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The Multidisciplinary Approach of Rural Studies - Research article

The evolution of policy instruments for European rural development

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Abstract. This article discusses the evolutions that have taken place in agricultural and rural policy instruments since their first implementation in 1999. In particular, it will be underlined how the evolutions have been influenced by the concept of multifunctionality and the emergence of the new paradigm of rural development. Rural development represents an alternative to the agro-industrial and post-productivist paradigms. The consequence is the introduction of a territorial and multi-sectoral approach to rural development, starting from the centrality of agriculture as the main user of space, but focusing on the interrelationships between agriculture, the other socio-economic activities and the territory's natural and environmental resources with a view to the co-production of all the actors (material and immaterial) involved. The second pillar of the CAP on rural development, introduced in 1999, has evolved from focusing primarily on economic objectives during its initial programming periods to incorporating a greater emphasis on environmental and social measures. It now serves as a bridge, linking agricultural policy with other policy areas. The second pillar remains a relevant policy today for two key reasons: the enduring importance and interest of European citizens in rural areas, and its ability to adapt to emerging economic, environmental, and social challenges.

Keywords: rural development, CAP, multifunctionality, coproduction.
JEL codes: Q18.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A territorial and multisectoral approach to rural development.
- Interrelationships between agriculture, other socioeconomic activities, and the natural and environmental resources of the territory.
- The centrality and interest of European citizens in rural areas.
- The ability to adapt to new economic, environmental, and social challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the evolution of the objectives and instruments of European rural development policy since its initial implementation in

1988. It specifically explores how this progression has been shaped by the concept of multifunctionality, the emergence of the new rural development paradigm, and advancements in rural studies. Rural development offers an alternative to the agro-industrial and post-productivist paradigms. This shift embraces a territorial and multisectoral approach to the development of rural areas, acknowledging agriculture as the primary land user. However, the focus shifts to the interconnections between agriculture, other socioeconomic activities, and the natural and environmental resources of the region, emphasising the co-production of all actors, both tangible and intangible, within the territory (Ploeg, 2006, 2015; Milone, Ventura, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the key stages of this evolution, focusing on how rural studies and policy have intersected and diverged. Specifically, this paper draws on the work of Flaminia Ventura, whose contributions to the interpretation of rural development theory provide a foundational framework for understanding the ongoing changes in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The intention is to outline the evolution of rural development policy; to connect theoretical concepts, such as multifunctionality and rural vitality, with empirical policy instruments; and to evaluate critically how European policy has responded to rural challenges through a comparative analysis of its phases. By linking these objectives to Ventura's elaborations on rural economies and the "peasant" model, this paper explores how rural policy adapts to the changing socio-economic and environmental landscape. This study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on both historical policy analysis and a literature review of key theoretical frameworks related to European rural development.

The first part of this paper briefly analyses the rural development paradigm as an alternative to the agroindustrial and post-productivist models. The second part traces the evolution of policy instruments using a chronological method, structured around major reforms of the CAP. Data are primarily sourced from European Commission reports, the rural studies literature (e.g., Ploeg, 2006; Ventura, Milone, 2012), and policy documents such as the Cork Declaration and Agenda 2000. In addition, the research employs a comparative analysis of the rural development phases (1988-2023) to assess how theoretical principles, such as multifunctionality and the rural development paradigm, have materialised in practice. In the third part, the ability of European rural development policy to respond to the challenges and prospects of rural areas, as identified in the new rural studies paradigm, is discussed (Ploeg *et al.*, 2000; Ventura, Milone, 2007; Ploeg, Ventura, 2014; Ploeg in this special issue).

2. RURAL DEVELOPMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE AGROINDUSTRIAL AND POST-PRODUCTIVIST PARADIGMS

The productivist paradigm is defined as an agricultural model characterised by the use of a high quantity of inputs, primarily aimed at maximising the production obtainable per unit of surface area involved in the production process (Beacham *et al.*, 2023). This was the predominant model in the 20th century, leading to the industrialisation and "commodification" of agricultural production as a full application of the Fordist model to the primary sector (Goodman, Redclift, 1991; Wilson, 2001), allowing companies to achieve economies of scale (Bowler, 1992).

