. These standardised policies, particularly the CAP, tend to generate new inequalities between regions. The transformation of the agricultural model in the aftermath of World War II, and more recently in the new Member States such as Poland, has led agriculture in all countries to specialise and regionalise. Farming has become a professional business, carried out by an ever-smaller proportion of the working population. As a result, territorial disparities have widened, contrasting areas that are heavily invested in productivism and historically unproductive rural areas where farming is a residual activity in decline.

Rural development policies are attempting to correct this phenomenon by applying what might be seen as a second layer of standardisation – that of residential and touristic attractiveness. Some highly specialised agricultural areas are not necessarily suited to this development. Attractiveness is shifting to areas where industrial agriculture is less developed. Other characteristics are becoming decisive, such as the quality of the landscape, climate, the quality of life and accessibility, and the presence of facilities such as education and healthcare. An analysis of tourist areas in France, for example, shows that significant tourist activity occurs in a small number of municipalities,

located at the seaside and in mountain ranges (Coopérative Acadie and Talandier, 2023). Other rural areas have acquired a strong touristic flavour, but this is essentially based on second homes, which make little contribution to the local economy. This second layer of rural development policies produces further disparities, between areas with good or poor tourist amenities.

Recently, the emergence of agro-ecological practices is creating a third path, by bringing back into focus products and production methods that have escaped industrialisation. A new "package" of specific advantages is emerging: an agrarian tradition, specific production and know-how, and high added value. In France, this type of territory is concentrated in a crescent in the south, that has partly escaped the development of industrial agriculture (except for wine production), and is thus regaining a promising economic role (Italian National Network of Young Researchers for Inner Areas Committee, 2021). Lastly, the development of new industrial activities, driven by ecological transitions (energy production, water and waste treatment and revival of forestry) can give a new role to regions with low agricultural productivity, low population density, and sufficient space to accommodate activities that are space hungry.

So, despite the standardisation of instruments, the superimposition of layers of public policy is contributing to the diversification of rural areas, beyond the traditional distinction between areas under urban influence and remote areas. But the question of territorial disparities and inequalities remains and is shifting to the issue of equivalence of living conditions.

Rural development as a central government responsibility

The regional level has always been considered by the European policies as the appropriate level for implementing development policies, both for cohesion and rural development policy, through the second pillar of the CAP. It is true that in most decentralised or federal countries, the regions are the EU's usual partners for implementing funding. However, analysis shows that the role of central governments has recently become more important, in response to the protest movements that are shaking up the countryside. As a result, national policies explicitly targeting rural areas have been introduced everywhere – apart from Poland and Estonia – and these policies have very diverse links to regional policies.

These national programmes, which are often (but not always) partially funded by European money, were all created after 2008 and became operational in the mid-2010s. In Spain, in 2017 the national government launched 130 *Medidas frente el reto demografico* (130 measures to fight against the demographic challenge) followed by the creation of a dedicated secretariat of state; in France, a *Commissariat general à l'égalité des territoires* (General Commission for Territorial Equality) was created within the government in 2015; in Germany, the federal BULE programme (*Bundesprogramm Ländliche Entwicklung und Regionale Wertschöpfung* – Federal Programme for Rural Development and Regional Added Value) was launched at the same time. In 2010, the Italian government launched a programme to support the development of remote and isolated areas (*Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* – National Strategy for Inner Areas) (Italian National Network of Young Researchers for Inner Areas Committee, 2021).

These programmes prioritise a specific geography, based on a variety of criteria: in Spain, the geography of rural demographic decline is used; in France, the focus is more on small towns and run-down villages; while in Germany, two "model" areas are selected in each Land, in which the federal government funds experiments designed to be replicated elsewhere. Italy, for its part, has identified 70 "inner areas" because of their remoteness from basic services.

These programmes pale into insignificance when compared to the funds earmarked for agriculture, and in most cases are run in parallel with European Union-funded LEADER programmes.

Their main purpose is to send a signal to political representatives and "discontented" rural residents. They do not support projects for the structural transformation of economic activities and rural societies. They do, however, finance, for the most part, small-scale facilities, the renovation of housing and cultural heritage, and they also support experimentation, particularly in terms of mobility and access to community services. Basically, the aim is to improve the daily lives of people in the countryside.

The intervention of central governments in an institutional system that seemed to be reserved for the Regions and territorial players has not brought about any fundamental upheaval. In none of the countries, apart from Ireland, do central governments have a "vision" for the future of rural areas. It is more a question of sending out political signals, at the risk of overlooking the social and economic transformations that are restructuring rural economies and societies.

Three emerging trends that can shape the future of rural areas

These trends are directly or indirectly linked to the ecological transition and involve the competition for arable land, the production of energy and raw materials, and the search for areas to be protected.

