



Belgeo

Revue belge de géographie

1-2-3-4 | 2000

Special issue: 29th International Geographical Congress

Belgian agriculture and rural environments

The spatial dimension of contemporary problems and challenges

Etienne Van Hecke, Henk Meert and Charles Christians



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/belgeo/14010>

DOI: 10.4000/belgeo.14010

ISSN: 2294-9135

Publisher:

National Committee of Geography of Belgium, Société Royale Belge de Géographie

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 December 2000

Number of pages: 201-218

ISSN: 1377-2368

Electronic reference

Etienne Van Hecke, Henk Meert and Charles Christians, « Belgian agriculture and rural environments », *Belgeo* [Online], 1-2-3-4 | 2000, Online since 12 July 2015, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/belgeo/14010> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.14010>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.



Belgeo est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

Belgian agriculture and rural environments

The spatial dimension of contemporary problems and challenges

Etienne Van Hecke, Henk Meert and Charles Christians

With thanks to Messrs F. Huyghe and F. Beyers of the Belgian Farmers' Association (Louvain), J.M. Bouquiaux of the Centre d'économie agricole (Brussels)

Introduction

- 1 For many years, the countryside was in relation to the city what agriculture was in relation to industry and services. This dichotomy has now become a thing of the past. Until recently, the approach to rural studies was mainly threefold; morphological, the study of rural landscapes and their genesis; functional, involving the study of agriculture, the sector which supports rural areas; and socio-economic, examining rural decline caused by the crisis in agriculture and the migration away from remote countryside areas.
- 2 Over recent years, the rural world has changed from being mono-functional to being multi-functional, partly as a result of the evolution of modern society, which now demands areas for activities such as tourism, recreation and rural housing. But the interest in rural areas is not just material; it has also entered into our cultural sphere; getting back to nature, ensuring sustainable development, etc. Agriculture often plays a minor role in such profound transformations, not only in material terms, but also from a psychological perspective. Thus, agriculture is faced with tough competition for the use of rural space and those working in this sector are confronted with low incomes and find it increasingly difficult to catch up with the income earned in other sectors, owing to increasingly widespread globalisation of the food chain. Moreover, the image of agriculture, tarnished by notions of mediocre food quality, negative effects on the environment, etc, means that this sector often finds itself isolated in the face of the new needs of society, as the latter becomes less and less aware of the role that agriculture

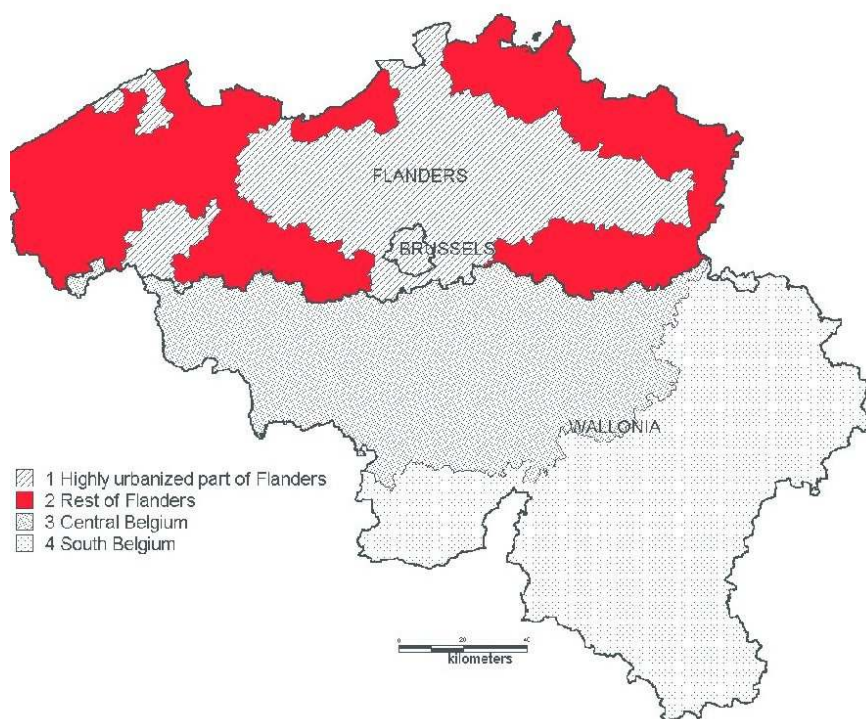
plays both in food production and in the conservation of rural areas. These general considerations must be differentiated according to the region that is taken into account.

New problems, regionally diverse problems

Macro regions and their features

- 3 Belgian agriculture varies greatly from region to region owing to different physical conditions, population densities and historical contexts (Christians, 1993; Van Hecke, 1992 and 1993). In general terms, we can distinguish four different regions going from the North to the South.
- 4 The North, the Flemish region, is characterised by its sandy plains and high population density. This has led to the development of highly intensive farming based on dairy production, pigs, poultry and horticulture. Small-scale farming dominates this region. Within this large zone there is a difference between the very urbanized central part, with its large number of small farms and more ageing, less dynamic farm holders, and the rest of Flanders.
- 5 In the centre of Belgium, stretching from the West to the East and largely belonging to the Walloon part of the country, where the soil is loamy, these are medium-sized and large farms which mainly specialise in extensive farming, some in combination with cattle farming, in particular for meat production.
- 6 Finally, in the South of Belgium, a region of ancient massifs and low population densities, the less favourable physical conditions have given rise to less intensive farming based on mixed cattle rearing.

Figure 1. Agricultural entities of Belgium.



© 2000, KU LEUVEN, PROF. DR. E. VAN HECKE, INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY.
 CARTOGRAPHY: H. VANDENHOECK

Table 1. Basic statistical data for the 4 subregions (1997).

	1	2	3	4
	highly urbanized part of Flanders	rest of Flanders	Central Belgium	South Belgium
Average farm area (ha a)	11.41	15.72	37.70	27.63
Area under grassland in total	41 %	38 %	28 %	83 %
Cattle/100 ha total agricultural area	251	264	157	268
Cattle/100 ha area grassland	610	703	564	323
Pigs/100 ha agricultural area	615	1335	43	32
Farms with successor on the farm	18 %	24 %	41 %	23 %

SOURCE: NIS 1997 (CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE)

Economic problems

- 7 Although all farms are bound by the economic obligation to operate as scale economies, they do not all have the same capacity to react to such changes. They must be sufficiently solvent to be able invest and develop a production volume that is sufficient to pay back

their loans. Their expansion depends on the ability to take over land or production quotas belonging to other farmers who are leaving the profession. This generally takes place at retirement age. Finally, farms must be in a position to sell their produce under good terms. Access to marketing networks and the degree of enterprise with the food and agriculture industry are not identical across the regions.