The productivist paradigm was mainly[1] conceptualised in the United Kingdom by scholars such as Bowler (1992), Lowe *et al.* (1993), and Ward and Lowe (1994), who argued for the central and undisputed role of agriculture in rural society as the predominant activity capable of maintaining employment and stabilising incomes. The achievement of the above two goals is possible through the use of an intensive agricultural model, applied, according to rural sociologists (Wilson, 2001), to move as far away as possible from the conditions of poverty and destitution experienced in the English countryside in the post-World War II period (Newby, 1985; Bishop, Phillips, 1993). Agricultural production within the productivist paradigm thus undergoes a process of industrialisation (Marsden *et al.*, 1993) and specialisation (Ilbery, Bowler, 1998), leading to increased labour productivity due to the spread of mechanisation (Ilbery, Bowler, 1998) but with a consequent reduction in the workforce (Whitby, Lowe, 1994). However, by increasing the consumption of synthetic factors of production (fertilisers, pesticides, etc.), the pressure on natural resources also intensifies, resulting in greater environmental impacts than before World War II, when agriculture was mostly low in input (Potter, 1998). There is a lack of dynamism in rural areas, which, in this context, are considered a passive backdrop to agricultural activity (Lowe *et al.*, 2019).

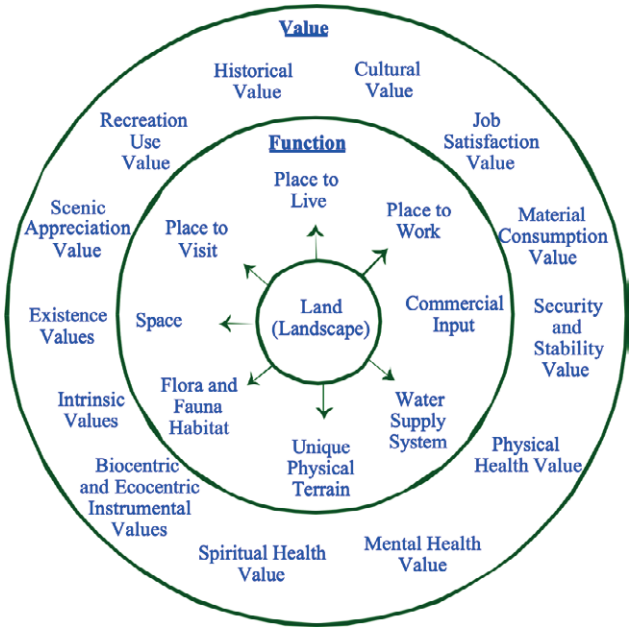
Parallel to the productivist paradigm, an antithetical paradigm known as post-productivism has also mainly developed in the United Kingdom (Ward, 1993; Mather *et al.*, 2006; Beacham *et al.*, 2023). As reported by Bergstrom (2002) and Mather *et al.* (2006), post-productivism is characterised both by the presence of a series of

[1] The advancement of technical progress, the spread of innovations, and the increase of productivity in agriculture are issues that have also been addressed previously (Hayami, Ruttan, 1970; Bieri *et al.*, 1972; Nguyen, 1979).

activities in rural areas, diversified from the mere production of commodities, and by the growing demand for goods – by users of these areas – that are not appreciated by the market, such as landscape and amenities. Moreover, according to the same authors, post-productivism is distinguished by a series of values linked to rural areas, including historical, scenic, and recreational value, as shown in Figure 1.

Wilson (2001), while highlighting the lack of a clear definition of which activities can certainly be considered post-productive, nevertheless summarised the contributions of British rural sociologists, who include post-productivism non-intensive agricultural activity (Pretty, 1995; Potter, 1998), practices for the protection of compromised habitats (Mannion, 1995), and the partial replacement of physical inputs with technical knowledge (Winter, 1997; Ward *et al.*, 1998). More importantly, agriculture loses its role as the central activity carried out in rural areas if it is framed solely as a set of practices aimed at the production of foodstuffs (Lowe *et al.*, 1993; Ward, 1993). Thus, rural areas are no longer the exclusive centre of activity for "pure" farmers, although their role as key actors in rural development remains significant (Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000). From a political perspective, as goals and priorities change, institutions have started to discuss remuneration for the production of environmental public goods, payments for ecosystem services (Mather *et al.*, 2006), and multifunctionality (Wilson, 2001).

Figure 1. Values and functions of rural areas and landscapes.



Source: Bergstrom (2002).

The fundamental difference between the post-productivist paradigm and the rural development paradigm lies in the role assigned to the farmer: the post-productivist paradigm represents a specific ideology developed in response to the excesses of the Fordist model applied to the agricultural sector, which focuses primarily on sustainability and multifunctionality (Ward, 1993; Wilson, 2001). On the other hand, the rural development paradigm adopts a broader and more integrated approach (Marsden, 1999). The latter paradigm aims for the balanced development of rural areas, including economic, social, and environmental aspects, and promotes the active participation of local communities in these territories, creating networks among the stakeholders involved (Milone, Ventura, 2012). Rural development can thus be understood as a long-term strategy that must necessarily interconnect the various natural, human, artificial, and social components of the capital present and generable in rural areas (Arzeni *et al.*, 2001; Sotte, 2006).

