



# **Are rural policies across Europe promoting sustainable ruralities?**

**ESRS Congress, Vaasa, August 2009**

**Hilkka Vihinen**

**MTT Economic Research**

## Three points, as to

**...sustainable rural policies?**

**...European policies promoting sustainable ruralities?**

**...sustainable rural policies in the condition of sparsity?**

# What do we need for (rural) policy to be sustainable?

- The topic has to be (and remain) *an issue*
- *Mobilisation* – those concerned have to be in the position to mobilise themselves, and able and free to articulate their perceptions of the rural dimension
- *Structures* for political action – institutionalise it in an appropriate way
- *Access* to democratic platforms for deliberative debate and for participation at all relevant levels of policy preparation and decision-making (local/regional/national/European)
- *Resources* – money, capacity to act, knowledge
- Not yet the case in any European country – nor at the European level

# Do European policies promote sustainable ruralities?

- In EU, crucial policies for sustainable ruralities are the CAP, spatial planning, and cohesion policy; of interest are also cross-sectoral programmes for high order objectives such as the climate change
- All suffer from partiality of the dominant constructions of rural sustainability
- The CAP: “consideration of sustainable rural development is preoccupied with the management and protection of environmental and natural resources”
- Spatial planning: emphasis on competitive regions and centralised solutions based on polycentricity, aims at a ‘more coherent’ spatial structure – offers no “window” for sustainability based on scattered settlement and economic activities

# Do European policies promote sustainable ruralities?

- Cohesion policy: weak as such, weak compared with the two other pillars of EU construction (Maastricht Treaty 1993) – economic and monetary union and the single market. *Territorial cohesion* itself still undeveloped, but: rural sustainability may gain in importance with the need to tackle rural poverty in new and future member states (Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey)
- The challenge of climate change is currently reduced in policy practice to effects on EU agriculture as production – the words “and rural areas” disappeared from the Commission working documents. “Resilience” is the new catchword
- These policy fields compete with each other about priority, resources and about hegemonic framings – no common ground for promoting sustainable ruralities

# EU policies for rural development after 2013?

- Main changes will concern the EU budget (share of the CAP), the scope of the CAP (just agriculture and agri-environmental measures, or including rural infrastructure, businesses and communities), and Structural Funds (prioritised regions, issues?)
- Probable that relatively wealthy MSs will return to more nationally financed measures (as a part of a European framework). More targeted policy measures for specific purposes accompanied with general policy for the economy instead of economic policy for separate industries
- No dramatic change in policy in 2013, rather a transition period till 2020
- More global responsibility to be carried by both the EU, member states, regions – and by individuals

# Sustainable rural policies for the condition of sparsity?

- Finland as a nation and state cannot do without sustainable rural policy. Finnish rural policy has developed this far not because of greater wisdom but out of necessity
- Yet, no consensus on how to live in the country. The role of rural areas is continuously questioned – sparsity or spaciousness; a burden or an asset?
- In the Finnish / Northern context rural sustainability boils down to the traditional questions concerning the implications of the scattered settlement pattern
- At stake are the novel ways of providing services, innovating environmentally sustainable rural housing, transportation, and energy sources as well as facilitating businesses in decentralised solutions

# Sustainable rural policies for the condition of sparsity?

- Polycentricity-based strategy (incl. urban-rural interaction), the dominating regional policy solution, has obvious limitations in a country with genuinely peripheral areas where towns can form only nodes, no corridors
- One shortcoming in Finnish rural & regional policy (& spatial planning) is their inability to take account of how our way of using space has changed: multiple residences, “popping-in countryside”. People “vote with their feet”, policy practices lag behind
- Moreover, mismatch of agriculture with rural development. Intellectual dishonesty when claiming that agriculture would have a crucial role in the vitality of all rural areas in the country – no more the case in many regions. There is a huge bias in the share of different axis of the RDP budget in this respect.

# Sustainable rural policies for the condition of sparsity?

- Sustainable for both Finnish rural areas and for agriculture would be to separate policy and funding which aim is to promote agriculture as an industry (in cases where this is appropriate), and genuine rural development which logic and funding criteria are different. In the Finnish case this would inevitably imply regionally differentiated support for farmers, which seems to have been unthinkable in agricultural policy
- To sum up: the significance of creative thinking concerning institutions and structures, divisions of labour, spaciousness, and decentralised solutions in constructing sustainable rurality, in addition to the significance of agency and place



**Rural future**