- 8 These major regions within Belgian agriculture are not isolated; they form part of larger areas or are similar to other geographical regions at European Union level. For this reason, they are confronted with the same agricultural development problems within the context of the common agricultural policy (CAP), in particular the Walloon regions of the centre and the South of Belgium where large-scale farming and cattle farming represent almost 100% of the production in financial terms. The sharp decrease in prices in the cereals and beef sectors, although partially offset by compensation, has had very different repercussions on farms growing crops and those specialising in cattle raising. In the case of extensive crop farming, reasonably favourable global market conditions along with yield intensification have enabled such farms to maintain a reasonable level of income, albeit lower than with an unchanged CAP. Conversely, the market for beef has been much poorer and cattle raising, by its nature, offers very limited scope in terms intensification, so there has been a significant drop in the already low income earned by farms of this type.
- 9 In the Flemish part of the country, dominated by intensive agriculture (such as pork, poultry and vegetables) the negative effects related to the CAP, the influence of the CAP is weaker (Christians, 1998). This, however, does not exclude the existence of other problems. The high level of urbanisation and the rather limited surface area of the farms push them towards intensification, but the investments needed for this do not always pay off. For this reason, there is considerable financial and environmental pressure. Farms which are too small often lack resources and give up, the result being mediocre structural revenue. Furthermore, this type of farming is highly sensitive to the problems that affect the food chain, precisely because of the fact that some food products with a doubtful quality might enter into the market.

Environmental problems

- 10 From agriculture to the rural is only a short step if we take into account the fact that pressure on agriculture is not exerted solely at the economic and farming levels, but is also environmental. Furthermore, and this is a very important point, according to the provisions of Agenda 2000, the solutions to the problems caused by intensive farming methods must be in keeping with the characteristics and potential of the rural sector, of which the problems of agriculture are a part.

New problems

- 11 New topics for study thus emerge within the sphere of agriculture and the rural sector;
 - The disparities between farmers are on the increase, i.e. between those who have the financial means to keep up with the frantic technological progress underway and those who do not. The outcome for this last group is poverty. Not all of those in the first group manage to reach the desired results and some run into financial difficulties, sometimes temporary, sometimes insurmountable.

- The environmental pressure on agriculture, whether direct or as part of multi-functional rural development plans, offers possibilities for farmers to preserve the environment.
- Questions must be asked, on the eve of the implementation of the regulations contained in Agenda 2000, as to the role of the CAP with regard to these problems. A CAP that is completely different to what it was; productivity is no longer the main issue, quite the contrary; a CAP that increasingly focuses on the whole rural sector, including the option of offering farmers opportunities to develop supplementary activities and revenue. Finally, will this new focus soothe or aggravate the problems cited in the two preceding sections?
- Another question deals with the tracing of the quality of food produced, stimulated or even forced by the European Community.

Rurality and the spatial dimension of social exclusion

- 12 A recent and detailed analysis of various data on financial earnings among Flemish farmers (younger than 65 years and with farming as their main job) revealed that one fifth among them has at maximum 10,000 Euro as the yearly available income (Van Hecke, 1999)¹. This amount of deprived farmers is divided up proportionally over two kinds of farm; on the one hand smaller farms which did not follow the trends of modernisation, on the other hand farmers who are confronted with over-investments in trying to pursue modernisation and who might have taken some wrong investment decisions. The first group consists of small enterprises which are strongly concentrated in the first entity (region), the second group consists of middle and large scale enterprises which can be found everywhere in Flanders. Especially the second group of deprived farmers has risen during the last decade, since the burden of debt has strongly increased during this period. Thus, there is no doubt about the existence of poverty amongst farmers. They try to survive by developing several strategies.
- 13 But rural poverty is not strictly limited to farmers. Undoubtedly, Belgium is a country with very strong suburbanisation and with a lot of 'rural' municipalities which have become the place of residence for many affluent households. However, the countryside is also characterised by the presence of poor households who are not directly related to farming. Although they are less visible since they are not strongly concentrated in specific neighbourhoods, their poor living situations have to be taken seriously. One should distinguish two groups of poor households. A 'hard' core consists of mainly intergenerational deprived families who can be described as poor local people, while another group consists of recently arrived households, mainly escaping from neighbouring towns or cities and now living for instance on remote camping sites.
- 14 Notwithstanding these facts, until the mid-1990s Belgian geographers studied poverty and social exclusion mainly in relation to urban topics. Obviously, this academic interest is justified because it perfectly reflects the increasing deprivation and poverty of Western metropolitan areas since the beginning of the hard economic crisis of the late 1960s. This abundance of literature on urban poverty could lead to the hasty conclusion that nowadays rural life is problem-free in Belgium. Indeed, a recent demarcation of impoverished neighbourhoods in Flanders (and Brussels), using official statistical data, has shown that the Flemish countryside is a rather affluent part of the country (Kesteloot *et al.*, 1997b). However, contemporary studies, based on in-depth-interviews, have pointed out that the interplay of three main macro-social processes also produces poverty and social exclusion in Belgian non-urban regions (Meert, 1998). First of all, labour markets

