



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/204
Agriculture in peri-urban
areas

Brussels, 16 September 2004

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on

Agriculture in peri-urban areas

(own-initiative opinion)

On 17 July 2003, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

Agriculture in peri-urban areas.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 6 July 2004. The rapporteur was **Mr Caball i Subirana**.

At its 411th plenary session of 15 and 16 September 2004 (meeting of 16 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 132 votes in favour and three abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 A productive activity conditioned by the urban environment

1.1.1 Peri-urban areas have been discussed at various European forums, including the European Economic and Social Committee. This is a growing phenomenon that affects many municipalities in the EU as a consequence of urban, industrial and tertiary development and the spread of communication and transport infrastructures, which are gobbling up prime farming land and generating an increasing number of marginal and uncompetitive agricultural areas.

1.1.2 Agricultural activity in peri-urban areas is conditional on the urban environment in which it is practised, in the sense that the latter has negative repercussions for the former, limiting its economic viability. Such negative repercussions are the primary cause of environmental degradation in the area and have a detrimental effect on the social relationship between city and country. Depending on how it is addressed and resolved, this disjuncture between city and country can seriously jeopardise the survival of agricultural activity itself.

1.1.3 In addition to the traditional problems facing peri-urban agricultural areas, another more recent problem has now emerged, namely the protection of free areas near cities, but without agricultural activity. This new problem basically stems from the idea that such areas should be some sort of "theme park", with the result that everything is artificial, decontextualised and impersonal. The aesthetic criteria underlying this idea are based mistakenly on biodiversity protection regulations or an image of the countryside that seeks to marginalise or romanticise agricultural activity.

1.1.4 The EU's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) stresses the need for farms to diversify by exploring activities that will generate new incomes for farmers. It must be emphasised that without agriculture there is no agricultural landscape, that is, a landscape characterised by fields of crops, animals, meadows and, above all, farmers.

1.1.5 All of these factors (pressure from the urban environment, the idea of agriculture without farmers, the reform of the CAP) raise serious problems for the continuity and stability of peri-urban agriculture. (Such problems are much more pronounced here than in other similar agro climatic areas, which means there is a higher risk of agricultural activity disappearing.)

1.1.6 Besides the loss of suitable land, farming in some Member States suffers from a lack of clear legislation to regulate the land market and farm leases. With no market in farmland, it is harder for young people to enter farming and for farm sizes to be increased. Many public and private landowners are blocking the land market by refusing to rent land to professional farmers. This is a form of speculation which seriously jeopardises the future of many peri-urban agricultural areas and has to be tackled by the Member States through specific preventive legislation.

1.1.7 Agricultural areas, which are not unaffected by the changes that have taken place in rural communities in recent years, are characterised by certain values and roles, which determine the suitability or otherwise of activities carried out in them.

1.2 **Much more than merely an economic activity**

1.2.1 The EESC, which has a direct interest in ensuring that the economic, environmental and social development of Europe's rural areas is sustainable, wishes to point out that the environmental, social and economic role played by agricultural areas is more important in peri-urban areas than elsewhere. This is because in peri-urban areas agricultural land acts as a green "lung" for major cities; these areas are, moreover, a key element in regional planning as they prevent the unlimited growth of cities, fashion the landscape and give the urban environment a human face. However, the economic role of such areas – essential for the protection and future prospects of agricultural land – is diminishing owing to urban pressure and the lack of importance attached to farming in the economic fabric of peri-urban areas.

1.2.2 According to the first principle of the Salzburg Conference, there is no farming without a living countryside, and there is no living countryside without agriculture¹. The EESC wishes to stress that the real protagonists of peri-urban agricultural areas are, and indeed must be, essentially professional full-time farmers, while also recognising the important role played by part-time farmers in many peri-urban areas.

1.3 **Constraints and opportunities: agriculture in heterogeneous and constantly-changing areas**

1.3.1 The EESC is aware that it is not easy to reach a unanimous definition of peri-urban areas as they are extremely heterogeneous and constantly changing. Such areas are essentially the

¹ Literally, "A living countryside is essential for farming, as agricultural activity is essential for **a living countryside.**" - Conclusions of the second European conference on rural development in Salzburg, 12-14 November 2003 – MEMO/03/236.

interface between strictly rural areas and the urban world; they preserve the fundamental characteristics of the former while integrating certain aspects of the latter.

