

AER seminar

“The EU Common Agricultural Policy & non-EU member regions” *Impacts, interactions, perspectives*

Fredrikstad, Østfold (NO), 24th March 2011

Context

On 24 March 2011, the Assembly of European Regions (AER) organised a seminar on the impacts of the EU Common Agricultural Policy on regions from non-EU countries. This event gathered regional experts from EEA-EFTA countries and candidate or potential candidate countries to EU accession, as well as representatives from the European Commission and the European Free trade Association.

In order to set the tone it is worth underlying that AER is the largest independent network of regions in wider Europe bringing together more than 270 regions from 34 countries, of which 70% are from the EU and 30% from other European countries. In the framework of its work on the current CAP reform, the AER working group¹ on agriculture and rural development met several times to define common objectives and set up a joint strategy. This work led to the adoption of a common position on agriculture and rural development (http://www.aer.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/MainIssues/AgricultureRuralDevelopment/AER-position-final-CAP.pdf) on 11/11/2010, on the occasion of the AER General Assembly in Istanbul. Discussions during working group meetings made clear that agricultural and rural development policies in non-EU regions were considerably influenced by changes in the EU Common Agricultural Policy. These regions are therefore substantially concerned by the ongoing CAP reform.

The objective of the seminar was therefore two-sided: on one hand, increase participants' mutual knowledge and raise awareness on the issues at stake for all, and on the other hand issue key statements to voice the interests and concerns of non-EU member regions regarding the CAP reform.

¹ *AER Working groups are temporary bodies, formed on an ad-hoc basis around issues arising in the context of the activities of the committees.*

The AER seminar was structured around two roundtables, focusing on two main groups of regions: regions from countries that do generally (with the exception of Iceland) not intend to join the European Union, and regions from candidate or potential candidate countries to EU accession.

The first roundtable sought to answer the following questions: *What is the impact of CAP on agricultural and rural development policies in pre-accession countries? How can they influence EU policymaking and how can they best orient their agricultural and rural development policies with views to future enlargements of the EU?*

Speakers particularly examined the aims, achievements and challenges of the Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and more specifically its rural development component (5th component).

The second roundtable focused on regions from EEA-EFTA countries and aimed at answering questions like: *“What is the impact of CAP on agricultural and rural development policies in EFTA countries? How do these regions voice their interests and how can they influence EU policymaking?”*

Speakers presented the interdependency that exists between the EU and EEA-EFTA countries because of trade agreements, and the challenges regions are faced with in the field of agriculture and rural areas.

Subsequently to the roundtables a discussion involving all participants led to further specification of different issues and the formulation of a series of statements. These statements were presented to all AER Committee 1 members the same day, during the plenary meeting. These conclusions constituted the basis for the AER answer to the consultation launched by DG Enlargement, together with DG Regional Development, Employment and Agriculture on the successor of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) post 2013, that run until 04/04/2011. Speakers' presentations are available on the AER website at:

<http://www.aer.eu/events/regionaldevelopment/2011/cap-thirdcountries.html> (AER members only).

Conclusions

Agriculture is vital to many regions for their regional development and has a role that goes far beyond direct economic impact. It is a tool for dynamising rural areas and avoiding rural exodus. Agriculture has also a social role and can be used as a tool for social inclusion. The Common Agricultural Policy was initially designed to ensure food security and consequently peace in Europe. This objective of peace should remain at the core of European policy making.

- The increasing interdependency between EEA-EFTA countries and the EU raises **questions of sovereignty and democracy** as agreements between the EU and third countries for instance directly impact EEA-EFTA countries

- Regions can **join efforts** in order to make their voice heard at **national and international** level as is the case of the Conference of Directors of Agriculture of the Swiss Cantons
- Concerning rural development in pre-accession countries, European integration obviously requires a **territorial response**. To increase the efficiency of pre-accession assistance, its definition should be based on the assessment of needs on the field. It is therefore crucial to consult the regional level during the definition process of EU integration policies and instruments.
- **The structure of pre-accession assistance** should reflect the reality of pre-accession countries to really answer the needs on the ground. Given the economic weight of agriculture in pre-accession countries (around 20% of GDP in Albania, in average more than 10% in Western Balkan countries taken as a whole and less than 3% in the EU) and the proportion of people employed in agriculture (almost the double in western Balkan countries than in the EU, *Source: "Agriculture policy reforms in BiH and Western Balkans in relation to the EU", Gordana Rokvić et al, University Banjaluka -study in progress*), rural development affects a large number of people. It should therefore be a priority of pre-accession assistance and more emphasis should be put on this component. Its current n°5 position in the IPA structure reflects indeed a bottom-down approach.
- EU assistance to pre-candidate and candidate countries in the area of agriculture and rural development needs to be **more efficient in bridging the gaps between the regions in and outside of the EU**, to this end it needs to be based on a bottom-up approach
- To **improve efficiency, participation and ownership** it is necessary to involve the regional level at an early stage, both in the definition and the implementation of pre-accession assistance.
- The combination of EU and national rules can hamper the implementation of projects. **A check system** is therefore needed, to ensure that the accumulation of rules does not prevent the final beneficiaries to benefit from it
- More **decentralised information** is crucial to improve the efficiency of policies and instruments: there is an evident need for better information on EU funds and programs at regional level.
- **Cooperation with the regional level** should be enshrined in EU regulation, especially with regards to technical assistance. It is essential that technical assistance be available at regional level.
- There is a need for **exchange of best practices**, both in terms of ideas and in terms of technical knowledge and know-how.
- Knowledge of auditing systems (rules and procedures) needs to be improved at regional level, teaching is therefore necessary.

A Pre-accession Assistance Instrument based on an integrated territorial approach is a warrant for the the success of the European integration process and an asset to prevent social unrest.

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