

*Decision-making process on the evolution of the rural  
development program in Wallonia*

**Analysis and critique from a political ecological perspective**

Urban Political Ecology (G0S40a)  
Prof. A. Kenis

Elisabeth Lerchs

Erasmus Mundus MSc in Sustainable Territorial Development (STeDe)

[elisabethastridm.lerchs@student.kuleuven.be](mailto:elisabethastridm.lerchs@student.kuleuven.be)

## Table of content

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Background.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>The Common Agricultural Policy.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development .....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>The rural development program in Wallonia .....</i>	<i>3</i>
<b>Critique of the decision-making process on the evolution of the rural development program in Wallonia.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Different narratives .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>The decision-making process.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>An alternative approach to implement: degrowth.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>9</b>

## Introduction

We live in a globalized and capitalist world evolving within the framework of continuous growth. Nevertheless, this way of operating has been increasingly challenged and is reflected in a shift and multiplicity of paradigms in environmental policy-making (see Bonneuil, 2016; Kenis & Lievens, 2015 and Robbins, 2012). In the framework of this work, I was interested in the one of the rural development program in Wallonia. This interest comes from an action that was taken during a summit meeting between the European Agricultural Machinery Association (CEMA) and representatives of the European Union for the introduction of Smart-Farm and other agricultural technologies. This action underlined the importance of the technological sovereignty of farmers and denounced the lobbying of the committee (BoerenFaçade Paysanne perturbe l'agrotechnologie, 2021). In order to develop my reflection on the subject, I interviewed a strong advocate of technological sovereignty. Following our discussion and various research I started to wonder about the decision making process on the allocation of budgets for such technologies. This led me to look at the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which is a European policy. In order to have a vision at different scales and to make a more precise and complete analysis of the decision-making process, I reduced the sphere of research to Wallonia and its rural development program. The latter being itself one of the pillars of the CAP operating here at a regional level.

In my opinion, this summit meeting with the CEMA and representatives of the European Union is only a symptom of a decision-making process that wrongly claims to be representative of the different stakeholders' interests. The purpose of the following analysis will be to explain this point of view. To do this, the CAP and rural development in Wallonia will be put into context. Then, an analysis will be made of the different narratives privileged in the decision making process in the evolution of the program. Then, the framework of the decision-making process will be criticized. Finally, hypotheses will be put forward on the reason for the absence of one of the great absentees of the debates during the decision making process, which in my opinion is none other than degrowth.

## Background

### *The Common Agricultural Policy*

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a European policy aimed at maintaining and developing agriculture in Europe. It is composed of 3 main pillars. The first is income support, the second is rural development and the third is market measures (European Commission, n.d.-d). In this work, I will focus on the second pillar which is rural development. In general, each country or region has its own rural development program that is partially financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

The rules for spending criteria and the amount of this fund are reviewed within the framework of the CAP (European Commission, n.d.-c). This policy goes through the same process as other European laws and policies. The European Commission submits a draft law that must then be approved by the European Parliament (European Commission, n.d.-a). The period of the CAP is reviewed every 6 years, 2 years before its implementation. The last CAP covered the period from 2014 to 2020. The next one began to be negotiated in 2018. However, instead of taking effect in 2021 for a period of 6 years, it has been postponed to 2023 due to negotiations between the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (European Commission, n.d.-b).

### *The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development*

The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development is implemented and often co-financed at the national or regional level by a rural development program specific to the various European entities. In Belgium, the implementation of this fund is done in a regional way. In order to have access to the fund, Wallonia must establish and submit its rural development program and have it validated by the European Commission. This validation is done on the basis of criteria established at the time of the establishment of the latest CAP (European Commission, n.d.-c).

The Commission has established 3 main priorities in the guidelines for the rural development program. The first is to promote the competitiveness of agriculture. The second is to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources and the fight against climate change. And the last is to achieve a balanced territorial development of economies and rural communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment. These objectives are translated into priorities specific to each CAP when it is set up (European Parliament, 2021). For the 2014-2020 CAP, there were 6 distinct objectives in line with the 3 priorities previously mentioned. For a country or region's rural development program to be accepted, it must aim to develop at least 4 of these different objectives (European Commission, n.d.-c).

