

Rural Development Policy post 2013 – Opinion Poll among Rural Actors

Austrian National Rural Network – Summary of Statements and Positions

The Austrian National Rural Network service unit “Netzwerk Land” has invited 1.400 stakeholders in rural development to answer three questions about the future orientation of the rural development policy. Additionally, these questions were posed on the front page of the network’s webpage. The RD monitoring committee held further discussions and debates on this subject which is included in this summary.

In total, 34 statements were made, 20 from the agriculture sector, five each from the sectors environment/nature and regional management/Leader as well as four others.

Most positions, with few exceptions, are based on the assumption of continuing the current two pillar system of the CAP, emphasising the “C” of the CAP and its community building impact. Rural Development in future should play a more important role in accompanying the first pillar, though clear structures and demarcations between the two pillars are needed. One single organisation declines the two pillar structure. A broad majority is in favour that the Leader method and the regional policy elements should remain part of the rural development policy, though without using RD to replace the regional policy. A sufficient CAP budget without renationalisation is required. The “public goods for public money” principle is generally accepted.

Guidelines on food labelling and the use of genetic engineering or concerning the harmonisation of the member state’s tax systems were proposed to accompany the policy.

1. What should be the objectives of the future rural development policy?

First priority is the continuation of the land use all over the country through non-industrial, multifunctional and sustainable agriculture and forestry – also in the less favoured areas and especially in mountainous areas where farming of alpine pastures is of high importance. The diversity in agricultural use (intensive, extensive) leads to a diversity in natural and cultural landscapes and regions as well as in biodiversity (species, breeds, varieties).

The output of farming activities are healthy, safe, manifold, regional and affordable foods and feed. Together with the forestry industry sustainable resources and renewable energy are produced. Soil/humus, water, climate and diversity are protected. Public goods such as drinking water, landscape used for recreation, climate protection (e.g. CO₂-sink) and the protection against natural hazards are provided. Animal welfare is respected.

To achieve all these tasks a further aim is to guarantee income for the agricultural and forestry sector. This is obtained by increasing the competitiveness (support for training and investment), the compensation of disadvantages in less favoured areas and payments for improving the environment as well as economic diversification.

The third aim of an integrated rural development policy is to establish attractive and vital rural areas for people of all ages and social backgrounds to live in. To increase the quality of life support is needed for regional economic cycles, the maintenance of an economy structure which is characterised by small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in tourism and crafts as well as for the creation of jobs within and outside the agriculture and forestry sectors. The representation of the employees and a few others ask to put more emphasis on the creation of jobs outside of agriculture. One organisation which deals with regional policy postulates to disconnect rural development from agriculture and to implement rural development projects outside the CAP regime.

2. How can the RD instruments be made more effective?

In principle the current architecture of the rural development policy is not questioned but supported. A respective planning reliability is very important in agriculture and forestry. Also within the administration adaptations and improvements of the existing framework are preferred to a complete new reform. Better strategic coordination of the funding instruments (ERDF, ESF, EFF) on EU and member states level seems to be necessary.

The principle of subsidiarity, i.e. national co-financing and national programs within the framework of an overall strategy has turned to be successful. According to many players more flexibility and simpler rules of administration as well as reducing control requirements would increase the impact of the policy instruments.

Proposals:

- strategic plans on farm development (intensification, extensification, diversification) should be implied in order to increase competitiveness
- In order to strengthen the position of the agricultural sector in the production chain RD can offer some measures:
 - support of quality programs to differentiate between products (regional food, protected designation of origin, mountain products)
 - strengthening the position of producer organisations
 - innovation and research
- The possibility for a regional differentiation of the compensatory allowance should be kept; increased focus on extremely less favoured areas is proposed.
- Increased cooperation and networking of the economic players, especially SMEs, along the production chain is desirable. Leader could be of help there.

- A controversy regarding the feasibility and objective of a nationwide organic production approach exists. An “organic bonus” in all measures could be proposed. Organic agriculture is a single measure to achieve multifunctional aims.
- Nature conservationists demand a stronger orientation on operational aims, which can be evaluated through indicators, and adapted during the respective period. It should also be possible to define such aims on a regional level.
- Nature conservationists underline that if area payments for nature conservation measures focus more on results of the action the involved farmers would have more room for manoeuvre for the implementation as well as more responsibility to achieve the objectives.
- Synergistic effects between environmental measures and agriculture are desirable. In order to solve conflicts of interests in land use between farmers and nature conservationists the Leader approach could be applied more often.
- The “public goods” approach should be integrated into agricultural education and further training.
- The Leader method should stay the first choice when it comes to funding of innovation, cooperation and trans-sector approaches.
- Leader could also be used in order to improve the communication between regional development, nature conservation, agriculture and forestry as well as tourism.
- An increased awareness of the public for regionalism and regional economic cycles can improve the understanding for and implementation of rural development policy.

3. How can the management of the RD policy be improved?

In general, players in rural areas should be stronger interlinked in order to achieve a widespread understanding for rural policy. Therefore, information campaigns and public relation work has to go further than just the agricultural society. Detailed, transparent and publicly available documentations of well implemented measures and projects increase the understanding of rural development policy.

The following requests result on experiences and range further than the proposals to question 2. According to the background of the organisation (agriculture/forestry, environment/nature conservation, regional development/Leader) the focus of the positions varies.

Postulations:

- An improved strategic approach of the funding of agriculture and forestry investments should focus on a farm’s future perspective, which should be developed by training and advisory measures (intensification, extensification, diversification).
- This includes efficient processing and marketing structures and strategies, rules on food quality and certification systems as well as appropriate information and promotion measures.

- Especially in the milk sector the impacts of the phasing out of the quota system could be smoothed and a succeeding model to the milk quota could be developed.
- Renewable energies and raw and building materials will become more important in future. Therefore, a sustainable forestry management and timber production, taking into account the small structured forestry sector, are necessary.
- A modulation (i.e. decreasing payments with increasing farm sizes), a basic allowance for small farms in mountain areas and various tolerances for small holdings are requested by representatives of the mountain farmers.
- Appropriate animal housing and ethic tolerable treatment of animals should, for some organisations, be a precondition for support or be supported.
- According to the representatives of the environment sector agri-environmental measures should hold the “new challenges” in its result catalogue (e.g. biodiversity).
- Environmental measures should again be offered for the forestry sector.
- Incentives are considered highly important for the agri-environment payments.
- Different co-financing rates (up to 75% for environment measures with common European objectives) are welcomed by Nature conservationists.
- Because of climate change the linking-up between habitats becomes more and more important. Therefore a nation wide preservation of the Natura 2000 network is essential.
- The majority of positions want the measures of the current axis 3 and Leader to stay part of the rural development policy. Two organisations are against this postulation.
- Sufficient funding is necessary for Leader actions to implement innovate actions and cooperation.
- The Leader approach can be used to realise regional energy strategies/autarky.
- Some organisations postulate the cancellation of the minimum spending on the axes, in order to achieve more flexibility for the programme management.

Summarising, we want to emphasise that the conclusion of most statements was to continue and improve the current rural development policy framework. In order to improve administration processes (administration efficiency, effectiveness and efficiency of measures) the general framework (processes, competences,...) should not be completely changed.