

RURAL ISSUES IN DEVELOPED NATIONS

Bernard J.S. Hoetjes

*University of Maastricht, Regional and international administration, Faculty of Law,
University of Leiden, Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences
the Netherlands*

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Summary

The European rural and agricultural policy since the 1950's was the product of wartime food scarcity, and became a spearhead in the process of European integration. The Common Agricultural Policy, in terms of its own goals, became a success, but ran into serious difficulties in terms of the quality of rural social life, world trade, and natural environment. After the Cold War, the prospect of eastward expansion of EU opens up new issues and problems of agricultural technology, environment and the role of the countryside in economy and society.

1. Definitions

This article addresses the problems in the lives of people in the countryside of developed countries, from a public policy perspective. This approach requires some clarification and definition, of concepts and perspectives.

First of all, life of people in the countryside, including its problems, has several dimensions: social, cultural and economic. We take the rural economy, especially the agricultural economy, as our starting point, and look for the consequences of economic developments for rural society and culture. This definition also implies, that the natural environment is not taken as an 'objective' entity by itself, but as a human category, i.e. perceived by people as a relevant part of their lives.

Secondly, the notion of 'the countryside' looks more obvious than it is. Should it be

defined as the area/territory where agricultural employment dominates? In that case one will find certain areas of labour-intensive agriculture lumped into the same category with urbanized areas of agro-industry. Should it be defined as the area with the lower/lowest density of population, the 'open space'? In that case areas of large-scale agriculture will be classed together with areas of tourism, natural reserves or seasonal residence (residence secondaire). We will use both definitions, recognizing its implication, i.e. that 'the countryside' covers a wide variety of economic, social and cultural forms.

Thirdly, there is the notion of developed nations. While the notion of 'a nation' has clear social and cultural overtones, it also has a strong political meaning, i.e. the loyalty with a certain state, or the desire to create a 'nation-state'. The concept of a state, in its turn, also refers to a geographical entity: states are territorially defined, and are often referred to as 'countries', i.e. territorial entities with their human inhabitants, ruled by a government. In this article, this latter notion will be used.

Similarly, we define 'developed countries' primarily in a geographical sense. Taking an economic yardstick as a starting point (i.e. GNP/cap), we will concentrate on those countries within the close and direct geographical orbit of economically developed areas. In concrete terms, we will take western Europe as the geographical 'locus' of our exposé, with some comparative excursions to North America (U.S., Canada) and other parts of the world, e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Israel or Japan. We do not pretend to deal with these latter countries in more than a cursory fashion. Especially Japan, it seems, would justify a separate study - because of its position between 'western' and 'non-western', and its major role as a developed country in world economy and world politics. This, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this article/author.

Even so, this geographical definition implies some arbitrary dividing lines. E.g. Portugal or Greece are included, but Argentina or India are excluded, even though the latter countries play an important role in the agricultural world market and might be considered 'developed' in economic terms, at least partially.

Finally, the focus of this article is policy- and politics-oriented. How and why are certain characteristics of rural life perceived as problems, which are to be tackled by government intervention? Which ideas are behind public policies affecting the countryside, what are the objectives and instruments of these policies, and how do they work out? Why and how do changes in these ideas, and in the ensuing policies, occur?

Behind these questions, there is an environment-related one: to what extent, how, and when have the notions of environmental vulnerability, and sustainable development become a relevant item in policy discussions, or, even, a guiding line for public policy? In reviewing the issues and policies affecting the countryside we will take agricultural policies as a starting point. Agricultural policy, as a part of wider economic policy, had a major impact on rural life, to begin with. Only at a later stage, more integrated policies were developed, taking into account economic as well as social, cultural and environmental dimensions.

Starting out in the immediate post-World War-II period, an account will be given of the major agricultural and rural policy issues, policies (2) and their consequences (3). The economic, social and political consequences for the state as a whole, and the countryside in particular, necessitated important policy changes in the '80's and '90's (4). Especially after the end of the Cold War, new challenges have arisen, requiring a fresh and critical look at the prospects of rural life in the 2000's and the appropriate policy approaches (5).

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Biographical Sketch

Bernard J.S. Hoetjes (Heiloo, Netherlands, 1945) took his degrees in political science from the University of Amsterdam and Leiden (Ph.D., 1977). He is a comparative political scientist with a special interest in comparative/multicultural federalism, European integration and public integrity/good governance. Publications: a monograph on the Dutch ministry of Agriculture; overviews (country studies) of India, Canada; the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy; local and regional government in EU. Currently, he is an associate professor in public administration at Leiden University, and holds a Special Chair on Regional and International Government at the University of Maastricht.