In fact, human and social components characterise the vitality of rural areas, which is considered to be an environmental public good in every respect (Cooper *et al.*, 2009) that must be preserved and enhanced. To ensure its provision, farmers who adopt a "peasant" model, which is not based on economies of scale but rather on economies of scope (Milone, Ventura *et al.*, 2015), play a key role. The "repeasantisation" of agriculture is thus one of the main trajectories of the rural development paradigm, a trend towards the re-emergence of traditional agricultural practices and the values associated with small-scale farming, in opposition to industrialised agriculture oriented towards the global market (Van der Ploeg, 2009).

This phenomenon is closely linked to a rethinking of agriculture and rural development, in which farms and local communities seek to regain autonomy, sustainability, and resilience through strategies that reduce dependence on external inputs, especially those provided by agribusiness and financial markets. In this "low-input" approach, farms become multifunctional units capable of interacting in new ways with society and the environment (Milone, Ventura, 2012), fully integrating the production of commodities and non-commodities (Ventura, Milone, 2005). In the rural development paradigm, the response to agricultural challenges and crises necessarily materialises through the development of appropriate economic and ecological models (Horlings, Marsden, 2014). Consequently, agriculture transforms into a more integrated process rooted in the territory, where the diversification of activities and the enhancement of local resources become key elements in building a more sustainable and resilient agricultural model capable of

responding to global challenges while maintaining a strong connection with local communities and the surrounding environment (Wilson, 2007).

3. RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CAP: FROM STRUCTURAL SUPPORT TO INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Initially, the CAP was established with three main objectives[2], but it was later adjusted and reformed to address the needs and challenges of the historical period, with an evolution that altered its guidelines and operational tools (Sotte, 2006; Frascarelli, 2020). Among the most significant adjustments to the CAP are the increasingly important role attributed to rural development (Van der Ploeg *et al*., 2000). This component, initially overlooked in the first and second Mansholt Plans, progressively moved away from solely supporting agricultural prices and income, adopting a more integrated and multifunctional approach (Fanfani, Brasili, 2003).

In the 1960s, during its early stages, the CAP was essentially based on price support (the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund [EAGGF] Guarantee). However, the specific needs of underdeveloped agricultural regions led agricultural policy to incorporate, in 1964, a modest structural fund (the EAGGF Guidance) aimed at improving the competitiveness of farms and food industries in these regions.

During the 1970s, the first attempt was made to implement an organised intervention in the structural field, through the issuance of three directives related to the modernisation of farms (Directive (EEC) 72/159), early retirement (Directive (EEC) 72/160), and socio-economic information and professional qualification (Directive (EEC) 72/161). However, these directives were not fully implemented by the Member States, nor were they accompanied by significant financial resources, which undermined their effectiveness.

In this initial phase, rural development policy was conceived as a response to the general needs for farm restructuring (Van der Ploeg *et al*., 2000). Over the years, rural development policy has made room for substantial changes in the models of interaction between society and business and has actively adapted because of the numerous actors, social movements, and/or state apparatuses involved (Van der Ploeg *et al*., 2015).

Only after 1985 the notion of rural development emerged through sociopolitical debate concerning rural areas and the need to reform the CAP (Knickel, 1990). This led to the dissemination of reflection papers such as the Green Paper on the "Perspectives of the CAP" (1985)[3] and the document on "The Future of Rural Areas" (1988)[4], in which the European Commission outlined the foundational principles of a policy based on a territorial logic (Table 1).

Table 1. The phases of rural development.

Year	Phase
1988	The Future of Rural Areas – Communication from the European Commission (COM(88) 501 final)
1989-1993	Objective 5b – Development of Rural Areas
1989-1993	Leader I
1992	Accompanying Measures of the MacSharry Reform
1993	Creation of the Cohesion Fund
1994-1999	Objective 5b – Development of Rural Areas
1994-1999	Leader II
1996	The European Rural Charter
2000-2006	Rural Development Regulation (Reg. 1257/1999)
2000-2006	Leader+
2007-2013	Rural Development Regulation, includes Leader (Reg. EC 1698/2005)
2014-2020	Rural Development Regulation 2014-2020 (Reg. 1305/2013)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the consulted literature.