and consumer markets fail to integrate economically weaker households. On the one hand, the continuous downgrading pressure on wages in production sectors that are characterised by expensive labour forces, leads towards steady high unemployment levels while new growth perspectives are seldom accompanied by an important numerous expansion of job numbers. Consequently, many households living in remote rural areas are the first victims of this development. On the other hand, the globalisation of food markets also leads towards collapsing incomes for many Belgian family farms, despite the attempts of the EU to temper this trend by its CAP. The dismantling of the welfare state is another important process causing rural social exclusion. This process is expressed by growing selectivity and cut-backs in expenditures for social programmes. Increasing suspension of unemployment allowances or finally prohibitive bank credits, initially to sustain investments for farming activities, push many rural households progressively towards guaranteed minimum incomes. Since official data on these minimum incomes are not immediately alarming, rural deprivation tends to be hidden (see e.g. Cloke *et al.*, 1995 or Woodward, 1996). The concealment of deprivation is in many rural areas stimulated by a severe social control that stigmatises the use of public assistance (Meert, 1998). The decreasing importance of reciprocal relations based upon extended families and strong local community life is a third significant process. Decreasing birth rates, strong and rapidly ageing of the population and the crisis of the classic family structure are the main demographic movements. Two important phenomena are related to Belgian rural areas; the structural ageing of the farming population and the recent arrival of impoverished urban and suburban families. Concerning this last mentioned topic, a recent survey has shown that today about 10,000 households are living on (rural) camping sites and other recreation grounds in Belgium (especially the coastal region, the axis between Ghent and Antwerp, the eastern part of the provinces of Antwerp and Flemish Brabant, and the Ardennes). The majority of these households consist of singles, single parents with children, and retired couples (Meert, 1996; De Decker *et al.*, 1998; Raymakers, 1999). Definitely, the varying composition and working of households implies also that the impact and functioning of personal networks are changing.

Social exclusion, survival strategies and spheres of economic integration

- 15 Beside the detection of the problem and the building of a macro-social frame to explain it, Belgian geographers also have invested a lot of work in understanding the way poor rural families try to survive (Meert *et al.*, 1997; Meert, 1998 and 1999; Van Hecke, 1999). Given the accurate knowledge about Belgian urban poverty, it is not surprising that most of the rural studies build further on conceptual and methodological tools that were developed in urban analyses (especially Kesteloot *et al.*, 1997) and that these rural studies also compare urban and non-urban poverty and social exclusion (see Meert, 1996 and 1999). Until now, most attention has been paid on the way rural families try to escape from marginalisation by developing survival strategies in the market economy, alternative redistribution systems or by reciprocal actions with relatives or friends, supported by social networks. The current access to the socio-economic resources necessary for a decent living and for the reproduction of the household, is not direct but depends on the integration of the household within the economic system that produces these resources. Therefore any understanding of rural survival strategies relies on a micro-social understanding of Polanyi's spheres of economic integration (1944). From the household's

point of view, one has to discern three spheres which serve to provide the necessarily means of existence. All remunerated activities broadly correspond to market exchange and use money as the exchange tool. Redistribution means that everybody contributes to a common stock of resources and that these means are then redistributed following a set of rules, while reciprocity helps people to obtain resources through mutual exchange, supported by strong social networks.

The geography of rural poverty and the contemporary significance of social networks and reciprocal actions

- 16 Despite the widespread accepted dominance of market exchange in Western societies, the detailed analysis of survival strategies of farmers and other families in a small rural setting in Flanders (Houwaart) has highlighted the importance of reciprocal actions in order to enable residents to survive (Meert, 1998)². For example, almost 40% of strategies to obtain sustainable means depend on reciprocity. Contrary to the findings of Beggs *et al.* concerning the contrast among personal networks in urban and non-urban areas (1996, p. 316), the more detailed examination of personal networks in this rural setting has shown that close family members and other relatives are more important than friends, when compared to findings that are related to similar studies on urban poverty (Meert, 2000). This observation has a clear spatial background. It means that many reciprocal survival strategies within a rural context are based on inter-generational and kin-related solidarity, clearly linked with the huge residential stability among the inhabitants of the studied village that was examined. At the same time it comes as no surprise that redistribution is hardly important to survival in non-urban settings. Social control and shame explain this observation to a large extent.
- 17 Finally, this research on the geographical dimension of rural social exclusion and related survival strategies also raises several objections against the proposition of a rural advantage, as formerly argued by Levitan and Feldman; 'we would suggest then that rurality facilitates the particular types of informal exchanges which utilise natural resources' (1991, p. 165). However, the findings of the Belgian research concerning the way poor households have access to basic goods and services, show that inner-city neighbourhoods are much better equipped with all sorts of survival infrastructure, including charity initiatives, cheap ethnic shops, a developed system of public transport, etc. Taking into account the social and historical production of rural settings, this means that the surviving social-spatial layers that were produced in the past offer few present-day possibilities in order to get by, compared to their urban counterparts.
- 18 To summarise, although Belgian poverty is mainly an urban question, it is clear that the more concealed rural poverty has also to be seen as an expression of present-day macro-social processes. Moreover, because of a severe social control and the scanty equipment of rural settings with survival infrastructure, non-urban poverty seems to be more difficult to manage or even to suppress. Meanwhile, more empirical and qualitative research is needed in order to know to what extent the above conclusions can be generalised.

The agricultural sector in a rural context; environmental problems

- 19 Because the topics 'Spatial Planning' and 'Environment' are regionalised within the Belgian state structure, policy and regulations differ between Flanders and Wallonia. Consequently, both Flanders and Wallonia were in the 1990s subject to new town planning tools laying down general policies. Since the natural and the socio-economic frames of both regions are widely different, both regions have worked out varying measures regarding town and country planning and environmental policy.

The reduction of agricultural land-use in Flanders

- 20 In Flanders the use of the land by large land-users (e.g. housing, industry, agriculture, recreation, nature) was defined within the 'Flanders Spatial Structure Plan'. In broad terms, the plan boils down to an increase in the areas intended for nature and forests, as compared with a reduction in the area devoted to agriculture, from around 800,000 to 750,000 ha (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1997, pp. 391-399). Within those areas demarcated as agricultural land, the Flemish region also defines zones non aedificandi (green belt areas) which are, however, limited in size. These zones non aedificandi are demarcated in such a way that they continue to protect the current agricultural areas of most outstanding natural and ecological beauty from future construction. For these reasons they will be situated mainly in agricultural areas with land-based cattle breeding (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1997, p. 395). Even outside the zones non aedificandi a policy is being applied which is aimed at maintaining and further developing agricultural land use. Efforts are being made to introduce better agricultural structures within the demarcated areas, whilst preventing other functions from hampering agriculture in the long term (*inter alia* by resisting new non-agricultural activities), and physical conditions are being created for the use of sectoral policy instruments (creation of specific infrastructure, water treatment, re-allocation of land, etc.). The demarcation is therefore both a physical and functional boundary, aimed at offering the agricultural sector security and continuity, by protecting it from urban development, in exchange for a reduction in the surface it occupies.

