



2 Use experience, generate knowledge

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Over half the population of the 25 EU member states live in rural areas which make up some 90 % of the total area of the European Union¹. The rural areas of the European Union are already confronted with huge challenges from the continuing structural change in agriculture and an intensifying demographic change. The lack, in particular, of non-agricultural jobs and occupational prospects is inducing young, well-educated young people to leave rural areas for economically attractive regions.

In view of the structural change in agriculture, the economic situation is also becoming ever more difficult for farmers. To secure their existence, many farmers feel forced to tap new income alternatives, such as the direct sales of agricultural

produce or providing services for tourists (farmyard café, Agrotourism etc.).

The current discussions about the energy crisis and global warming are increasingly accompanied by slogans in the media such as „Energy from the ploughed field“, „Agriculture produces energy“, „We harvest energy – farmers becoming energy managers“, „Power from the farmer“ or „Farmers as power producers“. They show that a trend-setting, yet far from new field of application is being opened up for agriculture.

In some regions in European Union countries, such as Denmark, Germany and Austria, numerous farmers are already operating as „Energy managers“ and produce both the resources for energy recovery and energy itself. In this way they

not only improve their own economic situation but also actively contribute to environmental protection and to an improvement of the regional value added. The energetic utilisation of biomass in Upper Austria, for instance, which covers 13 % of energy requirements, results in over 1.5 billion euros of purchasing power staying in the region – which otherwise would have to be spent on importing fossil fuels – and thus contributes there to the value added.

The positive effects of cultivating and energetically utilising renewable resources for regional development have resulted in it becoming a focus of interest and promotion for the European Commission. This is revealed, for instance, in the passing of the Biomass Action Plan² and the contents of the „Strategic Principles of the Union for Developing the Rural Area 2007-2013“ in which the importance of agriculture and forestry for

the development of renewables and their impact on rural economy diversification is stressed.

The rising number of EU-promoted projects focusing on the development of renewable energies in rural areas shows just how relevant this subject has become at the European level.

¹ Office for official publications of the European Communities (2004): Fact Sheet – New perspectives for developing the rural areas in the EU. Luxembourg.

² Commission of the European Communities (2005): Action plan for biomass. KOM (2005) 628 final.



Biomass action plan for the European Union

Energy has a decisive role to play in implementing Europe's targets in terms of growth, employment and sustainability. The high oil prices illustrate Europe's increasing dependence on energy imports.

The European Union must decisively react to this challenge. The central significance of energy policies in mastering the challenges which Europe is faced with due to the effects of globalisation, was reinforced by the heads of state and government at the unofficial Hampton Court summit in October 2005.

Viewed against this backdrop the Commission is undertaking a comprehensive review of its energy policy. [...] In association with vigorous economic growth, the main elements of this policy revolve around the need to lessen energy requirements, utilise more intensively renewable energy sources in view of Europe's development potential and undertake their sustainability, diversify energy sources and develop international cooperation. These elements can help Europe lessen its dependence on energy imports, improve sustainability and promote both growth and employment. [...]

In their 2004 announcement on the renewables share in the EU, the Commission committed itself to presenting a biomass action plan in which the need for a coordinated concept in the relevant policy is shown. At the Council meeting in the spring of 2004 the conclusion reached was that for „environmental and competitive reasons“ renewable energy was of prime importance, whereas the European Parliament pointed out „that the use of biomass has considerable advantages over conventional energy sources and also over certain other renewable fuels – especially relatively low costs, less susceptibility to short-term

weather changes, promotion of regional economic structures and development of alternative sources of income for farmers”.

This action plan shows how the utilisation of biomass energy from wood, waste and agricultural crops can be promoted by creating economic incentives and removing obstacles hindering the development of a market. In this way, Europe can lessen its dependence on fossil fuels, cut greenhouse gas emissions and revive economic operations in rural areas.

Source: Commission of the European Communities (2005): Biomass action plan, KOM (2005) 628 final.

Networks as medium for exchanging experience and transferring knowledge

The network term is an increasingly fashionable catch phrase that is used as the heading for material and immaterial forms of linkage.

In the material sense, networks are associated with physical or technical infrastructural connections such as roads, railway lines, pipelines and even glass fibre cables.

In the immaterial context it is more a matter of communication and organisational networks which are constituted and they are characterised by relationships among people.

Both networks involve the transfer and exchange of values whether physical, immaterial or informal.

„Social links connect the people, communities and regions of Europe. These links have come about through collective projects, working relationships and/or friendships. European cooperation programmes such as INTERREG contribute to developing social networks in the whole of Europe and to keep them in the long run.“ INTERREG IIIC East JTS (Publisher) (2006): *Networks of Interregional Co-operation*. Vienna.

Immaterial networks can be imagined as large fishing nets in which the people, institutions and the like form the knots and are linked to each other by the strings. The more strings proceeding from the knots, the more the knots are integrated into the network.

Networks are characterised by *reciprocity* (a characteristic whereby the individual actors trust that no single person will unilaterally benefit at the expense of the other(s) over the long term), *interdependence*, *loose association* (each actor remains independent) and the insignificance of power mainly featuring a complex power structure.

To establish a long-term, productive network, it is therefore important to work towards a stable, efficient and diversified network. Productive networks connect previously non-linked actors. They thus create the requirements needed for a transfer of information. By enabling and simplifying communication and an exchange of knowledge, they reduce uncertainty and risks. This can lead to problems being considered differently and to their ultimate solution.



There is still considerable potential for action despite the continuous rise in the number of bio-energy initiatives in Europe's rural areas. In particular, this potential has not been exhausted in the 10 new member states of the European Union and this despite the fact that much of the rural area, which displays pronounced structural weaknesses, is very closely linked with agriculture. For sustainable regional development, special importance is attached here to trend-setting concepts and strategies.

The INTERREG III C programme provides the European Union with a supporting instrument for 2000-2006 which *„strengthens the innovative forces and competitiveness of European regions by furthering the distribution and transfer of know-how through regional policies and thus supports the economic, social and environmental development of the regions“*³.

Under the REGIOSUSTAIN project and using a competence network, the idea is for this instrument to help in initiating an address-oriented transfer of knowledge and comparison of notes in the „Production and energetic utilisation of biomass to strengthen the regional economy“. The point of the numerous activities during the term of the project was to use the experience of others, generate and bundle knowledge and to form local or regional networks.

³ INTERREG III C East JTS (Publisher) (2006): INTERREG III C in Action – Germany. Vienna.