In the Single European Act (1986), rural development became one of the five objectives of cohesion policy, laying the foundation for a wide range of rural development measures supported by three different funds: the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the EAGGF Guidance Section (Oostindie *et al*., 2010). However, it was only through the 1988 reform of the Structural Funds[5] that rural development interventions were established for the first time (Fanfani, Brasili, 2003). This reform introduced key concepts, such as the shift from a sectoral to an integrated approach, which had already been mentioned in the Mediterranean Integrated Programmes (MIPs), making the European Union's (EU's)

[2] The three main objectives were ensuring food security, supporting farmer income, and stabilising agricultural markets. These objectives immediately brought about issues of overproduction and environmental pressures.

[3] Communication from the Commission of the European Communities, dated July 15, 1985, "Perspectives for the Common Agricultural Policy" (COM(85) 333 final).

[4] Communication from the Commission of the European Communities, dated July 29, 1988, "The Future of the Rural World" (COM(88) 501 final).

[5] This reform outlined for the first time a coordination of interventions from the three structural funds (Social, Regional, and EAGGF Orientation) for integrated development actions, also in collaboration with the European Investment Bank (EIB), laying the foundation for the implementation of genuine integrated interventions covering all economic activities, services, and infrastructures.

efforts to reduce socioeconomic disparities between European regions more coherent and effective, aiming for multilevel governance with the involvement of member states and regions (Sotte, 2023). The 1988 reform of the Structural Funds was a pioneer of future rural development policy and spanned two programming periods: 1989-1993 and 1994-1999. Its implementation occurred through three instruments: (1) Objective 5a, called "Improvement of Agricultural Structures", which continued the old logic of structural improvement of farms; (2) Objective 5b, "Development of Rural Areas", aimed at supporting the economic and social development of struggling rural areas through various interventions (rural infrastructure, economic diversification, improvement of social services, and support for sustainable agriculture); and (3) Community Initiative Leader I and Leader II[6] (Sotte, 2023). These instruments were part of the EU's structural policy and are significant because they represent the early stages of the new rural development policy that emerged after 2000.

In 1992, with the MacSharry Reform, another instrument within market policy was introduced: the so-called "accompanying measures of the CAP", which focused not only on income[7] but also, in part, on rural development (Povellato, Velazquez, 2005; Sotte, 2023).

The growing awareness of the strategic role of rural areas in European integration led the EU Commission to organise the Cork Conference in 1996, which laid the foundation for the CAP reform for the 2000-2006 period, known as Agenda 2000. Following the path set by MacSharry, Agenda 2000 represented a significant reform both for agricultural policy (with the creation of the two pillars of the CAP) and for the structural policy of the EU, redefining objectives, tools, and intervention methods. Structural and cohesion policies were reformulated to better target the available funds, focusing interventions on a smaller number of objectives than did the 1988 and 1993 reforms[8], with particular attention given to economic and social cohesion. Rural development gained relative autonomy from other cohesion policies[9], which were implemented through separate programmes from those of the other structural funds (Storti, 2016).

Agenda 2000 began to promote multifunctional agriculture, which considered not only food production, but also the sustainable management of natural resources, landscape conservation, and recreational activities related to the land. This reform increased attention to environmental, social, and economic challenges in rural areas and increased local assets and resources (Van der Ploeg, 1999). Agenda 2000 marked a key turning point in the rural development paradigm and policy (Ventura, 2001; Van der Ploeg *et al*., 2000), in which farmers redefined the boundaries of their businesses. This new model led to a redefinition of the social actors targeted by agricultural policy: a multifunctional entrepreneur producing both marketable goods and services, as well as nonmarket-oriented products valued by sectoral policy (Van Huylenbroeck, Durand, 2003; Sotte, 2023). The impact of the new paradigm on European agriculture promoted the diversification of agricultural activities and the integration of environmental policies. In Italy, farmers particularly benefited from the new opportunities offered by multifunctionality, with an increase in rural tourism, educational farms, direct sales of agricultural products, and the provision of services to public administrations (Henke, 2004). With Agenda 2000, rural development policy evolved from a simple tool aimed at addressing structural problems to a set of support measures that focused on and enhanced the multiple roles that agriculture plays in society (Marsden *et al*., 1993; Van der Ploeg, 1999).

A crucial moment in the evolution of rural development policy was the establishment of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) in 2005, which came into effect in 2007[10]. This fund consolidated the second pillar and provided a more structured and coherent framework for the implementation of rural development policies across the EU, incorporating the LEADER approach[11].