1.3.2 The common characteristic of peri-urban areas is their territorial, environmental and social fragility and the fact that they are found on the peripheries of cities. It is the professional farming practised in these areas that is known as "peri-urban agriculture". This professional farming co-exists with other activities linked to the growing of plants for recreational, therapeutic, educational and other reasons or for the purpose of creating and maintaining landscapes (landscape gardeners, gardeners, etc.). Such activities are especially important in some regions of the Member States.

1.3.3 Peri-urban areas are rural areas that face specific and characteristic constraints that set them apart from other rural areas, and whose survival is seriously threatened.

1.3.4 At the same time, peri-urban agriculture often presents unique characteristics that must be exploited to the full, e.g. the opportunities provided by its proximity to consumer markets, growing consumer awareness of issues such as food quality and safety, and social demand for new activities (leisure, training, environmental education, ecotourism, etc.). These new complementary activities could help spread the entrepreneurial risk and boost agricultural incomes.

1.3.5 Article 20 of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1257/1999 on support for rural development from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) stipulates that "Less-favoured areas may include other areas affected by specific handicaps, in which farming should be continued, where necessary and subject to certain conditions, in order to conserve or improve the environment, maintain the countryside and preserve the tourist potential of the area or in order to protect the coastline", reinforcing the EESC's oft-repeated view that peri-urban agricultural areas constitute "areas affected by specific handicaps".

1.3.6 Agenda 2000 and the recent CAP mid-term review have given further impetus to these guidelines.

1.3.7 The preamble to the Conclusions of the Salzburg Conference stresses "the need to help European farmers take up their multifunctional role as custodians of the countryside and market oriented producers in all of the EU"². This was echoed in the EESC's own initiative Opinion (rapporteur: **Mr Bros**) on The CAP second pillar: outlook for change in development policy for rural areas (follow-up to the Salzburg conference).³

² See footnote 1.

³ CESE 961/2004 – NAT/243

2. Objectives for the conservation and development of peri-urban agriculture

2.1 In the EESC's view, peri-urban agriculture undoubtedly faces specific constraints stemming directly from characteristics that can be easily identified and defined. Specific measures must therefore be introduced for the conservation, planning and management of peri-urban areas with agricultural activity. To achieve this, the EESC proposes that mechanisms and instruments to conserve and develop peri-urban agricultural areas should be promoted.

2.2 Objective 1: Social, political and administrative recognition that peri-urban areas with agricultural activity are rural areas facing specific constraints

2.2.1 Bolstering an active and powerful network of "intermediate cities"

2.2.1.1 The EESC notes that the "metropolitanisation" of Europe is a growing phenomenon resulting in an increase in large cities and a constant and irreversible reduction in fertile land, the main constraint on peri-urban areas, as pointed out in its own-initiative Opinion (rapporteur: **Mr Van Iersel**) on European Metropolitan Areas: socio-economic implications for Europe's future.⁴

2.2.1.2 This decline in agricultural activity has repercussions not only for the agricultural sector but also for the maintenance of natural resources, protection of the quality of life of city dwellers and balanced land management.

2.2.1.3 From the point of view of a balanced and sustainable Europe, the EESC stresses **the need to bolster an active and powerful network of "intermediate cities"**, defined not so much by their demographic size as by their role as a mediator between rural and urban areas within their area of influence.

2.2.1.4 Such a network of cities is only possible if surrounded by agricultural and natural areas, in short peri-urban areas, that can act as buffer zones between built-up areas and as corridors between natural areas, enhancing and consolidating the personality of towns and cities, protecting biological diversity and making viable agricultural production possible.

2.2.2 Acknowledging the role of agriculture in the relationship between city and country

2.2.2.1 In the EESC's view, the first essential instrument must be **social, political and administrative recognition that these rural/urban (i.e. peri-urban) areas with agricultural activity face specific difficulties and play a key role in the relationship between city and country.**

2.2.2.2 Recognition of peri-urban agricultural areas and the agricultural activity practised in them is conditional on (a) a study of the problems both facing and generated by these areas and (b) a **full analysis of the different values that they encapsulate** (water, landscape, biodiversity,

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architecture, agricultural system, etc.) **and of the economic, environmental and social role** that they are called upon to play as a result of these values.

2.2.3 **Raising awareness as a tool for recognition**

2.2.3.1 **Society needs to understand that land is a limited natural resource** and a common heritage that is difficult to recover once it has been destroyed. For this reason, centripetal (inward) urban growth must be promoted through programmes designed to restore and reclaim degraded urban areas and obsolete industrial areas, as this will prevent the loss of even more land to construction, and through specific legislation to stop speculation in the farmland on the periphery of many European cities.

