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- ▣ **Framework text of the topic “The European rural world and sustainability”**

Initial document for launching the debate of the European electronic forum

- ▣ **Authors:** Matthieu Calame and Philippe Cacciabue
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 - ▣ **Topic co-ordinator:** Philippe Cacciabue
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Context

This topic, "The rural world and sustainability", is fuelled by the collective movement launched a year ago by “Barcelona 99: What countrysides? What food? What agriculture for Europe?”

The major directions of work giving structure to current consideration were set out at Valencia in May 1999 at a major progress review of the process.

The entirety of the work resulting from this process will be used as the basis of this electronic forum intended to continue and enhance the exchanges and debates already begun and finalise the proposals for change.

Foreword

Most European policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, which alone takes up half the European budget, were designed forty years ago. However, European society has changed, the needs and challenges are no longer the same: an ageing population, growing urbanisation, reduced working hours and increased leisure time, sustainable development, the transformation of work, continued cultural diversity, etc.

These changes have real repercussions on the future of territories, on the use of rural areas in Europe, on their social functions, on the distribution of the resources attributed to them and on the links between towns and rural areas.

The discrepancy between the challenges facing a rich, ageing and urban Europe and current policies can no longer be tolerated. It is now imperative to pursue and develop citizens', local and European debates on new proposals for European policies on the rural world, food and agriculture.

1. The current situation

An urban civilisation, but attached to its rural roots

In many ways the situation in Western Europe is paradoxical. Although it is one of the world's most densely urbanised regions, it stems from a rich and still vigorous rural heritage to which it remains much attached. Forests, rural zones, medium sized towns and hamlets all display in their own way the long association and dependency between a civilisation and the clump of earth in which it finds its roots and initial sources.

...rich, but confronted with limited resources...

Of course, Western Europe is open and its economy has long changed from being based on the wealth produced by the countryside (for several centuries in the case of certain regions such as Veneto, the Netherlands and south-east England). Western Europe is one of the richest parts of the world, trading with every corner of the globe. However, it is confronted with the issue of its system of sustainable development, an issue that takes the form of concrete challenges: waste management, resource management, loss of biodiversity, atmospheric and water pollution, and soil erosion. Thus it is exactly because it is rich, densely populated, small and because it relies on remarkably limited resources¹ that it can no longer avoid the question of its future, development and its capacity to maintain its territory in acceptable condition.

...which questions the management of its rural areas,

Necessity has led urban Europe to join rural Europe in examining its future in terms of cultural heritage, as a space of production, a place where people live, are educated and in terms of its preservation. This examination takes place in a climate marked by:

- 0* Concern about food, characterised by a growing gulf between populations and the sources from which they obtain it, food-related scandals, questionable practices by agri-business, etc.;
- 1* Ageing populations;
- 2* The place of work, no longer the only source of social integration and identity, and the growing importance of leisure time resulting from this change;
- 3* The growth of cities, with rising populations, especially of the most disadvantaged, who suffer from over-crowding and inactivity. The spread of urbanisation results in costly and pollutant forms of transport;

1 Europe's surface area covers 10.4 million km² for a population of 720 million. Discounting the countries of the former Soviet Union these figures fall to less than 5 million km² for a population of 500 million with an average density of 100 people per square kilometre.

Furthermore, this figure is merely an average since large areas remain inhospitable and thus scarcely populated. A country such as Sweden with a surface area of 500,000 km², a tenth of that of Europe, has a population of less than 9 million, i.e. less than 2% of the continent's population, with a density of 18 people per square km². On the contrary, certain regions are among the most densely populated in the world. The Netherlands has 34,000 km², less than 0.7% of European territory for a population of 15 million, i.e. 3% of the total European population, with a density of 440 people per km² ! By comparison, the United States has a population density of 25 people per km².

- 4* The direction taken by productivist agriculture which requires forever more fertilisers, greater yields, pesticides, artifice and financing, and which continues to develop to the detriment of our fundamental natural resources,
- 5* Fiercely fought international negotiations regarding:
 - 6* Its unification, since it should not be forgotten that two Europes exist that have far to go before they converge,
 - 7* International trade negotiations in which issues of food and agriculture play a decisive role and in which Western Europe is aware of its reliance on the exterior, whether for energy, raw agricultural materials or waste treatment.

Good management of its territory for Europeans is therefore not only a question of them being interested in their garden, it is also understanding what goes in and what comes out, and what their neighbours, children and grandchildren think.

Stakes that go beyond its territory

Lastly, it is clear that the future orientation of Western Europe and a unified Europe, the choices it will be led to defending in the international arena and the principles that it will formulate to found and justify its action have particular importance in today's world. Since, given its economic and ecological influence, its perhaps not always deserved but nonetheless real cultural prestige, the position taken by Western Europe will be subject to particular attention. Thus it is faced with an historic responsibility whose repercussions resound around the world. Therefore, will it make the choice to:

- 8* Preserve its rural space as *'agreeable gardens, the ornaments of opulence'*?
- 9* Or apply on its scale and in its context the valid principles, rights and duties recognised by all in view to implementing a more sustainable form of development?

2. Paths of consideration and research

During its major meeting at Valencia in May 1999, the "European rural world and sustainability" topical workshop set out the following five directions for work on which we invite you to debate:

- 0* New contracts between agriculture and society
- 1* Food, quality and health
- 2* Sustainable production systems
- 3* Europe and the rest of the world
- 4* Citizenship, power and democracy

We have chosen to keep these directions for work because they are the result of collective work and they cover reasonably well all the questions that need to be dealt with, in order to formulate proposals for the responsible and sustainable use and management of rural territory.

