

# Literature review WP 3

## Belgium

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## Discussion report

### 1. PROBLEM

The lack of scientific research about specific and origin's products in Belgium raises a first general question about rural and agricultural research. Even economical research on rural development disappeared at the end of the sixties. Of course there are a lot of economical research on agriculture and agricultural development but none on the specific theme of regional products.

This situation resulted from a two fold evolution in the belgian culture and politics :

- a. the first one could be called denial of rural development problem by a strongly urbanized country : the question of rural development dissolved in the problématique of regional development and of spatial planning focused on infrastructure, industry and housing ;
- b. the second one is the strong agricultural corporatism : farmer's union privileged production systems that were oriented towards industry, international markets, and towards standardized production : especially in the Flanders, the farmer's union was closely linked with industry through a network of cooperatives, credit institutions, industrial companies and banks. This close connection with industry and openness on the international (for example pork production is 210% on national production) pushed to standardization and strongly reduces the autonomy of producers.

This general overview must be balanced and explained. Balanced because rural claims never disappeared and some tentatives of local development around specific products emerged at different times.

A new ruralist concept developed from the seventies an a new rural institution (Fondation rurale de Wallonie) too, but essentially focused on patrimonial themes (architecture, landscape, local planning) without any connectioun with farmer's unions or agricultural institutions. This institution remains private and plyas as intermediate expert between local authorities and regional administrartion. The programmes she carries out, the projects she designs (even in Leader) rae only marginally about agriculture or food production.

Secondly, when looking back the thirty last years, it is possible to describe a few initiatives that were trying to develop some specific products . (see paper of P Stassart). Of all these only two can be considered as partial successes.

Then it looks very strange that Belgium sometimes is considered in the literature as a significant country in the origin-specific products sector.

### 2. REGIONAL POLITICS

Politics and political reforms are important to understand the difficulty to promote local products. For decades the whole belgian political life is a process of regional conflicts and of progressive federalisation of State. For some reasons agriculture (and especially the economical institutions and regulations) remained federal up till 2000.

The different stages of this evolution cand be summarized as follows :

1. Before 1980 agriculture is strictly a federal competence, with a strong link between administration and the flemish farmer's union (each ministry of agriculture came from the Catholic party, closely linked with the farmer's union) and the agricultural policy always aimed at developing efficient and intensive production ; neither research, nor farmer's unions, nor administration show any interest in developing new kind of production. This is true for local products and for organic farming as well.
2. In 1980, some marginal parts of the agricultural department were devoluted to regions, namely agricultural extension, specific product policy, agro-environmental policy. That gave the Regional Authorities more a power to help innovation than a real influence on decisions. It must be known that walloon agriculture is more extensive. In the one part with good soil and climate conditions, crops are produced in big farms. In the other part, with less good soil and colder winters, livestock dominate and smaller structures. That is in this last part that a few tentatives emerged in local or origins's products.

3. Regional dimension and political dimension matters because in this context the policy option was not to develop specific products but to develop a regional «quality» system (Walloon labelling) in order to stimulate consumption of regional products. This option remains the policy option today (see P Stassart Paper).
4. So we could speak of over politisation of the labelling. It looks like if this policy was mainly to encourage consumers and citizens to love their region, or to encourage farmers but without any real support to the development of new products, of new chains, with high quality requirements. This political option did not help local tentatives, but it often hampered them, by leaving no space to promote specific products, and especially to find a real market niche for them.
5. It also means that local initiatives did not succeed in building policy networks around initiatives. You can not, at any moment of this history, identify a real network that could have provided them with technical, financial and political support. This is more and more difficult now since the regional policy is strictly based on a «chain organisation» which the farmers have to contribute financially.

This political dimension of the «labelling» process does not look to have been examined. It concerns the mediations between soil, productive economic networks and political support. In Belgium neither administration; nor politicians are supporting origin's products and local initiatives in this direction. In the Walloon region, political support privileged rhetorical idea of quality on the basis of «region» identity.