The first trend concerns agriculture and varies from country to country. It results from the disappearance of peasant farming and its replacement by companies that employ salaried workers rather than farmers. In fact, in the countries studied, salaried agricultural workers are the only category of agricultural workers whose number is growing (Purseigle and Hervieu, 2022). This trend is well advanced in Germany and Spain. It is expanding in France and beginning to emerge in Poland (Lecarte and Nègre, 2022). It is estimated that farms of more than 50 hectares occupy between 50% and 70% of the land in the various European countries. These capitalist enterprises specialise in field crops that are mainly for export. This trend generates an international competition between multinational companies, looking for large pieces of land, where industrial farming is easy.

The second major trend is the reindustrialisation of rural areas, based around activities linked to the ecological transition and especially energy, involving wind and solar power generation, as well as biogas production. These activities are part of new production chains, in which logistics activities and the development of energy transport networks are playing a growing role. They may also be accompanied by new extractive activities for minerals such as lithium and titanium (Smaïli, 2022).

The third trend concerns the search for large areas of protected nature as biosphere reserves. Even if the degree of protection varies according to the existing rules in each country, this trend is spreading. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) also includes protected areas where human activity is taking place (Dudley, 2008), which is considered by many experts to be a very low level of protection, as it does not prevent damage to the environment (West and Brockington, 2006).

With the ecological transition, there is a new need for sparsely populated space, used as a support for an activity that does not (or little) benefit the area and its human inhabitants. Indeed, in all three cases, it is the soil and its cover that are exploited, through activities whose added value is extracted and paid for directly or indirectly by agents from outside the region, such as large agricultural, energy or mining companies. The case of biosphere reserves is different, as there is generally no extraction of monetary added value[6] but they can lead to a decline in local farming and forestry activities, which are difficult to replace only by tourist activities.

Nevertheless, "empty" or "emptied" space is gradually acquiring a specific value, one that is sometimes at odds with the idea of an "inhabited countryside", which is generally promoted by rural development programmes. Perhaps more than rural development policies, it is ways in which climate policies are implemented that will transform the face of the countryside over the long term – at the risk of turning them into reserved, hyper-specialised areas with ultimately few residents.

The value of comparative research on rural development

In order to elaborate on the value of comparative international research, at least within Europe, we draw here not on the benefits of general comparisons, but on our own approach which is both qualitative and cross-disciplinary.

Firstly, working with researchers from other countries is not only helpful in understanding more deeply from the inside the way that rural issues are debated in each country but also personally enriching. We had the great privilege during our fieldwork to meet other researchers and political, economic, and social actors and these encounters led to surprises such as a visit to a miraculously preserved synagogue in Poland, a hike among the large, abandoned rice farms in the Po basin, or the discovery, in Aragon, of a lagoon that is a remarkable refuge for migratory birds.

Secondly, qualitative comparative studies are not immune to a little selfishness. Although we seek to be as neutral as possible, we cannot dispense with a certain point of view, which, as far as we are concerned, is French. We must accept this as a starting point. An important part of the job, with the help of our partners in other countries, is to distance ourselves from this starting point, and try to escape our parochialism. That's why translation is so important: in the case of qualitative studies, translation is not only about the language, but involves the comprehension of history, politics and geography in each country. Translation should also be taken literally: the act of being transported from a place to another, to acquire a kind of cultural bilingualism, at least for the time of the study.

Thirdly, qualitative comparative studies are caught up in a double dialectic: the dialectic of specificities and similarities; the dialectic of convergences and divergences. One concerns national cultures on the subject in question, the other national trajectories. The comparison becomes interesting when you can come out of this double dialectic: indeed, the trajectories transform also the national culture.

Notes

1 About a third of the EU budget is spent in rural areas.
2 LEADER (French acronym for *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale* – Link between activities for the development of rural economy) is a European programme aimed at supporting innovative development strategies to revitalise rural areas.
3 The European Green Deal is the EU Commission's roadmap for ecological transition to 2050.
4 The European biodiversity strategy sets up the objective of protecting 30% of European soil, 10% of which should be fully protected without implementing any instrument. In France, regional planning schemes are disconnected from regional ecological transition roadmaps; the Climate and Resilience Act (*Loi climate et resilience*-2022), sets up the national objective of no net land take by 2050 but this is submitted to many restrictions any time that a strategic investment (such as gigafactories for batteries) is at stake.
5 Generally a change in land use from natural, agricultural, forest, etc. to urbanised land, road, sealed surfaces with no/low ecosystems service value aka "land consumption" (NB: varying definitions exist).
6 Some new models are emerging in UK, see biodiversity net gain policy but their effects are yet unclear.

References

Ambroziak, A.A. (2014) 'Review of the literature on determinants of the locational attractiveness of Regions', in Ambroziak, A.A. (ed.) *New cohesion policy of the European Union in Poland: How it will influence the investment attractiveness of regions in 2014-2020*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05335-6_1.

Barca, F. (2019) 'Place-based policy and politics', *Renewal*, 27(1), pp. 84–96.

Barca, F., McCann, P. and Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2012) 'The case for regional development intervention: Place-based versus place-neutral approaches', *Journal of Regional Science*, 52(1), pp. 134–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9787.2011.00756.x.

