

Editorial

Sustainable Rural Development: Strategies, Good Practices and Opportunities (Second Edition)

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In 2021, a book entitled “*Sustainable Rural Development: Strategies, Good Practices and Opportunities*” was launched as a compilation of 16 papers and published in a Special Issue of the journal *Land* [1]. In 2022, a Second Edition was launched, thus confirming the scientific interest in an essential topic: sustainable rural development and strategy design necessary for the stability of a population and the integrated use of resources and environmental conservation in these areas [2–4]. Above all, it is a scientific, social and political challenge that will require short-, medium- and long-term strategies. The situation of rural areas and their prioritized dedication to the agricultural sector are in a critical situation [5], despite its importance, both in the most developed regions and in other developing regions of the world [6–9].

The unequal distribution of land and its production, low incomes and chronic underemployment with a continuously declining and very little diversification, have led to massive emigration and the abandonment of rural areas [10,11]. Rural areas are suffering deterioration or regressive demographic dynamics because they show high rates of ageing, masculinization or low demographic growth [12–14]. In fact, the rural population, very stable for centuries in the context of an agrarian subsistence economy, is emptying of its population, with residents migrating to cities that centralize facilities and services and provide access to employment in and income from the industrial sector [14,15]. The abandonment of traditional forms of habitats and ways of life, and, in the long run, the dismantling of services and facilities, the deterioration of infrastructures or environmental and heritage abandonment [16,17], is causing a multitude of small settlements throughout the territory to disappear and give way to territorial disarticulation [18].

This process of urban concentration, particularly in Europe and the more developed regions of the world, as well as developing areas of Asia and Africa, has led to the depopulation of vast rural regions, with consequent negative economic, social and environmental impacts [19–21].

Due to an awareness of these problems, different programmes are being developed for the revitalisation, recovery and stabilisation of rural environments, both from a global and sectoral perspective at different levels [22], as in the case of European Union Cohesion Policies. This Cohesion Policy has been proposed by the EU since its beginnings and promoted in recent decades in different agreements [23–26] with the aim of achieving sustainable and balanced development in all its territories due to the fact that there is an unequal pattern of territorial occupation, as urban areas, especially large cities, continue to house a majority of the population while a considerable number of rural areas, located in remote places or far from urban centres, are in progressive demographic decline [9,10]. The EU also promotes a territorial policy with a polycentric system of networked medium-sized cities, capable of offering services, employment and income not only for their inhabitants but also for those within their rural surroundings, thus contributing to the stabilisation of the latter population [23,27,28].

These problems include the risks of poverty and social exclusion, difficulties in preserving natural and cultural heritage, and a limited response to the impact of globalisation,



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climate change and other environmental risks [29–31]. Hence, in addition to communication networks, traditional transport networks are also important for facilitating accessibility from rural areas and integration into national and international economic circuits.

For decades, EU policies have been based on a system of specific aid for rural areas, with the particular aim of boosting the agricultural sector for the sake of social and economic cohesion in rural areas. From the outset, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has contributed to improving farmers' incomes and food supply in Europe [32], along with subsidies for rural development through EAFRD aid or through specific programmes such as the LEADER Initiative, where the main objectives are to improve the quality of life in rural areas with the aim of diversifying employment and income and fostering the participation of local stakeholders, inter-territorial cooperation, the redistribution of financial resources and the enhancement of endogenous heritage [29,33].

Fifty-one manuscripts were submitted for consideration for this Second Special Issue, and all of them were subject to the rigorous *Land* review process. In total, twenty-five papers and one case report were finally accepted for publication and inclusion in this Special Issue. The contributions are listed below.

In this regard, several articles are presented in this edition on the different effects of these European rural programmes, the LEADER Initiatives, especially in the less developed countries of the south and east. Rural development is intended to be endogenous, sustainable and participatory and made possible through specialisation and social and technical innovation (new technologies, networks, smart villages, agro-industry 4.0, etc.). Although they have undoubtedly contributed to this and have generated a certain economic and business dynamism, they have not had sufficient economic capacity to achieve their intended objectives. Their results have been very uneven, as mentioned in two articles on Spain and Romania, which state that many projects have been located in the most developed and populated rural areas or in the most urbanised areas [1,2]. Most of these LEADER programmes have been oriented towards rural tourism, with application to different territories and mixed results. Although tourism is not a unique solution, the EU encourages its complementarity with other economic activities, and there are examples of success, as shown in some of the articles presented in this edition (in Spain and Italy) [3,4]. In any case, it cannot be an exclusive alternative to the agricultural crisis, nor can it, in itself, be a driving force for rural development. However, it can become an important resource within a system of complementary multi-sectoral incomes if this possibility exists.