I wonder if this political dimension – at discursive and organisational levels – plays similar or comparable role in other European regions. But it seems clear in both Belgian regions that the «regional» dimension still overcomes all the labelling problematique. Rural development

### 3. RURAL DEVELOPMENT

All the process can also be interpreted from looking at the «rural development concept» in Belgium and at the way it has been implemented and translated into organisational forms and reference models. This question goes further in the political dimension. Rural development has a very specific history in Belgium. In the sixties already there is a gap between agricultural policy and agricultural institutions on the one hand, and all the emerging institutions that were progressively in charge of development and spatial planning in rural areas. This can be attributed to the high density of population, to the already minor weight of farmers in rural population, to the strong communication between cities and countryside, and to other geo-historical factors. But all these factors lead to development ideas and organisational forms that not make a specific place to rural areas.

Spatial planning was built in a very centralized model, probably against local resistances to land regulation. This centralized organisation, if forced to negotiate with rural local authorities, nevertheless maintained a unifying concept of the regional territory. It was a model of integration of villages in urban network and hierarchies. No specific rural problem has been really treated as such.

In the field of economic development, the scheme is quite different. Local authorities were not in favour of all industrial development. So the solution has been to create «intercommunal companies» to manage development programmes and projects. These companies, largely based on public capital, are managed like private companies. Progressively they were given more and more fields of activity and monopolies on certain ones (like waste disposal and treatment). They do not look like French «syndicats intercommunaux» because Belgian «intercommunal companies» are busy with large territories and populations and local politicians are not able to weight on decisions... Development policy was mainly focused on infrastructure and especially in the rural areas the main objective was to create industrial areas, and to attract foreign investors. That is a model mainly oriented to exogeneous forces and supports, whatever public or private. This model did not consider any specific characteristic of rural world that was mainly considered as remote, backwards...

However rural ideas came back in the eighties. Rural development was promoted by a specific institution (Rural Foundation of Wallonie) that grew up as an alternative to these urbanizing and industrializing models of development. But the critics was not hard and this institution developed in parallel and not in opposition. It actually invested new thematic like local or vernacular architecture, new local planning models, environmental problems especially as residential well-being. She tried to manage local programmes in a more participative way and organized a quite strong network of small local development agencies that help local authorities in making local projects. This model could be described as an environment – oriented model of development that puts the emphasis on rural amenities.

So the Walloon rural areas can be considered as object of three types of policies, policy networks that are largely separated: agricultural problems are still treated in a corporatist way, economic development could be considered as a territorial corporatism associating technical experts and politicians and the «rural development» as an «amenities movement». This

last one benefitted of the significant demographic increase of rural populations in Belgium. Some conflicts arose from time to time between these different orientations, some arbitrations were to be made, but no real integration of these segmented policies has ever been proposed or implemented.

So there is no specific rural institution that would be able to define territorial projects combining agricultural elements and other ones. Even the agro-environmental programme was hardly connected with conservation programmes or planning. There is no real « territorial institution » that could analyse or define projects : provinces and intercommunal corporations never make specific programmes . When european programmes (Interreg, Leader) are to be implemented they are generally splitted into sub programmes that each institution develops in his own way.

And finally there is no real political or social platform of rural areas that could be the voice of rural populations that are acteually a mix of rural and urban people.

All these institutional factor are not good conditions to imagine and build new agro-food chains that would be able to organize farmers, small enterprises and to communicate with consumers.

The more recent evolution could be described as :

- tentatives toward quality and certification
- tentatives to diversify conventional production
- a certain move towards organic farming

All these are coming from specific group of farmers and research labos. But regional dimension and links with soil are weak too.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Weak development of origin's products in Belgium can be explained by institutional and structural evolutions that might not bend within a few years and only by a few local initiatives. Proposals continually emerged and a few small organized actors are still active. It is doubtful they will be able to grow up and to reach a relevant role in economical rural areas, except if incentives are provided from outside the region.

If the economic impact is really weak we should not neglect the social and symbolic impact of an always regenerating movement on the margin of the agricultural world.