[6] The LEADER (Liason Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) program is a methodological approach aimed at coalescing different projects, actors, and resources at a local level into a Local Action Plan (LAP), managed by a local partnership (Local Action Group [LAG]), operating in a delimited rural territory.

[7] The measures were partly designed to compensate for the support of the CAP, in an attempt to break the link between production levels and subsidies, reduce incentives for overproduction, and more directly reward agriculture's contribution to public services (Oostindie *et al*., 2010).

[8] Objective 1: targeted regions lagging in development with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) below 75% of the community average; this objective aimed at promoting convergence and reducing socioeconomic disparities. Objective 2: grouped industrial and rural areas in decline that required economic and social restructuring; it included former Objective 2 (declining industrial zones) and former Objective 5b (declining rural zones) outside Objective 1. Objective 3: focused on training, education, and employment, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF); it covered regions not included in Objectives 1 and 2, aiming at modernising training systems and improving access to employment.

[9] The only exception was Objective 1 areas during the 2000-2006 period.

[10] Regulation EC 1290/2005 of June 21, 2005, on the financing of the CAP, established two new agricultural funds, replacing the EAGGF: the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), which finances the first pillar of the CAP, and the EAFRD, which finances the second pillar. Today, these two agricultural funds remain in place, with minor modifications introduced by Regulation EU No. 1306/2003 (programming 2014-2022) and Regulation 2021/2116 (the 2023-2027 programming).

[11] At the same time, the widely shared success of the LEADER Community Initiative suggested that the pioneering experience should be incorporated into the mainstream of rural development policy.

The designation of the EAFRD as the "European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development" is a paradox, both conceptually and scientifically, because it includes both the terms "agricultural" and "rural development", even though it is clear that "rural development" encompasses "agricultural development". There are two explanations for this contradiction. On the one hand, the evolution of European policies regarding agriculture and rural development aims to integrate two related objectives: supporting agriculture as a key economic sector in rural areas while simultaneously promoting broader rural development that involves the environment, economic diversification, and the well-being of rural communities. On the other hand, this represents a political and strategic compromise rather than a mere contradiction: retaining the term "agricultural" within the EAFRD's name was a necessary compromise to gain the consensus of Member States, particularly those with a strong agricultural tradition (De Filippis, 2005). Rural policy was placed directly under the umbrella of the CAP, and rural development thus became one of the main objectives of the CAP (Oostindie *et al*., 2010). Moreover, this has helped justify the CAP's budget over the years and continues to do so today.

Since 2007, the second pillar has focused on three thematic areas (or axes)[12], each corresponding to specific rural policy objectives, complemented by the LEADER axis, which promotes the design and implementation of rural policies from the grassroots through Local Action Groups (LAGs).

The 2007-2013 programming period, rooted in the Fischler reform of the CAP, can be seen as a "bridge period" between the past and future rural development policies. The goal was to reposition agricultural policies from a still-sectoral framework based on public spending oriented towards financing-status-related attributes[13] to a new structure, where sectoral aspects closely align with territorial ones, strengthening their content and improving their overall effectiveness[14] (Sotte, 2013). Owing to its greater territorial sentiment, aligned with the objectives of Lisbon and Gothenburg, this policy, compared with the old CAP, allows for the effective pursuit of the ambitious economic, social, and environmental objectives required by the EU (Camaioni *et al*., 2013).

The 2007-2013 programming was born out of the need to proactively respond to new social demands and the need to safeguard and enhance the quality of rural life. Agricultural practices could be adapted to provide positive rather than negative externalities. Based on this premise, service-oriented policy tools aimed at strengthening agricultural and rural development were adopted. The distinctive qualities of food, the recognition of agriculture's contribution to public goods (such as nature and landscapes), cultural heritage, and rural/regional identities have become increasingly important elements of service-oriented rural policies (Oostindie *et al*., 2010).

The political compromises that made the Fischler reform possible and the relatively limited resources compared with those committed to the first pillar constrained the innovative potential of rural development policy (Sotte, 2013). Moreover, according to some authors, the limited effectiveness of the spatial allocation of EAFRD expenditures towards rural areas and the tendency to favour more central and urbanised regions of the continent undermined the positive link between rurality and EAFRD spending (Shucksmith *et al*., 2005; Crescenzi *et al*., 2011; Camaioni *et al*., 2013), neutralising one of the cornerstones of cohesion policy (Brunori *et al*., 2018).

In the 2014-2022 programming period[15], the role of the EAFRD was further consolidated, with enhanced coordination and integration with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI)[16], placing greater emphasis on environmental sustainability. New tools were introduced to promote sustainability and improve environmentally friendly production methods and innovations. Additionally, the LEADER approach was strengthened, extending its scope to all rural areas and adopting a multi-fund approach (Mantino, 2013).

