NATURE: OUR FUTURE

How rural regions benefit from environmental protection and conservation and how EU agricultural policy could contribute
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DEAR READER,

Fields, meadows and pastureland are the physical foundations on which human life depends. They feed us, they preserve biological diversity and we enjoy relaxing in natural surroundings.

But these foundations are under threat: settlements and roads are fragmenting natural rural habitats, environmentally inappropriate farming methods are damaging natural resources. Furthermore, people who live in the countryside are finding themselves ever more frequently confronted with problems such as unemployment and out-migration. Should this be seen as a vicious circle that can never be broken?

I do not believe so. Environmental protection offers many opportunities, particularly for rural regions with all their natural riches. Whether it is renewable energy from biomass, regenerative raw materials or the direct marketing of ecologically produced foods and farm holidays – nature encourages innovation and creates jobs. If this is to happen, however, policymakers must also take action at all levels, including the level of the EU. I am firmly convinced that policy must move away from the payment of subsidies to the agricultural sector towards the promotion of the diverse kinds of potential to be found in the countryside. This will strengthen rural areas, and so protect the environment. And that is our task.

The way ahead is clear: nature is the future.

[Signature]

Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety
Rural regions differ from major cities and conurbations in one respect above all: their low population density. Since there are fewer houses and roads in such areas, they have a lot of unfragmented land that has never been built on. This gives plants and animals space to live, clean drinking water can form there, woodlands and forests keep the air clean. These places are therefore very valuable for environmental protection and nature conservation. How rural areas develop is of great significance for the condition of nature and the environment – and therefore for the physical resource base that is so important to human life. Sustainable development can secure both an intact environment and a solid basis for economic activity.

About half the land in Germany is managed by farms. Even if agriculture is now relatively insignificant in rural areas and offers ever less employment as a result of growing rationalisation, it still shapes the appearance of the countryside to a decisive extent. We are all familiar with farmed fields, meadows and pastureland as components of cultural landscapes. Farmers also preserve biological diversity and therefore make an important contribution to nature conservation, helping Germany to fulfil its national and international responsibilities in this respect.
But they can also damage the environment: fertilisers and pesticides pollute groundwater, animals produce greenhouse gases, farming methods that are not appropriate to local conditions cause soil erosion. The payment of subsidies to farmers for several decades by the European Union – largely as a way of increasing production – has added to these undesirable developments. Even though much has been achieved in the last few years, our soils, water, air, plants and animals are still under great pressure from agricultural activities. In Germany alone, nitrate and pesticide residues, flood damage, soil erosion and water pollution cause costs of about 5.1 billion euros each year – a figure that takes no account of the varied landscapes and numerous animal and plant species that are being lost. Policy therefore has to set limits, but must also create the right incentives.

Environmentally friendly farms seek to work hand in hand with nature and reduce ecological burdens to an unavoidable minimum. Frequently, however, they do more than just protect the environment. They also make better use of the economic potential to be found in rural areas by strengthening regional economic cycles and, in this way, extending value creation chains. It is policymakers’ job to promote and strengthen this approach to agriculture.

A five-year study in the UK has shown that one third more bats, 17 percent more spider species, five percent more bird species and more than twice as many plant species live on ecologically managed farmland.
Policy has great influence

European agriculture is heavily constrained by policy considerations, even if market trends are increasingly gaining influence. High levels of subsidy still flow from taxpayers to agricultural enterprises. For instance, German farmers receive approximately six billion euros a year from Brussels, while the German Federation and the Länder, Germany’s constituent states, top this up with another two billion euros – not including the Federal Government’s expenditure on agricultural social policy. As a result, agricultural policy has a massive influence on the way farmers work and therefore on the condition of the environment and nature: For example, the recently introduced decoupling of direct payments that has severed the linkage between these payments and production is an important step away from one-dimensional support for “quantity”. Nevertheless, agricultural enterprises are still being paid high income supports, which have only recently been linked to environmental requirements. These conditions are not very ambitious, and their impact is accordingly modest.

However, a great many more options for environmental protection and nature conservation are offered by payments disbursed in the context of the EU’s support for rural development. These payments are intended, among other things, to finance important shared European environmental projects, such as Natura 2000 – the Europe-wide ecological network of protected sites – and the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive. This makes the effects of the imbalances in agricultural funding all the more serious: of the EU agricultural payments that flow to Germany, less than one fifth – just over a billion euros a year – are spent on promoting rural development.