Wallonia; preservation of agrarian land and especially its diversity take priority

- 21 Wallonia's Development Plan for Rural Space does not impose surface area restrictions for agriculture, as is the case in Flanders (S.D.E.R., 1999). What is more, this is logical, given the large proportion of forests and natural landscapes in Wallonia. One could even claim that in zoning plans agriculture is not only seen as a physical supporting factor but also as an economic supporting factor. The plan does, after all, state that to preserve agriculture in Wallonia measures must be taken to limit the pressure not only from urbanisation but also from afforestation. The farmer is seen as an important partner for local and regional development. The current situation of the agricultural area that has been mapped and registered with the land registry is the result of the regulated land occupation zones that were contained within the sector plans of the 1970s and 1980s and

which have since been greatly modified at local level by means of allowing dispensation to occur. Within this agricultural area, the plans provided for those zones that were to be built on, institutional zones that were to be created as well as limited afforestation in unfavourable biophysical conditions. One of the main principles was to 'protect the rural area necessary for the viability and profitability of agriculture and livestock farming'. In view of these previous regulations, we should not be surprised at the non-explicit content of the Development Plan for Rural Space in this respect. We should add to this the plans for more dense and highly concentrated non-agricultural and non-forestry zones provided for in the review of the sector plans as they appeared in the Walloon Code of Town and Country Planning and Heritage of 1997. These same ideas are taken up in the 1999 Development Plan for Rural Space, which responds to Article 1 of this Code, 'the parsimonious management of the land' (Gosselain, 1999).

- 22 Approximately 750,000 ha of more than 900,000 ha of agricultural land registered during the 1990s, of which roughly 2,500 ha are lost per year and which were intended for non-agricultural zones, constitute the agricultural surface area currently used by farms. These farms have recovered roughly 2,000 ha per year since the new CAP of 1992 'principally since the introduction of bonuses linked to the surface area being cultivated' (Annet, 1999).
- 23 One major option is that of maintaining and consolidating the diversity of the dozen or so agro-geographical sub-regions. Their biophysical potential, the varied types and levels of dynamism of the agriculture found within them, the different combinations of agriculture and forestry resulting in specific countryside as well as the levels of intensity of urban pressure have been ensuring their individuality for a long time now within the two major regions of the Centre and the South (Christians, 1962, included by the Department for Land Development at various dates, including the SDER of 1999).
- 24 This results in preferential spatial distribution of land development projects in terms of consolidation (in particular in the Centre region which is dominated by crop farming), of lifestyle and tourism attractions (on uneven land and in agro-forestry areas such as the South and principally the Ardennes region for tourism), of responses to considerable urban pressure (essentially great pressure from Brussels on half of the Centre region) and of the development of ecological and environmental values (rich in the South, under threat in the Centre).

Agriculture with nature and from agriculture to nature (Flanders)

- 25 The Flanders Spatial Structure Plan considers reducing the land reserved for agriculture to be *possible*, taking into account developments in productivity within the agricultural sector on a world scale, and *desirable*, to create space for other activities which our society considers important. A transfer of around 50,000 ha from agricultural land to nature is scheduled. This has to be confirmed in regional and local zoning plans. However, at this moment it is not clear what will be the future legal status of these grounds. The land to be transferred from agriculture to nature depends on the demarcation of the land pre-designated for nature. According to the status of the nature reserve, agriculture will either have to be entirely eliminated or preserved in accordance with certain framework conditions. In the first case, the farmer operating in this zone should be able to benefit from a regulation on compensation or cessation or be removed from the area via land consolidation as part of a nature establishment project or the re-allocation of land. In the

second case, continued farming on this land is linked to accepting the framework conditions of a cessation regulation. The Flanders Spatial Structure Plan provides not only for a transfer of 56,000 ha but approximately 70,000 ha of the demarcated agricultural areas are located in 'nature interlinking areas' and belong physically to the natural structure. A 'nature interlinking area' is an unbroken area where the functions of agriculture, forest and nature are co-ordinated while other functions are subordinated, and where the permanent preservation of specific ecotopes can be guaranteed. The interlinking implies that each function can be maintained without supplanting other functions or being supplanted by other functions. A policy will have to be drawn up to clarify which ecotopes can be reconciled with agricultural and forestry activities and how these can be maintained. Agricultural activities in these interlinking areas will be subject to restrictions, in order to protect certain ecotopes. These nature interlinking areas will in future be included in the regional zoning plans, implementing the Flanders Spatial Structure Plan. Furthermore, the Flemish government will make an effort to add another 10,000 ha of forest to these 70,000 ha of ecologically rich agricultural land in the agricultural area, as provided for within the framework of an EC regulation (2080/92). Clearly, to refund farmers for their new management tasks in these nature reserves, the European government as well as the Flemish government will intervene.

Environmental policy imposes restrictions in Flanders

- 26 It is not only the development of new town planning acts and tools which imposes restrictions on agriculture in these 70,000 ha in nature interlinking areas, restrictions are also imposed on agriculture via environmental legislation setting maximum manuring standards. In the north of the country an enormous production of pigs produces significant quantities of slurry, in addition to the slurry produced by intensive livestock breeding. This, added to the use of artificial fertilizers, resulted in the serious pollution of surface water, causing major problems. Therefore, in 1996 a Manure Action Plan was introduced in the Flemish Region, whereby a balance was sought between the production of phosphates and nitrogen by agriculture and the capacity of the agricultural land to assimilate it so as not to exceed a maximum load at a local level. Taking into account the stocking density, the operational area, the production plan and the use of manures, a calculation is made for each farm -taking into account manuring standards- of the extent to which they will have to deal with phosphate and/or nitrogen surpluses. There are certain areas which are subject to stricter manuring standards, namely areas within the 'nature group' (valleys, ecologically valuable agricultural areas, wooded areas, nature reserves and nature development areas demarcated on the regional zoning plans and also the areas covered by the directive on the conservation of wild birds); the 'water group' (water collection areas), as well as phosphate-saturated areas.
- 27 In 1997, approximately half of professional farms had to deal with surpluses of phosphate and/or nitrogen. The total commercial surpluses amounted to 34% of the total nitrogen production and 40% of the total phosphate production in Flanders. There is therefore a significant imbalance. Since these surpluses cannot be 'used' on the farm, they are the subject of a great many negotiations between farms with surpluses and those below the manuring standard, which can therefore accept slurry, as well as processing plants. At times, journeys are made over considerable distances to transport surpluses from one farm to another. For those farmers who have insufficient ground in relation to the

surface area cultivated this poses an economic problem since disposing of the surplus manure can be a costly operation.