Access to EAFRD funds by Member States and European regions is achieved through the preparation of a multiyear Rural Development Programme (RDP), which contributes to the implementation of the EU's strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth. To this end, each of the European structural and investment funds supports 11 thematic objectives derived from the Europe 2020 strategy and a single programming docu-

[12] Axis 1: improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry; Axis 2: supporting land management and enhancing the environment; and Axis 3: improving the quality of life and encouraging the diversification of rural economies.

[13] Possession of formal requirements and entitlement to acquired rights for past behaviour, such as in the case of the decoupled single payment activated with the Fischler reform.

[14] The goal was to transition to an intervention capable of selectively incentivising and supporting behaviours, that is, individual (business) or collective (interbusiness, territorial) development projects and programmes.

[15] The programming period was initially planned for 2014-2020, then extended to 2022 (Reg. EU 2022/2220), due to delays in approving the new CAP.

[16] The main characteristic of these financial instruments concerns the methods of programming and implementation, which are carried out from a multilevel governance perspective, that is, managed locally by the States and Regions based on a partnership agreement signed with the European Commission.

ment: the Partnership Agreement (PA). The set of regulations for the 2014-2020 CAP introduced several types of changes, which can be summarised into five major categories[17]. At the same time, a series of measures were introduced to attempt to increase synergy between the first and second pillars of the CAP, such as the so-called "flexibility" between pillars. The goal of the second pillar measures is to steer development by acting on productive structures and both tangible and intangible infrastructure while simultaneously aiming to create a coherent and sustainable framework that can safeguard the future of rural areas. This is based particularly on the capacity to provide a range of public services that go beyond the simple production of food and on the capacity of rural economies to create new sources of income and employment while protecting the culture, environment, and heritage of rural areas.

A further evolution occurred with the 2023-2027 programming, which outlined three fundamental objectives: (1) promoting a smart and resilient agricultural sector; (2) supporting care for the environment and climate action; and (3) stimulating growth and employment in rural areas. These three general objectives are broken down into nine specific objectives: competitiveness, farmer income, fair distribution of value along the supply chain, climate change, biodiversity, protection of natural resources, generational renewal, bioeconomy, rural area vitality, health, and nutrition. Additionally, a cross-cutting objective includes the transfer of innovations, advisory services, training, and digitisation, aiming to create an Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).

Ecological transition and innovation are two new features of the 2023-2027 rural development policy, aligned with the transformation of consumer society and the increased availability of digital technologies. In addition to this new governance of the CAP, Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 allows Member States to outline a rural development framework with great flexibility through the new delivery model (De Castro *et al*., 2021).

In the evolution of rural development, there has been an important contribution from the conferences held over the years, which have developed various synergistic objectives, as outlined in Table 2. The first conference officially dedicated to rural development, which defined the principles for the following years, was held in Cork in 1996. This was the moment when the essential role of rural areas in the future of the EU was recognised, highlighting the need for more integrated and multisectoral rural policy approaches involving a wider range of rural actors (Oostindie *et al*., 2010). The path set by the conference, although slow and complex, was immediately followed by the creation of the two pillars of the CAP (Mantino, 1996; Saraceno, 1999).

The Salzburg Conference in 2003 emphasised the importance of territorial cohesion and the bottom-up approach and the separation of the Guarantee and Guidance sections of the EAGGF into two different funds, the EAGF and the EAFRD, respectively, to support the two pillars of the CAP. This new arrangement changed the EAFRD's status as a structural fund, which meant that integration with the other structural funds (ESF and ERDF) was no longer guaranteed.

Next, the Limassol Conference in 2012 reinforced the idea of an integrated and multifunctional rural development policy, emphasising the need to adapt policies to territorial specificities and to promote innovation, and highlighted the importance of the resilience of rural communities in the face of global challenges such as climate change and market volatility.

The second Cork Conference, held in 2016, substantially confirmed and extended the guidelines drawn from the first conference, reaffirming the importance of agricultural multifunctionality and sustainability (Sotte, 2023). The final declaration emphasised the need for a more focused and flexible approach to rural development policies capable of responding to the specific needs of rural areas and promoting inclusive and sustainable growth.