The Water Framework Directive requires all water bodies to have a good status by 2015. At present, not even half of Germany’s rivers, lakes and groundwater stocks reach this standard. Agriculture is one of the most important factors that influence water quality.
Nature in Germany

Given that it is an industrialised country, Germany’s natural riches tend to be “underestimated”, but it can boast numerous biotopes and a rich diversity of species. Overall, there are about 28,000 animal species and 48,000 fungus and plant species in Germany, which has 87 nature parks, 15 national parks and 14 biosphere reserves. 13 percent of German territory is covered by the European Natura 2000 network, a status that recognises its contributions to the preservation and protection of species diversity in Europe. In this respect, agriculture has a major role to play in landscape management and nature conservation: Farmers manage about half of the land in use in Germany, with forestry enterprises controlling another 30 percent. Almost three quarters of Germany’s Natura 2000 sites are used for farming and forestry. In many of these areas, the achievement of conservation targets is dependant on extensive farming and conservation work.
AGRICULTURAL POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Today, the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is based on two pillars:

The **first pillar** is classical agricultural market and pricing policy. EU-wide, a total of about 293 billion euros is budgeted for this field in the programming period from 2007 to 2013. A large proportion of this sum will be disbursed as subsidies to farms, what are known as direct payments, which are intended to maintain farmers’ incomes. In this way, German farms are supported with about five billion euros every year. Since the EU agricultural reform in 2003, these direct payments have been almost completely decoupled, which means that – in Germany at least – they are paid regardless of production volumes. As a result, there are no longer any production incentives detached from demand of the kind that can lead to overproduction. Since 2005, premiums have only been paid in full if farms comply with specific environmental protection, animal welfare and food safety requirements, as well as keeping their land in good agricultural and ecological condition (cross compliance). However, the criteria applied are too undemanding to ensure environmental protection and nature conservation standards are actually achieved or upheld.

The **second pillar** of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy is intended to support rural regions. It rewards not only farmers, but also other actors in rural areas, for concrete measures they take to cushion the damaging environmental impact of farming methods, conserve nature and landscapes and improve the broader economic structures and infrastructure of rural regions. The financial resources for the second pillar are very much less generous than those for the first pillar: at nearly 70 billion euros in the period from 2007 to 2013, they represent just over one fifth of
the EU’s agricultural budget. In order to strengthen rural development policy financially, up to five percent of the budget has been reallocated from the first pillar to the second pillar (modulation) since 2005. Nevertheless, fewer resources are available for the new financial period from 2007 to 2013: In comparison to the last planning period, about 23 percent less funding (in constant 2004 prices) is available on average across Germany.

The two pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy

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<th>The EU’s Common Agricultural Policy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First Pillar</strong></td>
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<td>Agricultural market and pricing policy</td>
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<td>- Direct payments</td>
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<td>- Price supports:</td>
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<td>Intervention,</td>
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<td>Production quotas,</td>
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<td>Export subsidies,</td>
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<td>Protective tariffs etc.</td>
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<td>100% EU funds</td>
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<td><strong>Second Pillar</strong></td>
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<td>Policy for rural development</td>
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<td>- Agri-environmental measures</td>
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<td>- Natura 2000 compensation</td>
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<td>- support for investments etc.</td>
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<td>Part-financed by the EU</td>
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Source: Osterburg, B. and Reiter, K.: Presentation at the policy seminar on Agricultural Reform for Conservationists held by the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union/German Association for Landcare on 17 February 2005 at the BMU, Bonn
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: BIOMASS

“The prospects for renewable energy from biomass are good at the moment: today, it already supplies about two percent of electricity consumption and 5.2 percent of all the heat generated in Germany. What is more, all renewably produced fuels (about 3.4 percent of total fuel consumption in Germany) come from biomass. The decisive impetus for this biomass boom was given by the bonus for the use of regenerative raw materials introduced in 2004, which provides for higher tariffs to be paid for energy produced from these substances.