### *The rural development program in Wallonia*

In Wallonia, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) for the 2014-2020 period constituted just under half (47%) of the rural development program budget, with the remaining majority coming from the Walloon budget (European Commission, 2020). To make the rural development program evolve in light of the new CAP, the Walloon government is going through several steps. To evaluate the previous year's rural development policy and establish the new strategic plan, it selected an external consultant through a public procurement procedure. To do this, the first task was to carry out a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) of the previous rural development program. This analysis was then used to establish the strategy for the new rural development program (Service Public de Wallonie, 2020, p.27).

In order to identify the needs and priorities of the new program, the independent consultant consulted with representative of the rural development stakeholders. He also called on representatives of universities, research centers and other socio-economic partners (Service Public de Wallonie, 2020, p.603). First, the managing authority, i.e. the Walloon Government represented by the Minister of Agriculture, validated the choice of measures to be included in its rural development program. Then, these measures were the subject of a first draft. This was followed by consultations with the stakeholders, which led to the formalization of a first version of the program that was approved, in first reading, by the Walloon Government. On the basis of this version, which contained all the necessary elements, the consultancy body was able to make proposals in terms of strategy and a new version of the program was finalized for a second reading by the Walloon Government. This is the same version that was validated by the European Commission (Service Public de Wallonie, 2020, p.27).

## **Critique of the decision-making process on the evolution of the rural development program in Wallonia**

The way decisions are taken for the new rural development program may seem rather democratic. Indeed, for its realization, representatives of all the different actors are consulted. However, from a political ecology perspective, as described by Juanita Sundberg and Jessica Dempsey in the chapter on Political Ecology in the book *Introducing Human Geographies*, this way of making decisions does not challenge the dominant positions as it should (Sundberg & Dempsey, 2008). I think this is partly due to the fact that the consultation of the different stakeholders, as well as the way decisions are made, is far from sufficient or adequate. Furthermore, I think that the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy and its European Fund for Rural Development is too rigid to make decisions in terms of rural development spending that reflect the real wants and needs of the main stakeholders.

### *Different narratives*

This impression could be due to the fact that this decision-making process for the rural development program does not allow all narratives to be fully expressed. Indeed, as Christophe Bonneuil explains in his chapter on the different narratives of the Anthropocene in the book *Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, there are now different narratives on how to deal with the climate crisis. The most common of which is the naturalist narrative. This narrative is characterized by the fact that humans are all equally responsible for the climate crisis and does not take into account the disparities between different humans in their use of resources and their vulnerability to the climate crisis. This proposal for a single solution governed by reason and science maintains a certain social order and feeds into the inequalities already present (Bonneuil, 2016).

I think that the way decisions are made for the rural development program is quite close to this narrative. On the one hand, because it falls within the guidelines of the Common Agricultural Policy, which is a European program with the same guidelines for each country and therefore, by nature, does not take into account the disparities between different countries, regions or even less people. On the other hand, because the different points of view of the parties involved are dealt with by a single entity that itself gives guidelines for rural development through its own prism, which can be reductive.

Indeed, this prism could be reductive given that these narratives are carried primarily by white northern males as Sherilyn MacGregor and Nicole Seymour explain in their book *Men and Nature: Hegemonic Masculinities and Environmental Change*. They have established a causal link in the sphere of geoengineering (that I think this can be applied to all decision making with scientific implications) by mentioning that *"the field's current lack of diversity indicates that some of the most critical questions have probably not even been posed."* In order to address the problem, they insist that *"discussion and decision making regarding climate intervention need to include both interdisciplinary and gender-critical perspectives involving a broad and inclusive array of international and intergenerational participants."* (MacGregor & Seymour, 2017).

This is not to say that I think that the recommendations in terms of modification of the rural development plan made by the external consultant should not be taken into account. Rather, I think that, as Christophe Bonneuil explains when he says, *"The point here is not to choose the single best grand narrative for our geohistorical shift. Each illuminates different aspects in valuable ways and each has its limitations. We need a plurality of narratives from many voices and many places, rather than a single grand narrative from nowhere, from space or from the species."* (Bonneuil, 2016) that the external consultant's opinion and the common agricultural policy framework is interesting to consider but should not be the basis for decision making.

The naturalist narrative is consistent with the view of another author, Paul Robbins, who has identified five major narratives in political ecology and, in contrast, has also identified two in apolitical ecology. The first is that of ecoscarcity, and the second is that of modernization, aiming at new technologies and appropriate resource management to enable a healthy future for the planet (Robbins, 2012). I think that this last approach is the most similar to the framework of the one in which decisions are taken in rural development program in Wallonia. As for the common agricultural policy (CAP), it is based on the fact that it is possible to create a new agricultural system in which one of the main objectives is to increase the competitiveness of agriculture in Wallonia and thus growth in general, while preserving nature.