4. IS RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY STILL RELEVANT?

Over its more than 60-year history, the CAP has adapted to the evolving socioeconomic conditions of agriculture at the EU and international levels, societal changes, and advances in scientific studies. In some cases, the CAP has reacted late, subordinate to external pressures[18]; in other cases, however, it has anticipated and accelerated changes. Rural development policy, which only began in 1988 with limited financial

[17] The five categories of desirable changes for rural development are (Mantino, 2013):
1. Creation of a common programming structure that includes both cohesion policies and rural development, with the aim of strengthening integration and coordination between them.
2. A new strategic approach also within rural development policies.
3. Emphasis on cooperative and partnership approaches in various fields of intervention, not only for local development (LEADER), but also for supply chains, business networks, and environmental interventions.
4. New emphasis on innovation and its transfer to agricultural systems.
5. A more selective approach in defining the beneficiaries of interventions, both for rural areas and individual beneficiaries (small businesses, medium-sized farms, start-ups, etc.).

[18] The most emblematic case was the 1992 reform, which was driven by global trade conflicts and the Uruguay Round negotiations.

Table 2. Conferences on rural development.

Year	Conference	Targets
1996	Cork	- Raise public awareness of the importance of a new start for rural development policy - Make rural areas more attractive as places to live and work - Support programme (consisting of 10 points) cooperation as partners in the realisation of each of the objectives contained in the declaration - Play an active role in promoting sustainable rural development
2003	Salzburg	- Maintain a "living countryside" - Preserve the diversity of Europe's rural territory and strengthen the natural landscape - Rural development policy applied to all rural areas of the EU - Rural development policy must concern rural society as a whole and not just those working in agriculture - In rural development policy, partnership between public and private organisations and civil society as a whole must be developed as part of the preparation and implementation of programmes, based on the principle of subsidiarity
2012	Limassol	- Strengthen the idea of an integrated and multifunctional rural development policy - Adapt policies to territorial specificities and promote innovation
2016	Cork 2.0	- Increase public awareness of the potential of rural areas and resources in meeting a wide range of economic, social, and environmental challenges and opportunities for the benefit of all European citizens - Invest in the identity of rural communities and the potential for rural growth and make rural areas attractive places - Further develop agricultural and rural policy towards a simple, flexible, and result-oriented approach that is based on partnership and reflects the EU's objectives as well as local needs and aspirations - Systematically review other macro and sectoral policies from a rural perspective, considering the actual and potential implications and impacts on jobs, the growth and development prospects in rural areas, social welfare, and the environmental quality of these areas and communities - Support the conference programme (consisting of 10 points) and integrate its perspective and orientations into future policy-making

Source: Authors' elaboration from the consulted literature.

resources compared with market and income support policies, has grown in importance, now accounting for 50% of CAP support (including national co-financing), establishing itself as an essential component of Europe's future and the main tool of the entire CAP (European Commission, 2021).

Within the CAP, the second pillar of rural development remains relevant for two key reasons: the centrality and interest of European citizens in rural areas and their ability to adapt to new economic, environmental, and social challenges (De Castro *et al.*, 2021). The role and decisions of rural development policy have confirmed original political milestones, such as the 1988 communication 'The Future of the Rural World' and the 1996 Cork Conference, but the policy has not stagnated. Each new programming period, including the 2023-2027 period, has managed to innovate in regard to strategies and themes (Sotte, 2023).

The EU's rural areas are a fundamental part of the European way of life, as highlighted in the Cork Declaration (1996): "European citizens are increasingly paying attention to the quality of life in general, and issues of quality, health, safety, personal development, and leisure in particular, and […] rural areas are uniquely positioned to meet these interests and provide the foundation for an authentic, high-quality modern development model". Even today, many Europeans are concerned about the erosion of rural infrastructure and services (health care, social services, and education), the reduction in job opportunities, declining rural incomes, and limited transport and connectivity. Rural areas play an active role in the EU's green and digital transition. The European Commission is committed to a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas until 2040, focusing on four areas of intervention (European Commission, 2021):

– stronger rural areas: active community participation, access to services, and social innovation;
– more connected rural areas: digital connectivity, transport links, and new mobility;
– more prosperous rural areas: diversification of economic activities and sustainable food production;
– more resilient rural areas: resilience to climate change, environmental resilience, and social resilience.

In summary, rural development policy remains central in the long term. However, has it been and will it continue to be capable of adapting to new challenges and visions? Its capacity for adaptation has already been demonstrated in the past, as rural development policy has evolved alongside rural studies.