2.2.3.2 To ensure that such areas are given social, political and administrative recognition across Europe, the EESC proposes that a boost should be given to **European action on peri-urban agricultural areas** and the agricultural activity practised in them. Such action must recognise the values and roles of such areas and prepare the way for each country to draw up specific legislation on their protection and development, based on common fundamental criteria.

2.3 **Objective 2: Preventing peri-urban agricultural areas from becoming part of the urban process through regional planning, urban planning and municipal initiatives**

2.3.1 The EESC believes that to protect peri-urban agricultural areas it is not enough for politicians and society as a whole simply to pay lip service to the idea of preserving such areas; it is also imperative that all the Member States **have and apply instruments for managing peri-urban agricultural land** in order to prevent the speculation that results in such land being abandoned.

2.3.2 In the EESC's view, such land management instruments must be created, underpinned by six pillars:

- a) legal **regional and urban planning instruments** at European, national and regional level, and **land use instruments** at national and regional level that take particular account of peri-urban agricultural areas and agricultural policies and make it difficult to reclassify farmland for other uses;
- b) legal and transparent instruments to regulate situations in which private or public landowners **temporarily cease to use land**; professional farmers should be offered the opportunity to rent such land for the purposes of growing crops and/or raising stock, thus helping to improve farm output;
- c) avoidance of excessive taxation of land used for agriculture in these areas, which should be taxed on the same basis as urban industrial and/or residential land;

- d) **new and better initiatives at municipal level** to reinforce the subsidiarity principle (responsibility of local authorities and politicians) in municipal planning, in all cases using supra-municipal criteria based on inter-municipal cooperation and territorial cohesion;
- e) **new criteria for municipal funding, such as the concept of "protected agricultural areas"** in which the protection of agricultural land takes precedence over urban occupation, making it possible to reduce the dependence of municipal funding from taxation on other criteria;
- f) the mandatory and binding introduction of "agricultural impact studies" by the relevant agriculture administration whenever action is planned in a peri-urban agricultural area which could involve the loss of farmland.

2.3.3 In short, the aim is to use regional planning, urban planning, land use instruments, municipal funding and agricultural impact studies to protect peri-urban agricultural areas from the city's constant demand for land (for urban growth, industrial and tertiary development, and communication and energy infrastructures) and to prevent any land degradation that could be used to discredit and justify the disappearance of peri-urban agricultural areas.

2.4 **Objective 3: Ensure the dynamic and sustainable development of peri-urban agriculture and the areas in which it is practised**

2.4.1 In the EESC's view, the dynamic and sustainable development of peri-urban agriculture and the areas in which it is practised can only be ensured by allowing **local authorities to play a key role, incorporating elements such as inter-municipal management** as well as supra-municipal planning.

2.4.2 For this reason, peri-urban areas need to get together and set up **a body whose fundamental objective is not only to protect but also to revitalise agricultural areas and agricultural activity** by means of supra-municipal plans for the conservation, use and management of land.

2.4.3 The involvement of farmers in this body will ensure that it is a **genuine partnership**, enabling them to promote their objectives among local groups (general public and politicians) and other interested partners (universities, environmentalists, etc.) and reach agreement on how agricultural areas should be managed.

2.4.4 Managers of peri-urban areas must have a conservative approach to the values represented by peri-urban agricultural areas, but a progressive approach to proposals on how to develop the role of such areas, adopting a positive, imaginative and creative attitude. They must also strictly regulate land use in such areas. In short, they must use sustainability criteria.

2.4.5 A subsidiarity-based approach to the management of peri-urban agricultural areas is essential to ensuring that the authorities and farmers make a commitment to protecting and developing

such areas, in other words a **contract for sustainable agricultural management between the public administration and farmers**.

2.4.6 **Management must be based on a "cooperation network"**⁵ between public and private stakeholders involved in management, and headed by a **"participatory and managerial body"**. This body must bring together common aims and interests, and instigate specific actions tailored to the particular area and its natural resources (e.g. promoting its products, use of information and communication technologies, encouraging environmental education, preserving the countryside, etc.). In short, a body which establishes the general conditions, monitors their application and encourages measures to assist and nurture peri-urban areas.

2.4.7 It is a matter of following, including in areas with peri-urban agriculture, the approach proposed at the Salzburg Conference, where it was stressed that *"Future policy must mainstream EU support for rural areas through bottom-up local partnerships"* [and] *"More responsibility must be given to programme partnerships to define and deliver comprehensive strategies based on clearly defined objectives and outcomes"* (sixth and seventh principles of the Conclusions of the Salzburg Conference)⁶.

