

Improving competitiveness of rural economies & quality of life in rural areas

## Background & objectives

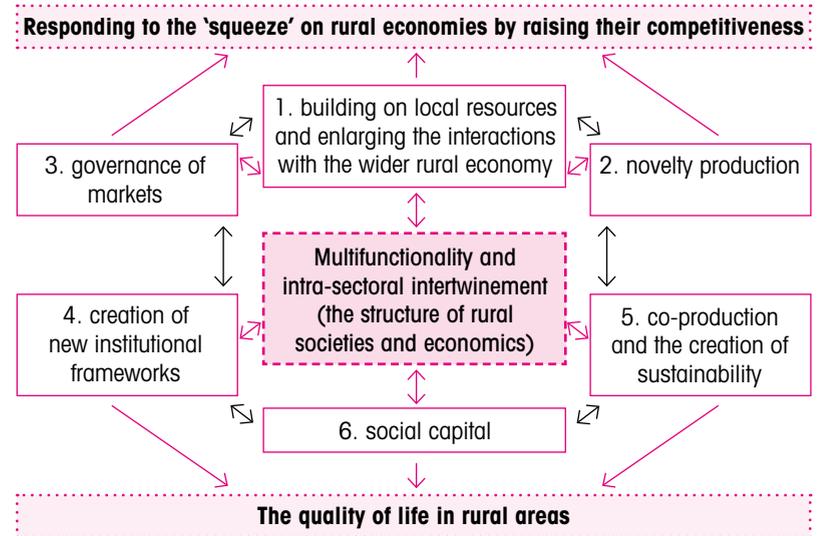
The EU, many Member States as well as Regional Authorities are increasingly transforming their rural development policies from an initial focus on farm structures to a broader framework that includes food chain aspects, forestry, environmental issues, diversification of the rural economy and the quality of life in rural areas. Simultaneously, patterns of governance have started to change: integrated actions, new public-private partnerships and area-based and bottom-up approaches constitute important ingredients of new local development strategies (although not everywhere with the same consistency). Together with a myriad of grass root initiatives new policies and governance structures are reshaping the social and economic fabric of many rural economies. At the same time it is becoming clear that rural development processes are moving beyond the institutionalized blocks of knowledge that were once designed to represent and understand the rural economy as it was shaped during the epoch of the big modernization project of European agriculture. Sectoral approaches are no longer adequate to understand the manifold and multilevel interactions between farming activities and the wider rural context.

ETUDE aims to develop an integrated conceptual framework that goes beyond mono-disciplinary and sectoral approaches and integrates several currently emerging theoretical strands. This with the objective to:

- acquire a better understanding of the dynamics, scope and regional economic impact of rural development processes, whilst reflecting the large heterogeneity of rural areas and activities,
- assess the differential impact of newly emerging rural constellations in terms of land management, the competitiveness of rural economies and the quality of life in rural areas and
- explore the interfaces between different rural development trajectories and governance structures and rural policies. For each objective, recommendations will be developed that are applicable in the domains of theory, practice and policy.

## Conceptual model

The heart of ETUDE consists of a re-conceptualization of regional/ rural constellations as visualized in following figure:



Starting from this (preliminary) conceptual model, ETUDE postulates three central hypotheses:

- The strength and density of WEB interrelations and positive mutual externalities within rural societies will be reflected in the strength of their economies.
- This WEB is currently being reshaped amongst others through processes of rural development, within which the rise of multifunctional farming and the re-linking of farming to the territory both play a major role.
- A proper understanding of the WEB requires the introduction of the indicated six 'conceptual dimensions' into the analysis. Without taking into account these dimensions it is impossible to come at grips with patterns of underlying positive mutual externalities.



## Research steps

### Phase 1

After a literature review on the different domains, ETUDE will load its preliminary conceptual framework with empirical experiences and lessons from 65 rural development cases across Europe. As a whole the Quick Scan analysis of this set of cases enables to improve insights around following questions:

- Which empirical developments regarding the six domains can be distinguished?

- To what extent and in which ways do developments in one specific domain have an impact on other domains?
- To what extent are interrelations between domains influenced by policy arrangements?
- To what extent do specific domains as well as interactions between domains strengthen the `web` of interrelations and positive mutual externalities within rural societies?
- How do different empirical domain interactions influence the competitiveness of rural economies and the quality of rural life?

### Phase 2

Second phase of ETUDE tests the conceptual framework in depth by selecting 12 regions that encompass different types of rural areas. It will be examined how different domains are interlinked, how different domains affect the structure of rural societies and economies and which activities are undertaken or lacking to improve the competitiveness of rural economies and the quality of life of rural areas. This reflection will be carried out in interaction with stakeholders, amongst others through the organisation of regional workshops. Subsequently, comparative analysis will result in a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of different rural development approaches in different regional settings.

### Phase 3

In the third phase ETUDE will work on policy recommendations for different administrative levels. Following questions will be leading in this process:

- Which rural policies may support the different domains of the conceptual model?
- What are the most adequate institutional frameworks to activate and to sustain rural development processes?
- What may be the role of increased levels of local self regulation and under which conditions will that function well?

During a second series of 12 regional workshops strategies to improve rural development potentials will be discussed.

## Consultation & Dissemination

ETUDE includes a series of activities to ensure use of results and recommendations by relevant target groups (policymakers, stakeholders and scientists):

- During two European Expert Forums research outcomes will be presented and discussed. In a first seminar, the conceptual framework will be at the centre, the second will focus on recommendations and their practical applicability.
- All six countries organize national workshops with regional and national policymakers and stakeholder to get feed-back on the practical applicability of the policy recommendations.
- Project results will be disseminated to relevant scientific audiences through presentations at scientific conferences, submission of articles to relevant scientific journals and contributions to scientific volumes.
- All project results will be made available through the project website [www.ETUDERD.eu](http://www.ETUDERD.eu)

## Project partners

- Wageningen University, Rural Sociology Group, Netherlands (project-coordination) (Rudolf.vanBroekhuizen@wur.nl)
- Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS), Germany (Knickel@em.uni-frankfurt.de)
- University of Perugia, Department of Economics and Food, Italy (Flavent@tin.it)
- Cardiff University, School of City and Regional Planning, United Kingdom, (Marsdentk@cf.ac.uk)
- MTT Economic Research, Finland (Hilkka.vihinen@mtt.fi)
- Baltic Studies Centre, Latvia (Talis.tisenkopfs@lu.lv)



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