The BMU supports numerous projects intended to promote the use of biomass, such as the BioRegio project, which is investigating strategies for the sustainable energetic use of biomass in selected model regions. Another example is the Bodensee-Oberschwaben regional power project, under which conservationists are working together with farmers and an ecologically oriented energy provider. Roughly three million kilowatt hours of electricity are being produced each year by 36 biogas plants and marketed to about 1,000 electricity customers through a premium pricing model. “ Parliamentary State Secretary Michael Müller

www.erneuerbare-energien.de
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: TOURISM

The first rays of the sun are almost burning on my skin, there is a fragrance of hay, a cow is mooing in the distance. It is windless, tranquil. A couple of white clouds stand like cotton wool sheep in the deep blue sky, an ant crawls over the back of my hand. I lie in the grass and the stress of the last week already seems a world away... The journey here by train went without a hitch... Lunch will be ready in a moment. I can hear the cook walk into the garden and pick herbs for her creamy mushroom soup. Then there will be shoulder of venison with beans, pears in red wine and new potatoes, hmmm. All the ingredients are sourced from the region and couldn’t be fresher. After all, the guest house is Viabono-certified...

Viabono is an environmental umbrella brand for tourism providers in Germany that receives funding from the BMU. Various environmental and tourism industry organisations have developed a catalogue of criteria that takes account of a range of concerns, including waste, energy, water, noise, mobility, nature and landscape, architecture and settlement issues, information, guests’ wellbeing, regional economic cycles and environmental management. Whether they are interested in a canoeing tour on the River Lahn, the Franconian Cabaret Festival, shiatsu on the Bodensee, haute cuisine in Baiersbronn or a romantic pampering weekend on the Moselle – holidaymakers can use the Viabono Internet portal to search for providers distinguished by their commitment to the environment.

A study commissioned by the BMU has also shown how significant large-scale conservation areas are for tourism and therefore for the economic development of the regions in which they are located: for example, in 2004 the gross turnover from landscape-related tourism in the Altmühltal Nature Park was 20.7 million euros, which is estimated to have created employment equivalent to 483 jobs.

➤ www.viabono.de
➤ www.zukunft-reisen.de
RURAL REGIONS NEED PERSPECTIVES

Taking problems seriously

The truth is that there is no such thing as the countryside. Rural regions are extremely varied in terms of their natural and economic structures and infrastructure, their historical background, their traditions and, not least, the composition of their populations. For instance, there are quite a few rural regions, above all close to major conurbations and in areas with particularly attractive landscapes and high-quality tourist facilities, that have comparatively strong standards of living and high employment rates, and where there is less reason to worry about economic development.

But there are also areas that are increasingly having to struggle with problems. This is something that needs to be taken seriously by policymakers.

Unemployment and out-migration

Rural areas have low population densities in any case, but the lack of jobs and declining quality of life are prompting ever more people to leave regions that are further away from major towns and cities and move to urban areas. Among them are disproportionately large numbers of women, young people and the better qualified. At the same time, the proportion of old people in the rural population is rising.

These changes are having serious consequences, as shown by a recent study (see the flow chart on the left): it is no longer possible to guarantee the maintenance of infrastructure throughout areas where this is happening because their populations are below the critical mass required to maintain public transport and other services. This weakens the attractiveness of these regions. In turn, fewer businesses set up there, the number of jobs falls and ever more people migrate to the cities.

About 290 million people visit nature parks, national parks and biosphere reserves in Germany each year. This strengthens the German tourism industry and creates local jobs.
The environment is also affected

This socioeconomic development in some rural regions has consequences for nature and the environment as well. The residents who are moving into areas around towns and cities bring housing and mobility needs with them that exacerbate the environmental problems encountered there in any case. Open spaces are lost, new residential developments and roads encroach on or break up the habitats of many animals and plants.

Contrasting trends are to be observed in the places affected by out-migration: Particularly in more remote and less agriculturally attractive areas, traditions of extensive farming have helped to foster biological diversity and create valuable cultural landscapes. Today, international competition makes it difficult to apply these forms of land management – many of which are cost and labour-intensive – profitably in locations where yields tend to be low. If no markets are created for their products and no incentives are put in place to continue these environmentally friendly farming methods, there is a danger that, depending on the location, the land may cease to be used or production intensified, with all the negative consequences this would have for nature and the environment. Such a development would put valuable cultural goods in danger.
How to strengthen rural regions

But ways can be found to break the cycle of rising unemployment, declining quality of life and out-migration while improving the quality of the environment. Certainly, there are no answers to the economic problems of rural regions that work everywhere – each region has to identify and exploit its own opportunities. However, if development is to be successful over the long term, it seems obvious to build on the specific potential of rural areas. Primarily, this means preserving their natural capital, such as beautiful landscapes, clean air and fertile soils, and using these resources to build up a sustainable local economy. Environmental tourism, the production of regenerative raw materials and renewable energies, the direct marketing and processing of agricultural and forestry products, landscape preservation, water body management and services connected with various aspects of nature conservation all

“Rural areas have much to offer. These specific locational advantages should be used in a targeted way to develop these areas economically – this will create jobs and make it possible to maintain the special quality of life in the countryside.”