Also of interest are the various papers that reflect China's resolute medium- and long-term rural development policy over the last few decades. First, we mention the paper that analyses China's national strategy with the design of rural development plans that promote agricultural and agro-industrial development, food security, culture and heritage, environmental protection and poverty eradication and make rural areas more attractive in 2050, avoiding urban agglomerations [5]. Other papers present complementary strategies by promoting the design of new territorial planning, first, through the construction of specialised agricultural villages, and in other cases, through human settlements using geographical and economic factors to overcome poverty, achieve economic revitalisation, guarantee the sustainable use of farmland and food production and promote network integration for the optimal exploitation of resources [6–9].

Other measures, such as financial support, primarily through the rental of agricultural land, have profoundly improved rural livelihood strategies and incomes, especially for low- and middle-income households [10]. Also, agricultural credit and insurance introduce new technologies in rural areas, such as innovative seeds that will improve the economic performance of these farms [11] or the modification of grain subsidies that were used to support increasing farm sizes [12]. Last but not least, the economic compensation of organic production not only promotes sustainable use and food production but also increases the income of the farmers who are implementing it [13]. On agricultural issues, we mention another work on the diversification of the distribution of vegetable crops and their relationship with the development of urban centres because, through grouping

techniques implemented in a GIS, concentrations of different products are detected in some agricultural areas to the detriment of others [14]. Continuing with the primary sector, another work presents the advantages that are being produced in certain areas of China; solutions based on nature and traditional pastoralism reflect better results in the conservation and development of gainful areas [15]. In the attempt to diversify economic activities, there is another paper related to resilience tourism and decision-making [16].

Another focus of the papers published is on different environmental protection figures and the design of strategies that link conservation and sustainable economic and social development. In general, this is a controversial issue, which tends to generate tensions among rural collectives due to the limitations it imposes, sometimes resolved with mediators (such as in the case of the biocultural landscape of the Sierra Occidental de Jalisco, Mexico) [17]. Within this thematic issue, there is a mentioned paper from Nepal [18] that contains the design of new strategies for the improvement of tourism in protected areas. The strong growth of tourism has the disadvantage that it provokes unbalanced development and unequal benefits among the peoples of the park; thus, there is support for an optimal design that balances the development of all the territories because not all the inhabitants and populations participate in its benefits to the same extent. Another paper analyses two national parks in Spain and Italy [19], where the inhabitants of these protected areas perceive that they do not have any positive impact as a result of the socio-economic and land-use restrictions and incompatibilities they impose. Instead, they attribute depopulation to other factors such as transport and isolation or the lack of services and employment. This requires raising awareness and training of human resources working in rural areas. Another study shows the results of the impact on four sites protected by the Natura 2000 network in Spain [20] in the rural areas where they are located, concluding that EPs are not detrimental to depopulation but that the management of these spaces should increase the promotion of tourism and greater compatibility of land uses, including housing and infrastructure development. While the Natura 2000 sites assessed certainly have the scope for tourism promotion, their lenient legal regimes make it largely unfeasible to extend land-use compatibility without damaging protected features. In accordance with this line, mention should be made of the paper that analyses the visual impact of certain buildings in rural settings, how they can affect the quality of the landscape and how they can damage the tourists' view of these sites [21].

An additional thematic axis refers to citizen participation and governance, which should be vertical (integrating all levels of government for the coordination of their investments) and horizontal (integrating all local sectors and actors for the design, development and bottom-up management of any project), and this is discussed in a research work on rural tourism projects implemented in the SW of Spain [22]. Another paper points to the role of agents in social innovation in rural areas in the generation and management of opportunities, capacities and needs, as analysed in different areas of Spain and Scotland [23]. In short, it is essential for rural areas to develop a social dynamism that they lack, enhancing the role of social agents and partnerships.

Finally, we would like to highlight three works that mention new strategies, such as the positive positives that are producing a coworking network in peripheral and non-peripheral areas of Germany, with the possibility of generating socio-spatial models on an international scale [24]. In Poland, optimal results can be obtained from the development of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure that connect villages with the existing railway network, characterised by a high frequency of trains, in order to revitalise these areas [25], or from the case report above on multiple crops in Bangladesh with the aim of increasing soil improvement and economic yields sustainably [26].

On a global scale, a demographic and social crisis is occurring in rural areas due to depopulation, in other words, the people's abandonment of their populations when migrating to urban areas in search of better job opportunities, services and living conditions. This process is particularly marked in the more developed countries and in continents such as Europe. New lines of research in many social and scientific areas can help to study,

analyse and propose new strategies to reduce these processes and convert rural areas into more attractive spaces with greater opportunities so that the population does not migrate to urban areas.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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