The problem with these different narratives is not so much their content or what they advocate. It is rather the fact that they intrinsically present themselves as apolitical because they are based on scientific facts. Preventing the presentation and debate of other narratives

that are equally legitimate in the search for solutions to different problems and, in this case, to rural development in Wallonia.

### *The decision-making process*

Another way of analyzing the program is not the narrative in which the strategy was developed, but the decision-making process itself and the actors involved. This is done by Amanda Machin and Graham Smith in their publication *Ends, Means, Beginnings: Environmental Technocracy, Ecological Deliberation or Embodied Disagreement?* in which they outline the most common modes of environmental policy making. The first being environmental technocracy, in which decision-making is based primarily on expert opinion and the second being ecological deliberation, in which experts interact with other stakeholders to open the debate to all (Machin & Smith, 2014). I think the way the rural development program is set up brings together a bit of both approaches. Indeed, the expert has a lot of power in the decision making regarding the evaluation and the strategy of the rural development program. Nevertheless, there is an attempt to integrate the different stakeholders by discussing potential strategies and consulting them at different stages of the process. According to the authors, neither of these approaches is truly political. In the first case, it is clear that by putting power in the hands of a few, the resulting decisions may represent the interests of a small fraction of the population. In the second case, the problem lies in the inequalities of power in the debate between the experts and the other parties involved. The authors also point out the problem of the lack of questioning of the framework in which these debates take place.

In their view, a solution that would make the debate truly political would be to recognize the differences of opinion and not to consider that there is only one green way led by the experts to the political discourse (ibid.). This green pathway, given the different narratives mentioned above, could be summarized in the concept of the green economy, which is becoming increasingly popular in environmental decision making. Nevertheless, it comes with limitations that are also reflected in the rural development program that are only too little or not at all taken into account during its evolution.

As Anneleen Kenis and Matthias Lievens mention in their book on the limits of the green economy, this approach explicitly rejects the idea that *"the planet's limits should be respected by putting a limit on economic growth."* And that *"Grasping the particular dynamics of capitalism is the key to understanding our current predicament. Ecological destruction is rooted in capital's intrinsic drive for growth and in the specific way it represents the world, based on forms of calculation that remain blind to qualitative, political, and holistic dimensions."* (Kenis & Lievens, 2015). To achieve this, I think a first step would be to include other narratives in the debate. The rural development program in Wallonia being only partially financed by the European Union could lend itself to this, at least for the half of the regional budget that might not follow European directives.

### *An alternative approach to implement: degrowth*

I think there are many discourses and narratives that could be implemented in the debate on food systems and more specifically the rural development program in Wallonia. To help me in the research and writing of this work, I conducted an interview with Oliver Vermeulen, who among other things is co-founder of the Fabriek Paysanne in Brussels, a non-profit association aiming to enable technological sovereignty for farmers. During our discussion, one point that made an impression on me was the lack of space for debate around degrowth in the political sphere in general (O., Vermeulen, personal interview, May 6, 2021). This also applies to the rural development plan in Wallonia.

As mentioned above, this is due to the fact that the main framework for environmental policies in order to be able to continue in a logic of growth is that of the green economy, leaving no room for a policy of degrowth. The fact that more than half of the budget of the rural development program comes from Belgium could be an opportunity to have different approaches outside the framework of the European Union. Unfortunately, at the regional, national or even global level, Belgium and Wallonia are evolving in a logic of growth in order, among other things, to be able to repay the public debt, (Kalis et al., 2012) which would explain the paradigm shift of environmental decisions not towards degrowth but rather towards green growth.