- 28 To cover the expense of running the Manure Bank, a basic charge is paid by farmers, including those without a surplus of manure on the farm. This is because the government assumes that each kilo of minerals contributes to the manure problem. The tariff is, nonetheless, progressive; the greater the production, the higher the charge per kg. Charges and transport costs therefore increase the burden on the budget of intensive livestock farmers. Depending on the region, these costs vary between 1 and 5 BEF per kg of pig meat (Lauwers & Van Huylenbroeck, 1999).
- 29 Ever stricter manure standards are to be introduced. The extent to which and speed with which these will be introduced depends on the policy adopted. To satisfy the European nitrate standard, a new Manure Action Plan was ratified in January 2000. As a result, not only will the cost to farmers with a manure surplus continue to rise but a reduction in stocks in the intensive livestock farming sector will also be necessary. This will create difficulties for farms and a drop in added value in the primary sector will be experienced.
- 30 In areas with stricter manuring standards, producers and users are entitled to compensation for loss of income suffered as a result of these stricter standards. This system of compensation should make the financial and social consequences of the manure decree more bearable. In areas of groundwater and surface water collection the compensation is higher than in areas of the 'nature group'.
- 31 In addition to compensation for loss of income, compensation is also available for loss of assets. This is intended for owners who sell agricultural land in areas with stricter manure standards. The extent of the compensation reflects the difference in the value of the land in question before and after the manure decree. Within the framework of the new manure decree (MAP II), 'step-down' regulations are also provided for farmers in these areas and land swapping is also possible between farmers (owners) in a protected area and in a 'normal' area. The Flemish Land Company acts as an intermediary to regulate these matters or buys up the land itself. This allows farmers who wish to farm biologically to establish themselves, for example, in these protected areas, or other farmers who wish to continue farming using traditional methods to do this outside the areas with stricter standards.

Wallonia; quality of environment and of agricultural products

- 32 The mechanisms available in Wallonia for the protection of the quality of the agricultural produce, the ecology and the environment are numerous; farmers are becoming those who safeguard a sound environment as well as producing healthy foodstuffs.
- 33 The Development Plan for Rural Space and the Contract for the Future of Wallonia make these their objectives. The Walloon Rural Development Plan provides an overview of the existing instruments and actions in 1999.
- 34 The greatest part of all agricultural production is tied to the land and must remain so, both 'at its origins in order to limit the production factors' as well as at the end 'for effluent management'. It is the Walloon Office for Rural Development that is responsible for the management of livestock effluent as well as the 'geo-agri' system for farms choosing to adopt these regulations. Given that the ratios between livestock density and farm area are relatively acceptable today, but that we are also seeing early warning signs

of change, the Walloon government, in the same way as in Flanders, is aiming at drawing up manuring plans and setting up a manuring register as well as one comprising the capacities of all of the farms.

- 35 As far as the environmental constraints placed on the farms are concerned, the farmers must be justly rewarded for their involvement in environmental work, whether they undertake this on a voluntary basis or not. This is the case today in particular for European agro-environmental measures, in which the Walloon Region pays a share of some BEF 600 million via the intermediary body Agrenwal. This is taken from a total agricultural budget of BEF 7.5 thousand million.
- 36 Indeed, agriculture is at the service of the environment in many areas of Wallonia. First of all, agriculture is excluded from more than 10,000 ha of land found on the 58 state-owned nature reserves, private nature reserves often approved by the Region itself, as well as in wetlands of biological interest. Agriculture must adhere to technical and landscape restrictions applicable in natural parks, special avifauna protection zones (more than 250,000 ha) and special conservation areas - these latter two both European initiatives - zones protected within the sector plans, i.e., over and above that already mentioned, the open space zones, countryside interest zones, zones belonging to the ecological network, catchment protection zones and finally classified sites where legislation ensures integral respect by the farmer for the state of the surroundings. To this we should add vulnerable zones in the sense meant by the European Nitrates Directive.
- 37 The co-ordination of these types of protection at the level of the local authorities, their introduction into a partnership framework involving specialists, administration experts and various population groups - including farmers - and the codes of good behaviour made necessary by them are emerging in the shape of Commune Plans for Nature Development (1996) and Environment and Nature Development Plans (1998), providing for even further integration.
- 38 As far as demands for quality are concerned, an increasing number of Walloon agricultural products will be bound to adhere to strict labelling and controlled-origin naming regulations. Indeed the best products already do so today. 'Rural agriculture' is being encouraged. Furthermore, organic farming is currently implemented by 2/3 of the 700 Belgian natural agriculture farms present in Wallonia. These are to be found in the major region of the South, mainly in the Ardennes.
- 39 Agriculture really has become the generator of a favourable environment through the responses it provides to the regulations guiding it on many different topics in many different areas.

Common Agricultural Policy; Agenda 2000

- 40 For many years, the evolution of agriculture has been influenced by the CAP. With the introduction of Agenda 2000, the future impact of the CAP will be even stronger. Moreover, the integration of rural items and of the countryside is more pronounced.