2.4.8 In addition to "contracts for sustainable agricultural management", consideration must also be given to supra-municipal management projects which, in view of the specific characteristics of agricultural areas (rural-urban areas), must be presented as **"rur-urban" projects** between administrations and managing bodies that protect and reclaim agricultural areas and generate income by city and countryside working together. It is imperative that some of the income derived from the non-agricultural benefits generated by agricultural areas revert to the farming community.

2.4.9 Such "rur-urban projects" must be promoted by the participatory and managerial bodies for peri-urban agricultural areas and based on **multi-sectoral criteria**, including products that respond to consumer demands, environmental elements that limit the impact of productive activity on the environment and create and maintain the landscape, and social elements that respond to urban needs, such as using agricultural areas for outdoor and educational activities.

2.4.10 Before the managerial bodies for peri-urban agricultural areas draw up rur-urban projects and contracts for agricultural management, **the parties involved in managing such areas** (i.e. the authorities, in particular local authorities, and the farming sector) must first draw up and approve an **institutional agreement** on the need for an integrated style of management.

⁵ The cooperation network is in response to a situation characterised by a conflict of interests and/or competences, to the growing need for efficiency, the need for a solution to the problems by means of integrated cross-sectoral measures, the need to establish contacts, coordinate and share responsibilities. This means that all the territorial stakeholders have to be ready and willing to establish clear objectives, plan and act together.

⁶ See footnote 1.

2.4.11 This institutional commitment by local and supra-local authorities and farmers could follow a series of general principles laid down in a "**Charter on peri-urban agriculture**".

2.4.12 To further consolidate this charter and reinforce the mutual commitment, a "**sustainable management and development plan**" could also be drawn up and adopted, setting out principles, strategic guidelines and specific measures to protect the values and develop the roles of a specific peri-urban agricultural area.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Such rur-urban projects and the mutual commitment documents must be based on criteria laid down in a **city-countryside pact** operated by the managing bodies and with arrangements to promote participation by the general public and the farming community. These pacts require the following objectives to be met:

- a) **Objective 1: There must be a territorial conservation and development project** for areas with peri-urban agriculture. Such projects must be based on regional, urban and land use plans, and on specific legislation to regulate the market in farmland.
- b) **Objective 2: Peri-urban land must be kept in agricultural use** by means of instruments and mechanisms which guarantee this continued use, reducing as far as possible urban pressure and land use for non-agricultural activities, and to facilitate access to farmland.
- c) **Objective 3: An integrated form of management based on a managerial body** to promote and mobilise areas of peri-urban agriculture and raise awareness of their value. This must also ensure dynamic and sustainable development through a commitment to manage land on the basis of **rur-urban projects** and a contractual relationship between the public, authorities and farmers in the form of a **sustainable agricultural management contract**.

3.2 To meet these objectives, the following are essential:

- a) **Moves to encourage women and young people to participate actively** in territorial projects and agricultural management contracts, to safeguard the present and future status of these areas.
- b) **A public perception** that farming can guarantee food safety because it follows environmentally friendly and socially responsible farming methods.
- c) **Recognition of the importance of water in consolidating peri-urban agricultural areas.** Specific legislation is needed not to restrict the use of water for agriculture, but rather to introduce a new "culture of water" based on limiting the use of surface water and groundwater and re-using water produced by waste water treatment plants for agricultural purposes.

- d) **Bolstering these peri-urban agricultural areas** through society's recognition that they face specific difficulties.
- e) Development of instruments and **actions intended to raise agricultural incomes, increase the efficiency of infrastructures and improve the provision of services to farming.**
- f) Promotion of **production and marketing systems that meet market demands**, with special attention to the promotion of food diversity by encouraging sustainable farming which respects the environment, cultural identity and animal welfare.
- g) **Rational use of resources** (in particular land, water and landscape) and their **protection.**

3.3 In view of the precarious situation facing peri-urban agricultural areas and European peri-urban agriculture as a whole, the EESC believes it is essential to establish a **European observatory for peri-urban agriculture** that not only has a European perspective on peri-urban agricultural areas and the agricultural activity practised in them, but also acts as a reference centre for monitoring, analysing and raising awareness of the situation of peri-urban agriculture in Europe and a place where local and regional authorities and different European bodies can come together to discuss this issue, proposing initiatives for the conservation and development of these peri-urban areas and their agriculture.

Brussels, 16 September 2004

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