2.1 - New contracts between agriculture and society,

Limiting rural areas simply to their use for farming would be ridiculous, although failure to acknowledge the major role played by agriculture in their management and orientation, at least in the past, would be counter productive. The agriculture dominated for forty years by modern industrial techniques is in full retreat: formerly perceived as an essential activity for food production, territorial management, a guarantee of independence, security and peace, it is now accused of being a pollutant, expensive, inefficient and even dangerous activity. The importance of agriculture appeared so great that it seemed unthinkable previously to question its place in Europe, but this is not so today. Exactly what functions does agriculture fulfil in today's Europe? What is its place at present? How should it be organised? What are the mechanisms and according to what social system should it be oriented, negotiated and managed?

10* Agriculture and other functions of the territory?

11* The social organisation of agricultural activity, by companies and by families?

12* The legitimacy and procedures of subsidies for agriculture?

13* The strategic role of agriculture?

14* The cultural function of agriculture?

15* The cost of agriculture?

2.2 - Food, quality and health

What more is there to add? Mad cow disease, dioxin contaminated chickens, water pollution and swine fever exist side by side with quality wines and cheeses, bio products and functional foods (medicinal foods). We first eat to live, to sustain good health and also according to tradition. The justification by modernity, rationalism and efficiency to produce food of mediocre nutritive quality, some of which is even dangerous for health, is absolutely scandalous. Does this "progress" in fact hide a kind of regression?

Although food is not the only element that contributes towards a balanced life – the following can be mentioned in order of importance: social integration, hygiene, hard working conditions, living environment, social relations, medicine, etc. – its symbolic role is vital. Fear of eating one's steak is equivalent to returning to the stone-age. The debate on food is therefore a fundamental debate on health and lifestyle.

On another level, that of quantity, a more global geopolitical debate exists on "who should feed whom?" and on the types of food production which best respect the environment. Although Europe exports cereals, to produce them it imports oil and pollutes its water. To produce fast, it pretends to feed Egypt with wheat produced thanks to Saudi Arabian oil extracted by Filipino workers overseen by Palestinian managers, and by doing so it pollutes its water.

- How can food management be integrated with an essentially preventive health policy?
- How can food and agricultural policy be harmonised with health policy?
- On what principles can a healthy food policy be based?
- Must Europe feed itself?

2.3 - Sustainable production systems

Although rural areas appear to be less polluted than the city, this is not always so: the atmosphere and water can hold some surprises! As is often the case when small companies enjoy large amounts of space their management of resources and pollutants leaves much to be desired. However, growing concern over preserving the naturalness of rural areas tends to increase the number of constraints on the development of economic activities there, whether they are directly related to natural resources (as with silviculture, wood working, tourism, some farming and agrifood activities) or not (small industrial and craft enterprises, soilless agriculture, roads and railways). However, restriction rhymes with additional cost, at least in the short term, and additional cost means reduced competitiveness. Maintaining economic activity that preserves natural resources requires resources of its own, whether economic or regulatory. These must then be accepted by one's neighbours and trading partners!

- What common foundations are needed for a policy of sustainable rural development?
- What priority should be given to the resources to be preserved and why?
- What principles should be used to guide the implementation of these policies?
- What resources should be used?

2.4 - Europe and the rest of the world

The continent that has done most to break down, sometimes brutally, the frontiers between the world's regions cannot ignore the interdependency of the relations it has woven. Every internal decision taken has an external impact. Since Europe is generally in a position of force vis-à-vis weaker regions, it can feign to ignore them, though this would be neither prudent, nor wise for the future. Consideration on the future of Europe's territory provides the opportunity to formulate several concrete principles that follow on in particular from the Rio conference, with the aim of building a third pillar in the international order. Moreover, Europe is itself faced daily by myriad different situations in its midst: different cultures, rationales and interests of the north, south, east and west prevail, although attempts are needed to make them converge! What is more, Europe's lack of raw materials makes it a major player in international trade.

- What rules in the future should correct the principles of free trade?
- According to what principles and in what spirit will Europe become united?
- How can an intercultural dialogue be set up?
- Should interdependencies be reduced?

2.5 - Citizenship, power and democracy

In Europe, at least, the great era of master plans such as agricultural policies negotiated in closed circles has come to an end. Local authorities and ad hoc organisations are no longer afraid of openly protesting or of going to court to

contest actions they feel are harmful. We often find ourselves in a situation of protesting after events have occurred, but this shows the desire of citizens to become active players in their own destinies. However, this situation gives the impression of blockage and the growing judicialisation of society. This stems from the weakness of consultation procedures applied upstream of events. If we are to stop increasing failures and blockages, the management of rural areas, as well as that of a large number of social issues, now requires the development of procedures for consultation and negotiation before decisions are taken. This is the major challenge now facing Europe's representative democratic system.

- How can territorial dynamics be harmonised from the scale of local authority to that of Europe?
- How is common welfare constituted? When is it invoked to require that an individual or local authority obeys a decision that it refuses to comply with?
- How can the economic and political unity of Europe be reconciled with the natural diversity of its territories and with the cultural diversity of its peoples?
- What are the principles that should guide collective movements, taking into account the specific situations of local authorities?