I sometimes have the impression that it is almost impossible to get out of this system of continuous growth, even on a relatively small scale, for example with the reform of the rural development program in Wallonia. Indeed, although at first sight the green economy seemed to be a solution to the various climate and biodiversity crises, I realized that this was not the case and that it would be necessary to add other narratives to the decision-making process. To this end, as Erik Swyngedouw mentions in his publication *Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition*, "*Politicizing environments democratically, then, becomes an issue of enhancing the democratic political content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more egalitarian mode of producing natures can be achieved. This requires reclaiming proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces.*" (Swyngedouw, 2011)



## Conclusion

I believe that it is not enough to involve the different stakeholders in the decision-making process on the evolution of the rural development program in Wallonia. Indeed, the decision-making framework as well as the people involved in the process carry the same narrative representing the interests of a minority of the population, namely white northern males. This narrative can be seen as an aggregation of different approaches such as the green economy, the naturalist narrative or the environmental technocracy. In this paper, I aim to highlight the inability of these narratives to drive the evolution of the program while including others. To support my point, I have focused on the failure to consider the possibility of a degrowth approach for the program. Note that I could also have done the same with an eco-feminist, decolonial or many other approaches that are lacking in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the purpose here was mainly to point out the lack of possibilities for inclusion of other perspectives, not to make an exhaustive analysis.

Given that the rural development program is implemented at a regional level and that more than half of it is funded by the region, managing its evolution could be seen as an opportunity to explore alternative decision-making processes that truly involve the views of all the different stakeholders. It now remains to find a way in view of the framework in which the Walloon agricultural system is evolving, anchored as for the majority of the economic agents of this world in a logic of profit growth and competitiveness.

## References

- BoerenFaçade Paysanne perturbe l'agrotechnologie. (2021, April 13). Luttès Paysannes. [http://www.luttespaysannes.be/spip.php?article244&fbclid=IwAR2hIOP8zIBS1w72iZiDzT3PFVzUdawywWIIPLdFN-3RNDEdoie\\_zA1vgos](http://www.luttespaysannes.be/spip.php?article244&fbclid=IwAR2hIOP8zIBS1w72iZiDzT3PFVzUdawywWIIPLdFN-3RNDEdoie_zA1vgos)
- Bonneuil, C. (2016). The geological turn: narratives of the Anthropocene. In *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. (pp. 17–32). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327116X14703858759332>
- European Commission. (n.d.-a). *Adopting EU law*. Retrieved May 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/adopting-eu-law\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/adopting-eu-law_en)
- European Commission. (n.d.-b). *CAP transitional regulation: 2021–22*. Retrieved May 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/transitional-regulation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/transitional-regulation_en)
- European Commission. (n.d.-c). *Rural development*. Retrieved May 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/rural-development\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/rural-development_en)
- European Commission. (n.d.-d). *The common agricultural policy at a glance*. Retrieved May 2021, from [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/cap-glance\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/cap-glance_en)
- European Commission. (2020, August). *Fiche d'information sur le programme de développement rural 2014- 2020 de la Wallonie (Belgique)*. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/key\\_policies/documents/rdp-factsheet-belgium-wallonia\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/key_policies/documents/rdp-factsheet-belgium-wallonia_en.pdf)
- European Parliament. (2021). *SECOND PILLAR OF THE CAP: RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU\\_3.2.6.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_3.2.6.pdf)
- Kallis, Giorgos, Kerschner, Christian, & Martinez-Alier, Joan. (2012). The economics of degrowth. *Ecological Economics*, 84, 172–180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.08.017>
- Kenis, A., & Lievens, M. (2015). *The Limits of the Green Economy: From Reinventing Capitalism to Repoliticising the Present*. Routledge.
- MacGregor, S., & Seymour, N. (2017). Men and Nature: Hegemonic Masculinities and Environmental Change. *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7977>
- Machin, A., & Smith, G. (2014). Ends, means, beginnings: Environmental technocracy, ecological deliberation or embodied disagreement? *Ethical Perspectives*, 21(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.2143/EP.21.1.3017286>
- Robbins, P. (2012). *Political ecology: a critical introduction* (2nd ed. / reprint.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Service Public de Wallonie. (2020, June). *Program wallon de développement rural 2014- 2020. Wallonie Agriculture SPW*. [https://agriculture.wallonie.be/documents/20182/21864/PwDR\\_version+23+mars+2017+-+approuv%C3%A9+11+avril+2017.pdf/cea93a98-0898-4879-b2cf-fcc754ab6840](https://agriculture.wallonie.be/documents/20182/21864/PwDR_version+23+mars+2017+-+approuv%C3%A9+11+avril+2017.pdf/cea93a98-0898-4879-b2cf-fcc754ab6840)
- Sundberg, J., & Dempsey, J. (2008). Political Ecology. In *Introducing human geographies* (3rd ed.) (pp. 175–185). Routledge.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2011). Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 69, 253–274. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246111000300>