From the birth of the CAP until the late 1990s, rural development activities focused heavily on creating

new opportunities for generating income and employment. At the time, the concept of rural development was specifically used to describe (and group) activities that improved relations between agriculture and society as a whole. Later, it became clear that rural development did not mean a departure from agriculture. While it was recognised that the rural economy was much broader than agriculture, it was also believed that agriculture could be transformed and become an indispensable (although not dominant) part of the rural economy (Oostindie *et al*., 2010). Thus, various but closely interrelated elements emerged that define the concept and practice of rural development. Among these, creating new connections with society as a whole was central: new goods and services have to be produced to meet the needs and expectations of today's citizens. Consequently, rural development was defined as "responding to the growing demands for higher quality, health, safety, personal development, and leisure, and improving rural well-being" (Cork Declaration, 1996).

Another key element was the transformation of agriculture to meet new needs and expectations (and to generate additional income and employment). Rural development required a reconfiguration of rural resources, and agriculture was reshaped according to a new logic along these lines: multifunctionality, reduced dependency on external resources, improved and more sustainable use of available internal resources (especially nature), new ways of mobilising resources, and new forms of cooperation, which became important expressions of this new rural development logic, based on socially innovative governance, of which a virtuous example are the LAGs (Georgios, Barraí, 2023)

Rural development policy has maintained a certain "ambiguity" between agricultural development and authentic rural development, but this vagueness has allowed for a balance between the characteristics of European agriculture, which has a dual structure – both economies of scale and economies of scope – although[19], in practice, there is and will continue to be considerable overlap and nuance (Oostindie *et al*., 2010). Consider, for example, the 2023-2027 rural development policy, which includes a wide range of interventions aimed at achieving economies of scale and enhancing the competitiveness of businesses through support for the modernisation of agricultural structures and integration along long supply chains while simultaneously supporting the agrienvironment, multifunctionality, and local partnerships.

Rural development policy has successfully reconciled EU-level regulations with subsidiarity, taking into account local specificities and needs and thus encouraging or rewarding specific behaviours aimed at addressing territorial needs with selective measures, in line with the principle of subsidiarity (Bartolini, Viaggi, 2013; De Castro *et al*., 2021). This is especially true for small farmers, who have been able to adopt a multifunctional approach thanks to these measures (Vecchio *et al*., 2021). The success of technological innovations in competitive and sustainable agriculture also strongly depends on the involvement and active collaboration of a wide range of actors, including investments in multi-stakeholder networks (Bojkova *et al*., 2024).

Despite inevitable compromises between political groups and national visions, rural development policy has followed the evolution of rural studies. In fact, political choices regarding the CAP's second pillar have been much more influenced by scientific studies than those of the first pillar. Rural studies, emerging as a new paradigm in the fragmented representation of the countryside, agriculture, and the processing and distribution of food – an area to which Flaminia Ventura has made significant contributions – have played a decisive role in shaping and advancing rural development policy (see Ploeg in this special issue).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper concludes that the evolution of rural development policy in the EU has closely followed the theoretical advancements in rural studies, particularly the concepts of multifunctionality and territorial development. The CAP has successfully integrated these principles, especially through instruments such as the LEADER programme and the EAFRD funds. However, the implementation of rural development policy still faces significant challenges, such as balancing the needs of diverse rural areas and addressing socio-economic disparities.

The analysis in the third part of this article – an exploration of the implications of these results in relation to rural development theory – confirms that the evolution of rural development policy reflects broader shifts in rural development studies, particularly in its embrace of multi-sectorality and sustainability. This study demonstrates that European policy has increasingly moved towards integrating local economic, social, and environmental systems, a trend central to Flaminia Ventura's work (Ventura, Milone, 2005; Milone, Ventura,

[19] Oostindie *et al.* (2010) highlighted the dual structure of European farms: multifunctional farms (economies of scope) produce traditional goods along with a range of new products and services, aiming to avoid heavy reliance on external inputs and credit, while highly specialised farms (economies of scale) are strongly integrated into markets, particularly on the input side of the farm (including the capital market).

2012). As mentioned before, scientific studies have highly influenced the second pillar of the CAP but have only marginally addressed the first pillar, which is strongly influenced by path dependency.

Several challenges remain, particularly regarding the uneven distribution of EAFRD funds, which continues to favour more urbanised areas over peripheral rural zones. This finding aligns with critiques from the rural studies literature (Crescenzi *et al*., 2011), which argue that rural development policy has struggled to balance economic competitiveness with inclusive growth.

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of policy evolution, it is limited by its focus on EU-level interventions. Future research should investigate the localised impacts of rural development policies, particularly in regions where agricultural decline and rural depopulation persist. Additionally, the role of digitalisation and innovation in rural areas, though explored in the 2023-2027 policy period, deserves further empirical study to assess its long-term sustainability.

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