Federal Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel

Development paths for rural regions

Low population density  →  Lack of critical mass for services and infrastructure

Out-migration (+ aging)  ←  Fewer jobs  ←  Lower rate of business creation

There is a correlation between low population density and a weak economy and, as a recent study published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows, these phenomena are mutually reinforcing.

have plenty of potential. Farm buildings that are standing empty can be let out or used for other purposes, as horse boarding facilities for instance; farmers can open farm cafés or provide holiday accommodation on their farms. In addition to this, modern new communication technologies make it possible for geographically independent service providers to work for clients almost anywhere in the world, which also expands the range of business fields open to country residents, in the IT sector for example.

Rural regions must be placed in a position to exploit this potential to the full and, at the same time, create sustainable, ecologically appropriate economic structures. In particular, areas that are rich in natural amenities, but less viable in economic terms need support as they seek to do this in order to ensure that the contributions they make to society by conserving nature and protecting the environment are adequately rewarded.

For years, the experience of nature has been one of the major motives for taking a holiday. It is particularly important for over 30 percent of those surveyed, a figure that rises to more than 70 percent among domestic tourists in Germany.

However, solutions are available: The management of natural capital still offers unused potential for the development of rural areas.

Source: BMU (2007)
Providing reliable funding

Policymakers should assist and actively encourage these positive developments. Apart from adopting legal regulations, the state should also create targeted financial incentives. There have been various successful examples of funding instruments being deployed in the past, above all schemes under the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy: These instruments have secured nature conservation through contracts concluded with farms, promoted ecological farming, improved marketing structures for agricultural products and made it possible for whole regions to draw up comprehensive development concepts. These measures must be strengthened even more in future. It is only possible to ensure this happens by providing sufficient financial resources – the problems being encountered by rural regions cannot be solved with the current budget for the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy.

There are only a few areas where regional foods’ share of overall consumption is higher than five percent. Their potential market share is almost three quarters.
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: LARGE-SCALE CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Marshes and fenlands, extensive mountain hay meadows, large reedbeds, water meadows, periodically flooded grasslands, litter meadows, heaths and low mountain ranges with long, complex cultural histories... Germany has many unique natural and cultural landscapes, which provide habitats for numerous species of animals and plants and are dependent on special protection. In this respect, traditional extensive farming has a particular significance at the local level. Since, 1979, the BMU has sought to safeguard these areas by funding more than 60 large-scale conservation projects that encompass a total area of 220,000 hectares. The annual budget for these projects is currently 14 million euros (and a total of 300 million euros has been spent on them since 1979). These schemes protect nature and create jobs at the same time.

►www.bfn.de/0203_grossprojekte.html
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: DEVELOPMENT OF SETTLEMENTS

Every day, an average of 114 hectares of open landscape is destroyed by the construction of houses and roads – and the trend is rising. In response to these encroachments, the BMU commissioned the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) to collaborate with environmental organisations in drawing up guidelines for the sustainable development of human settlements: „The purpose of the guidelines is to improve people’s quality of life without more land being required for settlements and transport infrastructure over the long term,“ says Professor Hartmut Vogtmann, President of the BfN. Initially, use should be made of free spaces within cities, towns and villages, where there are still lots of potential sites for development lying fallow. „But this does not mean ‘building in every gap and at any price‘,“ Vogtmann says. „Sufficient green areas, parks and open spaces must remain in towns and cities – otherwise, people will move further out to the urban peripheries.“ The guidelines show how this can be done with many practical examples and a reference section, which provides details of various instruments and procedures as well as the statutory framework within which developers have to work.

► www.euronatur.org/uploads/media/FlaecheDruckLow_5_MB.pdf
Mr Flasbarth, rural regions are having to struggle with many socioeconomic and environmentally related problems. At the same time, further cuts are being made to the funding from the EAFRD, which was scarce enough in any case. Can you see a way round this?