Market and price policy

- 41 The reform of 1992 (Mac Sherry) is fundamental. Prices for basic products were reduced significantly but compensation is being given, albeit gradually, in the form of bonuses and income support. As a result of Agenda 2000, prices are being reduced even further, also compensated for partly, but not entirely, by subsidies. The Belgian Farmers' Union calculated that the loss of income in basic products (arable farming, beef and milk) will amount to 3.1 billion BEF (depending on the sector, by 2001, 2002, 2007), in other words the difference between 14.5 billion BEF in direct price cuts and 11.4 billion BEF in increased bonuses (internal document). The price cuts are therefore compensated for by bonuses to the tune of 79%, but this still means a 5% drop in relation to the total farm income for 1998. The problem for those regions with intensive farming is the built-in ceiling on bonuses per animal and per hectare, namely 2 LSU/ha unrefined feed (LSU= livestock units). This means that those farms which do not have much land will be faced with a significant drop in income. Once again, regional consequences will strongly vary. Especially, the Walloon part of the country threatens to count many victims, as this region is characterised by a high agrarian specialisation in many of the sectors on which the CAP focuses. Anyway, the numerous cattle breeding farms scattered over Flanders will run the same risk.
- 42 Another important aspect of Agenda 2000 is that it links the granting of bonuses compensating price cuts to the state of the environment in the Member State concerned. This could well be a problem for the competitiveness of intensive farming regions. This is why the Flemish Region has drastically reduced the maximum manuring standard in the new Manure Action Plan, precisely to prevent the EU from withholding these compensation bonuses. This would lead to a major social drama.

Rural development, a framework

- 43 In accordance with Agenda 2000, rural development will be added to the Common Agricultural Policy as a second cornerstone alongside market and price policy. The regulation establishes the framework for a permanent European policy on rural development. Support is being provided for a wide range of measures, including those, in the main, which are in keeping with existing ones, while promoting the adaptation and development of rural areas is new. Compensation is therefore scheduled for implementing environmental measures in agriculture. What is also striking is that aid for problem areas is also being extended to areas with 'specific restrictions in the environmental field'. In addition to the old regulation (support as compensation for areas with natural handicaps) provision is also made here to give compensation for areas with specific restrictions in the environmental field in order to satisfy environmental requirements and to safeguard agriculture in areas with specific restrictions in the environmental field. Beside this, there are also measures leaning towards multifunctional activities, as the diversification of businesses which are aimed at developing additional or alternative activities. The measures for maintaining and strengthening a practical social culture in rural areas are new. The measures which can be taken are extremely varied.
- 44 In budgetary terms, approximately 9/10 of the resources of the EAGGF department goes to the markets and 1/10 to rural development. The regulations therefore offer plenty of

prospects, as outlined above, but global resources remain significantly limited. In the case of Belgium, the funding would amount to approx. BEF 2bn per annum. The countryside ordinance of Agenda 2000 (1257/99) is supplemented by means of a plan covering a 7-year period (2000-2006). Nineteen per cent of the funds are managed federally (2/3 of this goes to promoting biological agriculture!), 22% by the Walloon Region and 58.4% by the Flemish Region.

- 45 In the *Flemish region*, part of that money should go to providing support for the reconversion of pig farming. After all, if the objectives of the Manure Policy (see above) are not achieved, a reduction in the volume of pig stocks seems unavoidable. Compensation is required for this, which if need can be linked to reconversion to biological agriculture. How the 'integrated countryside policy' component will be implemented has not yet been fully decided. The availability of relatively limited funds can be attributed to the fact that approximately 55% of the budget allotted under the heading of 'rural development' in Flanders still goes to providing support for investments in agriculture and support for setting up in agriculture, therefore pure agricultural and not countryside-based concerns. Approximately 10% of the budget for 'rural development goes towards environmental measures'.
- 46 Meanwhile, in *Wallonia* only one quarter of the budgets for 'rural development' goes towards support for investments in agriculture and the setting-up of young farmers, but a larger part goes towards the 'transformation and commercialisation' component and to environmental measures. Measures which concern pure 'rural development' do not on the whole, just as in Flanders, take up much of the total budget. Agenda 2000 will continue to recognise the specific category of disadvantaged regions. In Wallonia, the most southern region (see fig. 1) fits into this group. Compensation payments will be granted to the farmers there.
- 47 By way of an addition to the attention which Agenda 2000 gives to the European countryside, *Leader projects* have been revived for the period 2000-2006 ('Leader+'). As with the previous Leader projects (I and II), the EU is playing a sort of pioneering role with this Community initiative in relation to the separate Member States in terms of rural development. In contrast to the 'rural development' component in Agenda 2000, with Leader+ it can have a much greater say in the content and establishment of certain specific rural projects which it can approve and thus finance as exemplary projects. This Community initiative will above all release money for rural projects which experiment in an original fashion with three items; promotion of natural and cultural heritage, improvement of the economic environment as a result of which new jobs can be created, and thirdly projects to improve the organisational skills of local communities. In contrast to Leader I and II, in principle the new Leader formula applies to all rural areas, although the Member States are expected to designate a number of priority areas within their borders - based on a series of valid criteria. Although it is still far too early to assess the effect of Leader+, at first sight it would appear to tackle a number of socio-economic bottlenecks mentioned in the previous paragraph, as money is not only being freed up for creating new jobs but also for strengthening social networks between various partners in the countryside.

Conclusion

- 48 Given the vastly different forms of agriculture, the influence of regional policies in the regions of Belgium and of European policy will differ in the large areas ('entities') which were discussed in the introduction.
- 49 In the north, the most urbanised areas possess proportionally many small non-viable farms. Internal dynamism is minimal. There are many farmers with low or very low incomes. Little relief can be expected from the 'markets' component of the EAGGF's Guarantee department. Belgium does not prioritise the application of early retirement. The majority of these farms are not in tourist areas, so there is no directly obvious additional income from this activity. The only possibilities lie either in pursuing increased added value from the farm, which could be via biological farming or the sale of (processed) farm products on site; or in environmental regulations, but this is only possible if the farm is situated in a vulnerable area. Some possibilities are removed by the application of environmentally friendly farming practices.
- 50 In the rest of Flanders, where agriculture is intensive at a regional level ('intensive farms' can also be found in the previous area but are not dominant), farmers are mainly dependent, according to the type of production, on the CAP for the development of the cattle sector and in particular the dairy cattle sector, through the 'markets' component. Obviously the evolution of market conditions is important for the off-land livestock farming sector, but the restrictions will come primarily from environmental regulations; manuring standards, and restricted areas. Compensations may be available to farms situated in those areas with restrictions. For the other areas the evolution of manuring standards will be very important and a choice will have to be made between paying more (for sale and processing) or extensification. The latter will represent a major problem and it is doubtful whether the possibilities within the 'rural development' component will be sufficient to compensate for this, given that many farmers have opted for serious investments specifically in this sector. Also, these extremely intensive regions are generally not tourist regions, except for the area near the coast.
- 51 Agriculture in central Belgium is almost purely dependent on developments in the basic sectors, given their orientation towards mainly arable farming but also cattle farming. The environmental problems here are not particularly acute. The speed of internal reorganisation which permits an increase in scale and the further possibilities for intensification are considerable here. Changes in income in recent years show that the situation has become less favourable than it would have been if no reforms had taken place. Nevertheless, the situation is not dramatic.
- 52 Agriculture in southern Belgium is entirely dependent on cattle farming. The problems are perhaps greater here in the sense that the structure is less favourable than in central Belgium and that the future of (beef) cattle farming looks relatively less rosy than that of arable farming. The advantage is that the farming is 'extensive', therefore in terms of bonus possibilities falls within the scope of the CAP. Biological livestock farming may be an option for some here, while diversification outside agriculture is another, given the role of tourism in the region, but this should not be overstated, because no more than 3% of farms in southern Belgium have developed a subsidiary activity of tourism on the farm (Annet, 1999).

