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Rue des Potiers, 304, B-6717 Attert
tel : +32/63230490 - fax : +32 63230499
red@ruraleurope.org - www.ruraleurope.org

A polycentric approach based on urban and rural poles

A stake for a better cohesion of the European continent¹

by Patrice Collignon

Director of the international association R.E.D.

President of the European Centre for Rural and Environmental Interests

1. Introduction

Social and territorial changes dictated by economy

Everywhere in the world, the development of the economies takes the same way : the activities and services, except for the extraction or the production of the raw materials, tend to concentrate in the most populated sectors, the most accessible... The migrations of populations towards employment zones reinforce this concentration, obliging to take often hasty measures as regards infrastructures, housing, response to essential needs...

One needs however, without denying considerable progress accomplished thanks to the economic advancement, to become aware that this walk ahead at forced rhythm is accompanied by collateral damage which is in the heart of the great current planetary questions. Among those : destabilization of the society and rural territories, urban crises, global warming, widening North-South gap,..., loss of biodiversity, rise of extremism, with its corollary of violence and terrorism.

The European Union, if it has been able to maintain peace, does not succeed, against a backdrop of regular crises and important unemployment, to build the hoped social Europe. And the negative signals given to the project of European constitution did not make it possible to offer a political framework to answer social expectations of the citizens.

To reinforce the territorialisation of the policies

It is necessary to give again hope and capacity of initiative to the people by daring a true European policy of country planning and sustainable development. It should be based on a perspective of ambitious spatial development of Europe where the principles of social, economic and territorial cohesion apply at national level but find also their application within the areas, between Urban Poles and Rural Poles in strong and balanced relationships.

Within this framework and on these bases, the convergence of the cohesion, social and development policies, on a same territory, is a major stake. It would cause, if based on the fundamental principles of participative governance, to offer readable prospects to the citizens and to optimize the implementation of reduced financial means.

Rural areas : a real actor in Europe

Rural areas are characterised by a very large diversity of situations, ranging from remote rural areas suffering from depopulation and decline to peri-urban areas under increasing pressure from urban centres. According to the OECD definition, which is based on population density, rural regions represent in the EU-25 **92% of the territory**. Furthermore, 19% of the population live in predominantly rural regions and 37% live in significantly rural regions. These regions generate **45% of Gross Value Added (GVA)** in the EU-25 and provide **53% of the employment**. The combined agricultural and food sector represents an important part of the EU economy accounting for 15m jobs (8.3% of total employment) for in EU-25. Forestry and related industries employ around 3.4m people.²

2. The urban polycentric model and the lack of cohesion

In the polycentric development model currently suggested by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), only the urban centres (cities, agglomerations...) today are really identified with development poles. It is commonly held opinion that the development of the rural areas depends on the dynamism and the influence of the nearest cities.

The statistical analyses are not based on the personality of each rural community but their development is estimated at a global level including urban level.

The development of the rural areas is thus conditioned (for the decision makers) by the development of the urban poles where are concentrated :

- economy and employment, often in activities zones situated in near rural area (so « annexed » and becoming « peri-urban »);
- services, cultural and educational offer;
- inhabitants living in spaces the planning of which has been sometimes hasty.

Consequences :

- peripheral urban growths without dividing open space (« conurbations ») with:
 - a town planning sometimes very average ;
 - a standardized urban image (large zones of activities and dwelling before reaching the urban heart);
- concentration of rented accommodation and block of flats in peri-urban areas with often tense social context ;
- migrations of population towards rural districts of proximity (sometimes annexed by conurbation and becoming dormitory villages with new populations without cultural and social attachment with their commune);
- daily pendular migrations between residence and work.

The gap between the rural territories which profit or undergo the urban influence (by geographical proximity or because to transport infrastructures) and those which, because of their remoteness, do not profit from it gets wider.

3. Rural poles : component significant and essential of cohesion

So, in the polycentric model articulated on the only urban poles, the dynamic principles of social, economic and territorial cohesion are imperfectly implemented whereas one of the initial characteristics common to the European States is to have rural areas with strong cultural and social expression, and inhabited everywhere.

Without mobilizing the building capacities of rural territories, one misses a genuine social, economic and territorial engine for sustainable development. The right thing to do is thus to organize social, economic, territorial exchanges balanced between rural territories and urban poles.

The **recognition of the rural territories as development poles**, and neither only as natural and agricultural spaces, **is a precondition to stimulate advantageous and balanced**

exchanges between the urban and rural poles and to motivate the convergent mobilization of the urban and rural actors.

The rural territories become development poles are able to meet, as partners, the great urban and societal questions, but according to programmed and prospective steps. They can in this context accommodate new populations and offer to them a real statute of inhabitant. They can offer new activities linked with the territory project and the local resources or integrated in the relationships with the urban poles of proximity and their own sector of development.

In term of regional planning, this multipolar approach is also a response to the continuous extension of the urban centres; it allows, through land planning perspective shared between urban and rural poles, to preserve green and open spaces between high-density areas.

Notion of rural pole of development : outline of a definition

The rural pole of development is an inhabited territory where the social, economic and residential evolutions are led within the framework of an integrated and prospective project of development. The rural pole is not a small town, an agglomeration, but a rural territory as a whole and guided by an integrated project of territory.

The territorial project of development can be apprehended (by analogy with the business world) as being the business plan of the territory concerned.

- it determines the objectives of result to short, medium and long term ;
- it specifies the trends of development, the human and material means to achieve the laid down goals of result.

The development and the assessment of the territory project must be participative. The civil society, public and private actors must be the partners for it. The participative local development in France, the LEADER program of the E.U., have shown the way for this approach, but similar initiatives exist in other States.

Methodology and measures in favour of rural poles

The emergence and the animation of these rural poles of development must be based on the principal following methodological elements:

- a territory with a project built on a common political ambition and on shared economic and social interests;
- an integrated project of sustainable development, including means and measures within the scope of a multiannual programming;
- a participative and integrated development, based on a shared ex-ante analysis and an interdisciplinary reflexion leading to a common representation of the future territory;
- collective implementation and local partnership based on a co-operation between public and private institutions;
- co-operation between rural territories and between rural and urban territories, with a networking approach which favours a process of continuous training ;
- a framework of evaluation, to enhance the effectiveness and the efficiency of the territorial project of development and its sustainability
- a support for the innovation, engineering and building capacity.

As for measures to be implemented within the regional development policies:

- to recognize the rural territories as poles of competitiveness based on their endogenous potentialities: agri-activities, products and techniques with high environmental quality, wood-cluster,...;
- to constitute and animate multi-actors networks associating research institutes, engineering societies, local producers, academics offer;
- to support the cultural development and creation in order to develop cultural activities rooted in the rural territories;
- to support integrated tourism, which is vector of town-countryside exchanges and promoter of products and services;

- to support the access to broadband in all points of the rural territories for an equitable diffusion to the inhabitants and the economic and cultural actors;
- to support the offer in housing by restoring rural buildings with preserved character;
- to support collective and innovating experiment of public transport;
- to accompany the programs in favour of local services.

¹ Source : speech of Gérard Peltre, président of R.E.D., Open Days DG Regio, October 2005

²² Abstract of COM(2005) 304 final 2005/0129 (CNS) - Community strategic guidelines for Rural Development (Programming period 2007–2013)