

## ENASP'S CONTRIBUTION : LONG TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

Rural regions have a topographic, natural, cultural and social identity. They are often seen and evaluated as an antipode to urban regions. The fact that they are seen as disadvantaged and the need of-creating equal living conditions plays a major role in the public debate all over Europe. Indeed, territorial cohesion ensures the integration and active participation of the rural area in a wider territorial dynamic and provides an adapted response to the specific needs of rural and agricultural populations. It enables them to settle, live and work there.

In the general discussion, however, important aspects have so far been neglected. These concern **the global role of agriculture**, which plays a key role in territorial cohesion (production of food and non-food goods, creation of localized employment, management of natural resources and biodiversity, etc.) and the still largely underestimated **role of social security** for this group of people who play a decisive role in the future of rural regions. Access to essential services and social rights is the key to rebalancing territories

Farmers and foresters are Europe's largest land managers, and thus the key players in shaping rural regions. They create and maintain not only production areas but, at the same time, they design the rural business location. Doing so, they make an essential contribution to economic success and to social and territorial cohesion. In spite of this role as a basic activity, the agricultural population has a negative image which is reflected in the criticism of its intensive mode of production and adds to the existing income problems.

In several countries, e.g. France and Germany, there is currently a broad debate about a new social contract between agriculture and society. The core issue is to formulate the populations' expectations, for example in terms of provision of access to quality public services, of incomes, of environmental justice, of climate compatibility and of animal welfare so that, in the end, constructive cooperation can be reliably shaped. If this works, rural regions will be strengthened in the long term. Political agreement is emerging: farmers' services to the common good must be recognised. To sum up: Farmers can provide services of general interest because they themselves experience social solidarity. This is manifested very concretely in the collective taking seriously the social and health situation of people working in agriculture. This basic idea has long been inherent in agricultural pensions. In this sense there are already institutionalised solidarity communities that have been tried and tested in the agricultural social security systems.

Indeed, inter-scheme compensation allows to finance part of the pensions of retired farmers. This is at the same time a meaningful structural policy, because structural and demographic change is cushioned socially and shaped constructively. The national bodies responsible for agricultural social security have networked in the ENASP. These are SVS in Austria, Mela in Finland, MSA in France, SVLFG in Germany, KRUS in Poland and OPEKA in Greece. The works of the Enasp network rely on an overarching cross-cutting approach, on the research of a balance between old and young people and between town and country.

These works take into account the changes in food production that have been taking place for decades and have been made possible thanks to technological progress, and thus provide practical answers to questions of social cohesion, job retention and integration through economic activity.

At the interface between agriculture, social entitlements and joint support for agriculture, the agricultural social protection organizations are important pillars of rural life in several European countries. They provide health and social services and support to residents who feel medically, administratively and socially deprived. Their works are based on the common values and principles of solidarity (among generations, family heads and unattached individuals, the healthy and the sick) ; the principle of equity ; the principle of social and territorial cohesion ; the principle of unselfish management and the principle of social justice ; the principle of single counter and specialization (several risks covered by one single organization for the whole farming population) ; the principle of health and well-being of farming and rural populations ; the principle of democracy (interests held and defended by the representatives of the profession) ; the principle of taking into account territorial cohesion and environment ; the principle of protection/security of agricultural employment. These values are not only in line with European democratic and welfare principles but they are also economic and sustainable in their orientation.

In this way all the agricultural social security institutions contribute to the reduction of territorial inequalities by supporting their members and ensuring that their living conditions are equivalent to those of people insured in urban areas. They are also active in shaping social life in rural areas.

By guaranteeing minimum pensions to former farmers, pension schemes make it possible for their farms to be handed over in good time, thus ensuring innovative farming. Socially protected older entrepreneurs are in a position to pass on their farm to younger and more innovative hands, whether or not they come from the agricultural world. This means that a better educated and more energetic generation can take up responsible positions in good time. This serves the dynamic development of rural areas in several respects: young, well-trained people find work and career prospects for themselves and their families, often also for employees. It is also a means of preserving agricultural land and combating land speculation, concentration, land grabbing and artificialisation. Settling in agriculture also allows the maintenance of food autonomy and the fight against the decline of agricultural areas.

All Enasp systems have a competence not only for pensions but also for insurance against accidents at work and occupational diseases. The structure of agricultural accident insurance forms broad, democratically legitimised communities of solidarity. This means that the life risks of occupational accidents and diseases are borne jointly. Larger companies and those with naturally higher risks can pay higher contributions than others, while the benefit entitlements (injury benefit, medical and in-patient benefits, injury and survivors' pensions, etc.) are basically the same.

For the German SVLFG, this can be seen concretely in the fact that preventive and health promotion offers are made throughout the country, which strengthen social cohesion. These include hundreds of fall prevention courses for older people. These courses are not only aimed at strengthening the physical capacity of participants, but also at revitalising rural communities. For the French scheme MSA, this involves, in particular, welfare and safety at work in agriculture to ensure the health of individuals, the performance of the company and, beyond that, to maintain the employment of ageing or disabled workers. Strengthening the prevention of occupational and psycho-social risks also makes it possible to guarantee integration through activity and to combat the risk of suicide among farmers.

In addition, all generations, entrepreneurs and their families, employers and employees benefit from the many tailor-made offers of the agricultural social insurance institutions. This strengthens those who represent a sustainable economic factor in practically all rural regions, who provide important services as landscape conservationists, climate protectors and guarantors of biodiversity. All the social functions rightly attributed to farmers are made possible and supported by a convincing social security system. The various social security control instruments such as deferral of contributions and granting of advances allow special personal and economic circumstances to be taken into account. The principle that applies in Germany, for example, according to which prevention and rehabilitation of insured persons must be ensured "by all appropriate means", gives accident insurance in particular a wide scope for action. This allows the special features of rural regions to be taken into account.

Being able to live in rural areas also means being able to settle or stay there in good conditions with access to essential local services: childcare for young children, decent housing for working farmers and their elders.

It is also important to mention the need for decent housing for specific rural groups (such as seasonal workers, for example) and to address the issue of substandard housing, which makes agricultural and rural activity attractive in the wider sense. Also in this respect, the issue of housing for the elderly must be taken into account through the development of innovative housing formulas, such as the „*Maison d'Accueil et de Résidence pour l'Autonomie*“ (Marpa) small structures developed by the French MSA scheme.

Overall, the agricultural social security system has proved to be an effective support system for rural regions. It is in the vital interest of the EU and its Member States to develop it further in line with their needs and to give them access to existing European funding, as many actions aimed at maintaining social and territorial cohesion are initiated by social protection bodies.