- 53 In the heavily urbanised central part of Flanders (entity 1) and in southern Belgium (entity 4) the weak structure has manifested itself for some time in a significantly weaker degree of succession than in the other two entities. However, the social problem will drag on for some time yet and the weak grip of agriculture on the land will have to be rectified by means of a town and country planning policy. In entity 2 the problem of disintensification linked to the environment will also lead to social problems for some farmers. The need for extensification in intensive Flanders and the increase in scale needed overall, not only for the land-based agriculture of central Belgium, will lead to an increased demand for agricultural land which, in turn, could cause conflicts with other land-users while the costs of land for the farmer will increase further. There is a lack of consistency between the CAP and town and country planning policy in Flanders, not in fundamental terms but in terms of implementation. In fact, J.M. Bouquiaux (Centre for Agricultural Economy, 1999) sees a lack of coherence in the CAP reforms themselves; the Commission proposes a European model in which 'The agricultural sector must be rich in diversity and tradition and its task should not be limited to production but should also involve the preservation of the landscape and of a living countryside, including the preservation of employment'. According to J.M. Bouquiaux the reform will lead to even bigger farms, whose influence on the landscape has hardly been positive up to now, being less numerous and therefore creating fewer jobs while being maintained thanks to direct subsidies which public opinion will point the finger at. It is clear that, in practice, Agenda 2000 will bring less relief for the problems of many farmers and in particular for problems which result from restricting agricultural land as part of the Flanders Spatial Structure Plan. This will only increase social problems.
- 54 Opening up the practice of farming to the conditions and possibilities of the surrounding countryside is new. Geographical analysis of certain social bottlenecks with which the rural environment is presently confronted has highlighted certain communal problems with which farmers and non-farmers are faced as residents of the countryside. In this sense the increasing attention being paid to rural development within Agenda 2000 is in every way a step forward. After all, running a farm cannot be disassociated from the evolving countryside around it. Devoting extra attention to the quality and livability of the countryside does not therefore need to be incompatible with the specific interests of farmers, provided it is ensured that these extra resources also have a synergetic effect for those living a farming lifestyle. Obviously this condition also applies to the Leader programme which the EU wants to pursue. It also goes without saying that this modified attention to policy will have new consequences both on a methodological level and in terms of content for agricultural geography. In the light of the problems posed, it is set to become much more holistic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANNET C. (1999), *L'évolution de l'économie agricole et horticole de la région wallonne 1998*, Ministère de la région wallonne & UC.L.

- BEGGS J.J., HAINES V.A and HURLBERT J.S. (1996), 'Revisiting the Rural-Urban Contrast; Personal Networks in Nonmetropolitan and Metropolitan Settings', *Rural Studies*, 61, pp. 306-25.
- BEYERS A. (1999), 'De open ruimte in Vlaanderen, vandaag en morgen. Het standpunt van de landbouw', in *De open ruimte in Vlaanderen, vandaag en morgen*, Vlaamse Landmaatschappij, Brussel, pp. 27-33.
- BOUQUIAUX J.M. (sd), *Les propositions Agenda 2000 et l'agriculture belge*, Document de travail, Centre d'économie Agricole, Bruxelles.
- CHRISTIANS CH. (1993), 'Terroirs wallons et agriculture wallonne en Belgique', *Bulletin de la Société belge d'Etudes Géographiques*, 2, pp. 329-360.
- CHRISTIANS CH. (1998), 'Le paysage rural comme patrimoine', *Etudes et Documents/Monuments et Sites*, 6, Namur, pp. 35-40.
- CHRISTIANS CH. (1998), 'Quarante ans de politique agricole européenne commune et d'agriculture en Belgique', *Bulletin de la Société géographique de Liège*, 35, pp. 41-55.
- CLOKE P., GOODWIN M., MILBOURNE P. and THOMAS Chr. (1995), 'Deprivation, Poverty and Marginalization in rural Lifestyles in England and Wales', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11, pp. 351-365.
- COMITE DES STRUCTURES AGRICOLES ET DU DEVELOPPEMENT RURAL (1999), *Verslag van de 129ste vergadering van 24 november 1999*, Brussel (niet-gepubliceerd document).
- DE DECKER P., RAYMAEKERS P., MEERT H. (1998), 'Permanent wonen op campings in België ; de antichambre van de kartonnen doos', *Tijdschrift voor de Volkshuisvesting*, jg. 4, Den Haag, NIROV, pp. 14-18.
- GOSSELAIN P. (1999), 'Le plan du secteur, essai de bilan pour un nouveau départ', *Les Cahiers de l'Urbanisme*, 27, Namur, pp. 21-36.
- GOVERNEMENT WALLON (1999), *Agriculture-Biodiversité-Monde rural*, Projet de contrat d'Avenir pour la Wallonie, s.l., pp. 88-89-122-124.
- GOVERNEMENT WALLON, *Schéma de développement de l'Espace Régional*, 233 p. + annexes.
- KESTELOOT C. m.m.v. VANDENBROE-CKE H., VAN DER HAEGEN H., VANNESTE D. & VAN HECKE E. (1997b), *Atlas van achtergestelde buurten in Vlaanderen en Brussel*, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Brussel.
- KESTELOOT C., MEERT H., MISTIAEN P., SAVENBERG S., VAN DER HAEGEN H. (1997), *De geografische dimensie van de dualisering in de maatschappij*, Onderzoekrapport Programma Maatschappelijk Onderzoek, Federale Diensten voor Wetenschappelijke, Technische en Culturele Aangelegenheden, Brussel.
- LAUWERS L., VAN HUYLENBROECK G. (1999), 'Landbouw en milieu ; een specifieke relatie', in *Landbouweconomische uitdagingen, Jubileumboek*, Belgische Vereniging voor Landbouw-economie, Leuven, pp. 217-224.
- LEVITAN L., S. FELDMAN (1991), 'For love or money', in CLAY D.C., SCHWARZWELLER H.K. (1991), *Household Strategies. Research in Rural Sociology and Development*, a Research Annual, London, Jai Press.
- MARECHAL L. (1999), 'Le Code Wallon de l'Aménagement du Territoire, de l'Urbanisme et du Patrimoine, Un code de bonne pratique pour l'action', *Les Cahiers de l'Urbanisme*, 24, Namur, pp. 15-19.
- MEERT H. (1996), 'Marginaal camping-wonen ; overleven in Belgische bidon-villes', *Planologisch Nieuws*, 16, pp. 174-96.