Flasbarth: Rural areas enjoy one great advantage over towns and cities: the capital they have in their nature and their landscapes. This capital still has great potential that – if used appropriately – can help to compensate for the disadvantages they face and increase revenues. If natural resources and nature conservation are recognised as offering opportunities, natural capital can further expand the value creation chain and, in this way, significantly improve the economic situation in the countryside.

What practical implications does this have?

Flasbarth: One example is the regionalisation of economic cycles, the marketing of products „from the region for the region“. If a farm produces products in an environmentally friendly way, then processes and markets them itself, this enables it to lengthen its value creation chain and create new jobs. One example is the largest organic brewery in the Federal Republic of Germany, Neumarkter Lammsbräu, which now employs 85 people. Then there is the medicines and natural cosmetics manufacturer Weleda, which has about 600 employees in Germany alone. The retail market for organic products is also growing and creating new jobs, as is shown not least by the many new organic supermarkets in German cities. Above all, this is giving the areas around our cities good opportunities to supply urban residents with foods that have been produced in harmony with nature and the environment.

Landscape management too is becoming ever more important. As a result, there is growing demand for special low-impact machinery, such as combine harvesters that minimise soil damage and machines for mechanical weed control. The generation of ecoenergy using reeds, hedge cuttings and other biomass obtained from environmentally friendly sources is particularly promising for the future.
Another important income stream is tourism, there is much talk of „farm holidays”...

Flasbarth: Yes, that is right. Intact landscapes and large, species-rich conservation areas are popular destinations for daytrips and holidays. Ecotourism can boost the economy in rural regions. A nice example of how conservation and tourism can profit from one another is the Rhönschaf, a rare breed of sheep from the Rhön area: at one time, it was threatened with extinction (there were only about 300 animals left in 1960), but today it has become the tourist and culinary trademark of the Rhön. And the overall stocks of the Rhönschaf are numbered in tens of thousands again.

This suggests nature conservation can benefit directly from economic measures – and vice versa. What role is played here by agriculture?

Flasbarth: Extensive, ecological farming creates jobs. According to the German Federal Government’s Agriculture Report, organic farms employ about 34 percent more people, even though they earn 34 percent more profit than conventional farms – 37,090 euros on average. Apart from this, they are remarkably good at protecting biological diversity and groundwater, consume less energy and retain the fertility of the soil. Not only that, they tend to treat animals more humanely and do more to protect the health of both producers and consumers.

Semi-enclosed pastureland can be an alternative, particularly in remote regions that are difficult to farm. Such landscapes create areas of wilderness of a kind that has practically disappeared from Germany, which can in turn be attractive to tourists and so stimulate regional value creation. They are a cost-effective option for sustainable, environmentally sound land use. All these examples show how many opportunities nature conservation can offer for the economic development of rural regions.
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: HYDROPOWER

Hydropower is a safe, reliable, climate-friendly way of generating energy. There are more than 7,000 hydroelectric plants in Germany, most of them in rural areas. The Federal Environment Ministry was requested by the German Bundestag to draw up guidelines on the tariffs payable for electricity from hydropower under the Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG). These guidelines demonstrate that the use of waterpower and nature conservation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, if existing hydroelectric facilities are modernised, they can use hydropower even more effectively while improving the ecological status of water bodies and, in particular, making it easier for fish to migrate along them. This also helps to maintain the recreational value of the locality, and new jobs are created by the construction and modernisation work. The guidelines can be ordered from:

bm@broschuerenversand.de
What action is the BMU taking?
EXAMPLE: CONSERVATION FARMS AWARD

The preservation of biological diversity depends on those who use the land managing it with environmentally friendly methods. Without farmers who do this, it will not be possible to achieve the German Federal Government’s goal of halting the loss of biological diversity by 2010. This is the rationale for the BMU’s decision to sponsor the Conservation Farms Award, a competition organised for the first time this year by the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation in conjunction with the Ecology & Agriculture Foundation. The purpose of the project is the creation of a network of conservation farms across Germany that integrate nature conservation into agricultural practice in widely differing ways.

