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What agricultural landscapes in Europe, and for whom?

By Pierre Donadieu

After 2013, it is almost certain that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will change. For at least one simple political reason: the CAP budget will fall because States will give less room for agriculture in the European construction in favor of new industrial and services economies, creative of jobs.

But there are two ways of thinking about European agricultural economy. The first, in line with the second pillar of the CAP, the rural development, considers the agricultural economy initially as an activity productive of agricultural spaces and amenities, frames of the residential, leisure and tourism economics. It is in this perspective that financial aids to agricultural exploitations are justified, as remuneration for public services in favor of the quality of landscape and environment. What does not accept the farmers who claim for the status of entrepreneur, free of their choices, of deciding the markets they supply.

The second way of thinking about the agricultural economy is to relate it to its original purpose: to feed the world. This is consistent with the objectives of the CAP first pillar and the wishes of those who claim for the identity of free entrepreneur farmers. For them, desirable agricultural landscapes are those that show their activities, such as business and technical systems - often specialized - they have chosen, and enable them to produce them. And not like the Brussels conditions of financial aids want them to be: respectful of water quality and biodiversity, but also of the quality of agricultural products for the consumer.

These two poles of interpretation of the CAP do not have the same political importance according to the European Union members, because the agricultural populations do not have the same political weight. This weight is for example strong in Poland and Portugal, but very low in Great Britain and in the Netherlands.

Since early 2010, the European agriculture faces a serious crisis. Not only because grain prices have dropped dramatically, but because of the crisis of confidence between consumers and farmers. Suspicion now weighs on food products because of possible risks, in some cases, for human and non-human health.

Are opposed in public debates and on the Internet, on the one hand the proponents of organic farming, more or less labeled, supposed to reassure the consumer, and to feed a population of 9 billion; on the other hand, proponents of the so-called agriculture of quality, where the productions with guaranteed prices would be supported by the new CAP after 2013. The latter could then be directed in part to the benefit of public collectivities which would become locally mediators of the public aid to farmers.

Thus, local authorities would fund the local quality of landscapes and environments with European public funds. They would directly act on the prices of agricultural products and services which they consider strategic for the local quality of residential living. For example, to plant hedgerows and thickets in urban areas, to subsidize various forms of biological agriculture, to diversify the non-biological productions with environmental and landscapes rules of production.

Agricultural actors of these local landscapes would be partially paid, indirectly through support to local prices, with European funds. The landscapes would be jointly produced by farmers and local authorities by theoretically be accompanying with the decrease of food and environmental risks in favor of the residents.

This policy has consequences. It excludes entrepreneurs who want to depend only on world markets. Those will relocate. But it retains those who are interested in local guaranteed prices. It is putting local

authorities in competition as actors of landscape and environment policies, which will shape their reputation and attractiveness.

Under these conditions, products considered healthy but also considering the quality and fertility of soils as well as the biodiversity will become signs of local quality of life, whether the farmers are organic or not.

Face to the versatility of governments and the inability of collective States, time has probably come to rethink the social and economic development across local and regional authorities. By empowering them, as actors of their economies, it is likely that rapid results will be seen more quickly than if the CAP is only in the hands of States. Remember that the new technology of information and the economic globalization give many opportunities to local public and private actors..