- MEERT H. (1998), *De geografie van het overleven ; bestaansonzekere huishoudens en hun strategieën in een stedelijke en rurale context*, unpublished PhD thesis, Leuven, Catholic University of Leuven, Institute for Social and Economic Geography.
- MEERT H. (2000), 'Rural community life and the importance of reciprocal survival strategies', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40, 3, (in press).
- MEERT H. (2000), 'Arcadië Onderuit ? Woonzones met recreatief karakter als etalageruimte voor de witte producten van de Vlaamse woningmarkt', *Ruimte en Planning*, 20 (in press).
- MEERT H., MISTIAEN P. & KESTELOOT C. (1997), 'The geography of survival in different urban settings', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geografie*, 88, pp. 169-81.
- MINISTERE DE LA REGION WALLONE (1999), *Plan wallon de développement rural, Période 2000 - 2006*, Regulation (EC) n° 1257/99 of the Council, s.l., 415 p.
- MINISTERIE VAN DE VLAAMSE GEMEENSCHAP (1997), *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen*, Brussel.
- POLANYI K. (1944), *The Great Transformation*, New York, Rinehart.
- RAYMAKERS P. (1999), 'Permanente bewoning op campings in Vlaanderen', in DE DECKER P. (ed.), *Wonen onderzocht 1995-1999*, Brussel, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap.
- VAN HECKE E. (1992), 'De landbouw', in *Geografie in België*, Gemeentekrediet, 1992, pp. 331-355.
- VAN HECKE E. (1992), 'Evolution de l'agriculture en Belgique', *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 1346-1347, 80 p.
- VAN HECKE E. (1993), 'Landbouw en platteland in een dynamisch perspectief', *De Aardrijkskunde*, 1-2, pp. 185-203.
- VAN HECKE E. (1999), *Boeren in de Knel. Armoede in land- en tuinbouw*, Brussel, Koning Boudewijnstichting.
- VLAAMSE LANDMAATSCHAPPIJ (1996), *Gids bij het nieuwe mestdecreet*, Brussel, 48 p.
- VLAAMSE LANDMAATSCHAPPIJ (1999), *Jaarverslag 1998*, Brussel.
- WOODWARD R. (1996), 'Deprivation and the rural; an investigation into contradictory discourses', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 12, pp. 55-67.

NOTES

1. .Meanwhile, on-going research (by the same author) reveals that even a quarter of Walloon farmers have at maximum 10,000 Euro as the yearly available income.
2. (The village belongs to the Hageland. Until the beginning of the 1990s, it was one of the regions selected by the European Fund for Regional Development, specifically for target 5b, the supporting of the European countryside.

ABSTRACTS

Over recent years, the rural world has changed from being mono-functional to being multi-functional, partly as a result of the evolution of modern society, which now demands areas for activities such as tourism, recreation and rural housing. Agriculture often plays a minor role in such profound transformations. It is faced with stronger rules to protect nature and with tough competition for the use of rural space. Those working in agriculture are confronted with low incomes and find it increasingly difficult to catch up with the income earned in other sectors. The first and the second section of this article therefore deal with such present-day economic and environmental problems that are related to Belgian agriculture and the remaining rural environments. These problems are discussed and differentiated according to the regions that are taken into account. A third section assesses the answer of the Common Agriculture Policy to these problems.

Récemment le monde rural est passé du monofonctionnel au multifonctionnel, entre autres à cause de l'évolution de la société exigeant de l'espace pour des fonctions qui se développent comme le tourisme et la récréation, l'habitat en milieu rural. Dans ces mutations profondes l'agriculture se retrouve souvent dans une position minoritaire, non seulement matériellement mais également du point de vue psychologique. L'agriculture doit faire face à des règles plus strictes pour la conservation de la nature et est sujette à concurrence pour l'utilisation de l'espace. Les agriculteurs sont confrontés à des bas revenus et ne parviennent pas à rattraper les revenus des autres secteurs. La première et la deuxième partie de cet article traitent donc des problèmes économiques et environnementaux de l'agriculture belge et de l'espace rural subsistant. Ces problèmes, qui ne sont pas les mêmes partout en Belgique, sont analysés et différenciés par région. Une troisième partie a trait à la réponse de la Politique Agricole Commune à ces problèmes.

INDEX

Mots-clés: agriculture belge, campagne, problèmes économiques et environnementaux, Politique Agricole Commune

Keywords: Belgian agriculture, countryside, economic and environmental problems, Common Agricultural Policy

AUTHORS

ETIENNE VAN HECKE

Catholic University of Leuven, Institute for Social and Economic Geography, W. Decrolylaan 42,
B-3001 Leuven, etienne.vanhecke@geo.kuleuven.ac.be

HENK MEERT

Postdoc FWO Vlaanderen), Catholic University of Leuven, Institute for Social and Economic Geography, W. Decrolyaan 42, B-3001 Leuven, henk.meert@geo.kuleuven.ac.be

CHARLES CHRISTIANS

Emeritus professor at the Institute for Human and Economic Geography, University of Liège