Baron, N. (2010) '« Etat composé » ou décomposé ?', *L'Espace politique*, (11). https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.1687.

Baron, N. and Loyer, B. (2015) *L'Espagne en crise(s) une géopolitique au XXIe siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Collantes, F. and Pinilla Navarro, V. (2019) *¿Lugares que no importan?: la despoblación de la España rural desde 1900 hasta el presente*. Zaragoza, ES: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza.

Coopérative Acadie and Talandier, M. (2023) *Etude sur la diversité des ruralités*. Rapport pour l'Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires. Paris: Coopérative Acadie. Available at: https://www.observatoire-des-territoires.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2023-02/rapport_final_etude_anct_ruralites_-_acadie_-_magali_talandier_-_16_fevrier_2023.pdf.

Davezies, L. (2021) *L'Etat a toujours soutenu ses territoires*. Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2015) *Thinking rural: The essential guide to rural proofing*. https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/thinking-rural-essential-guide-rural-proofing. Accessed 22 July 2024.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2023) *Rural proofing: Proposals for a rural proofing model for Ireland*. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/06a3d-rural-proofing-proposals-for-a-rural-proofing-model-for-ireland/. Accessed 22 July 2024.

Desjardins, X. and Estèbe, P. (2019) *Villes petites et moyennes et aménagement territorial - Eclairages anglais, allemands et italiens sur le cas français*. La Défense: PUCA.

Desjardins, X. and Estèbe, P. (2022) 'Forgotten territories in Europe: Lessons from Italy, Spain, and Poland', *Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning*, 6(1), pp. 30–40. https://doi.org/10.24306/TrAESOP.2022.01.003.

Desjardins, X., Estèbe, P. and Hodent, C. (2023) *Rural areas and rural policies in Europe. A comparative approach to five countries: Germany, Spain, Estonia, Ireland and Poland*. Paris: ANCT, p. 12.

Détang-Dessendre, C. and Guyomard, H. (2023) *Evolving the common agricultural policy for tomorrow's challenges*. Versailles, France: Éditions Quae.

Dudley, N. (ed.) (2008) *Guidelines for applying protected area management categories*. Gland, CH: International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Gardin, J. (2017) 'La construction discursive des marges. Une étude de cas à partir du mouvement des « bonnets rouges » bretons de 2013', *Bulletin de l'association de géographes français. Géographies*, 94(3), pp. 560–574. https://doi.org/10.4000/bagf.2215.

González, S. (2011) 'The north/south divide in Italy and England: Discursive construction of regional inequality', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 18 (1) 2011, pp. 62–76: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0969776410369044.

Hervieu, B. and Viard, J. (2001) *L'archipel paysan: la fin de la République agricole. La Tour d'Aigues*. France: éd. de l'Aube.

Irish Government (2019) *Our rural future: Rural development policy 2021-2025*. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/. Accessed 25 September 2023.

Italian National Network of Young Researchers for Inner Areas Committee (2021) *Inner areas in Italy*. Milano: Babel Edition.

Lecarte, J. and Nègre, F. (2022) *The future of the European farming model: Socio-economic and territorial implications of the decline in the number of farms and farmers in the EU*. Luxembourg: Research for AGRI Committee, European Parliament.

Mackré, Q. (2011) 'Rémanence d'anciennes frontières dans l'espace rural polonais', *L'Espace Politique*, (14). https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.1998.

Muller, P. (2000) 'La politique agricole française: l'État et les organisations professionnelles', *Économie rurale*, 255(1), pp. 33–39. https://doi.org/10.3406/ecoru.2000.5153.

Purseigle, F. and Hervieu, B. (2022) *Une agriculture sans agriculteurs*. Paris (117 Boulevard Saint-Germain 75006). France: Presses de Sciences Po.

Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018) 'The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), pp. 189–209. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsx024.

Saraceno, E. (2013) 'Disparity and diversity: Their use in EU rural policies', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 53(3), pp. 331–348.

Sherry, E. and Shortall, S. (2019) 'Methodological fallacies and perceptions of rural disparity: How rural proofing addresses real versus abstract needs', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, pp. 336–343. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.12.005.

Slattery, C. and Zidar, O. (2020) 'Evaluating state and local business incentives', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 34(2), pp. 90–118. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.34.2.90.

Smaïli, M. (2022) 'Terres rares et métaux critiques, des enjeux de souveraineté sur fond de guerre économique', *Revue Défense Nationale*, 855(10), pp. 67–73. https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.855.0067.

Sykes, O. (2018) 'Post-geography worlds, new dominions, left behind regions, and "other" places: unpacking some spatial imaginaries of the UK's "Brexit" debate', *Space and Polity*, 22(2), pp. 137–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2018.1531699.

West, P. and Brockington, D. (2006) 'An anthropological perspective on some unexpected consequences of protected areas', *Conservation Biology*, 20(3), pp. 609–616.