►www.naturschutzhoefe.de
EU AGRICULTURAL POLICY: FIT FOR THE FUTURE
How to strengthen rural regions

Policies for the development of rural areas should have the goal of creating surroundings that offer a high quality of life to all the people who live in them, conserving nature, protecting the environment and promoting innovation and employment outside the agricultural sector. The emphasis should be on sustainable development that creates environmentally and socially compatible economic structures and infrastructure, preserves the diversity and uniqueness of cultural landscapes and achieves common European targets for soil, nature and water protection. Funding out of taxation is justifiable primarily if schemes create or preserve social goods. These goods include, for example, biological diversity and natural resources such as water, air and soil. Apart from this, it is necessary to put in place economic incentives for measures that create new jobs in rural regions, for example through the promotion of innovative technologies or regional economic cycles.

This means that, in their current form, the subsidies paid to European agriculture under the first pillar – which still absorbs relatively large amounts of taxpayers’ money – have now outlived their purpose. They are socially controversial and push farmers into the role of mere subsidy recipients, without recognising what they actually do for society. It is right as a matter of principle for payments to be linked to the ecological contributions made by agriculture. But the work that farmers do to protect the environment and conserve nature, supply our society with foodstuffs and preserve our cultural landscapes should be rewarded in targeted ways that reflect their real achievements.

„Agriculture and nature conservation are not mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary: they benefit from each other and strengthen rural regions, as long as politicians create the right framework. That is our task.‘‘
Federal Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel

Simply substituting domestic holidays for one percent of all trips made abroad would create 10,000 to 15,000 new jobs in Germany.
The approach embodied in the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy makes this possible. It funds targeted landscape management, environmental protection and nature conservation activities carried out by farmers and foresters. Furthermore, it is much more responsive to the needs of individual regions because it also takes account of ecological, social and other economic aspects beyond the scope of farming.
Promoting the potential of rural areas

Funding instruments that take all areas of the economy and life of rural areas into consideration are likely to create better solutions for their problems than merely subsidising agricultural production. This is why EU funding should strengthen the specific potential to be found across the board in rural areas.

Of course, agriculture and forestry will still play a central role in this respect on account of their use and preservation of natural resources. However, they should do even more than in the past to exploit the opportunities they have to diversify.

What does this mean in practice?

If European policymakers wish to respond appropriately to the concrete challenges that are arising in rural areas, the CAP will have to be further
developed: Away from subsidising agricultural production towards broader support for the specific potential of rural regions. The implication of this is that if the funding provided for the environment, agriculture and rural areas is to be adequate to meet the challenges of the future, it should purposefully support measures modelled on those encouraged under the second pillar.

Any new funding instrument should accordingly be centred around criteria that reward agricultural enterprises and other actors in rural areas for performing desirable activities with ecological and social benefits, such as the conservation and management of hedges, species-rich hay meadows and even field margins that offer shelter to wild animals in intensively farmed regions. Nature and the environment have a key role in funding policy because, on the one hand, an intact environment offers economic opportunities while, on the other hand, the state can make use of instruments of this kind in order to fulfil its responsibilities with regard to conservation and environmental protection.
Greater emphasis should be placed on market mechanisms when funds are being granted, for example by having desirable environmental measures put out to public tender. Both regions and businesses could apply for the funds to be granted. Such projects are even more effective if they reinforce the personal initiative of the actors on the ground. This is why more opportunities to access consulting services and training should be offered. A special focus should be placed on integrated development concepts of the kind pursued, for instance, within the framework of the EU LEADER funding initiative, under which local action groups draw up a shared programme of action for their region that sets several goals to be pursued in parallel. It is possible to achieve synergy effects because measures can be better coordinated when this model is applied.

Apart from these differentiated rewards for concrete activities, which should be embedded as far as possible in regional concepts, it would be possible to establish a basic, regionally delimited form of funding aimed at the preservation of biological diversity and cultural landscapes. This could be a way of
reducing the amount of red tape involved in helping to maintain agriculture in areas that are difficult to farm economically, but have a particularly high level of biological diversity thanks to their history of extensive farming practices.

Such a new funding system would clearly demand a degree of rethinking. But it would make a crucial contribution to the work being done to strengthen and protect our rural regions. And consequently help to maintain our physical resource base. It would preserve our cultural landscapes and familiar natural, leisure and economic amenities. This is why the decision should no longer be delayed. Our resources are limited, farmers need certainty if they are to plan for the future, rural regions need more effective support. In consequence, we should decide over the short term on the direction we want to move in and initiate a process of adjustment. This will enable us to support rural regions more successfully, as well as improving environmental protection and nature conservation. And so safeguard the living spaces we share on a sustainable basis.
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