

"NEW DECISION-MAKERS, NEW CHALLENGES"

# RURAL LIFE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, A BEACON OF HOPE FOR EUROPE



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**T**he countryside is not a blast from the past, it is a key player in the EU's future, according to an Tribune by our founder president Jacques Delors, MEP and former president of the Committee of the regions Mercedes Bresso, president of RED and of the Mouvement européen de la ruralité Gérard Peltre and president of Sol & Civilisation Anne-Claire Vial, published in French by [Contexte](#).

Rekindling dialogue with the citizens of Europe is becoming an increasingly important priority, but how can we give the European Union back its meaning, and where can we find our inspiration for imparting a fresh boost to the European adventure? The answer is probably very close to home: in our own rural areas.

## 1. Rural life, a neglected element in the European Union's DNA

Rural life is part and parcel of the European Union's DNA, lying at the roots of a rich cultural, architectural, natural, social, economic, food-related, artistic and even sentimental heritage. Yet it is far from being frozen in inertia; indeed, it is capable of dynamism and creativity provided it is shown a little consideration.

In a remarkable burst of inventive initiative some twenty-five years ago, the European Commission created a programme designed to help the countryside to emerge from its planned decline by daring to place the financial and technical resources for implementing projects in the hands of local players rather than simply in the hands of the authorities. The LEADER programme proved more successful than anyone had dared to hope.

Even before that, fully fifty-two years ago, the CAP was designed to guarantee low-cost produce and it highlighted the European people's solidarity with the world of farming by pledging to ensure that farmers earned incomes on a par with the average salary and to help them to transition into the modern world. What is the situation today?

Do economic, political and administrative authorities still afford rural life any consideration at all? One may be forgiven for voicing doubt in that connection; and indeed if certain speeches are anything to go by, rural life is simply either part of the past or a non-issue.

In the light of all this, the Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute and Sol & Civilisation brought some twenty European researchers and experts together to conduct an overview of the current situation and to ask them whether European rural life has in fact become a cumbersome heritage - when all is said and done, a burden too heavy to bear.

## 2. The countryside in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a world of solutions

The experts came up with a dual response. First of all, rural areas today are centres of innovation in the fields of energy, farming, applied technologies, communications networks, refuse management and life sciences.

The EU would have everything to gain from making the most of all the wealth thus produced and it could seek greater inspiration in the responses that that wealth provides in order to overcome the environmental, economic and social crisis currently besetting us.

That wealth invites us to see 21<sup>st</sup> century rural life as a "world" of solutions in which we can build or rebuild the relationship between man and his environment in an intelligent manner.

And secondly, from a political standpoint, it is far easier in the countryside to accommodate the demand for “slow” and “local” – both crucial conditions in the exercise of democracy, which requires time for people to accept the needs and values of others and to manage complexity.

With only a pinch of utopian thinking, a range of rural practices show that nothing really stands in the way of our turning our rural areas into workshops of high-quality democracy.

### 3. Rethinking the rural environment

Thus rural life is not yesterday’s news. In fact, it should not be an object of study or reform so much as a leading player in our future.

Yet in order to engineer this shift in perspective, we first need to overcome a major obstacle of an almost “ideological” nature.

This, because urban life was equated for a long time with trade and freedom, while the countryside meant farming and a closed society. More recently, cities have produced wealth through industry and become more attractive thanks to their cultural and artistic prestige, while the tendency to look down on rural life has not changed.

Today the advocates of the new geographical economy tell us that wealth continues to be focused in the big cities, the only areas capable of stimulating and seizing innovation. They have a hard time explaining what goes on outside those areas. Our “rural treasure” is totally

neglected either because it is not large enough or else because it does not fit onto the research and statistics institutes’ radar screens.

Yet the ongoing existence of small industries, the development of activities designed to make the most of natural resources, mobility based on quality-related rather than professional criteria, a returning population and innovation centres in sparsely populated areas are all realities that do exist.

It is not a matter of pitting the rural environment against urban life. Their economic and geographic interdependence are all too obvious. Mobility from one to the other is a daily or seasonal reality in everyone’s life.

But what we do believe, in view of all the above, is that it is necessary to rethink rural life in terms of what it has become for Europeans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to review all of the policies, one by one – cohesion, support for research, fishing, the environment, transport, energy, trade, competition, industry, agriculture and so on – asking ourselves how and to what extent they enhance or accompany the wealth of our rural areas in the project for the future that is being proposed to the people of Europe.

We can be pretty sure that the exercise will produce a whole set of disturbing answers, but at the same time it will open up prospects of intersectoral and interterritorial alliances bearing witness to our new way of living in the world. When all is said and done, the rural life can become a beacon of hope to help us out of Europe-wide crises.

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