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## Editorial

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**Biographical notes:** Peter Nijkamp is a Professor of Regional Economics and Economic Geography at the VU University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, a Fellow of the Tinbergen Institute and President of the Governing Board of the Netherlands Research Council (NWO). He is ranked among the best 100 economists in the world according to IDEAS/RePEc and is by far the most prolific economist in regional science. He is a Fellow of many societies, is on the editorial board of many journals and has served on numerous national and international committees. He is an Advisor to the Government of the Netherlands, the European Commission, the World Bank, Academia Sinica, the OECD and many other bodies.

Chiara M. Travisi graduated cum laude in Environmental Sciences from the University of Milano-Bicocca. Since 2003, she holds a Doctorate in Agricultural Ecology from the University of Milano, and since 2007, she holds a PhD in Environmental Economics from the Free University of Amsterdam. She is a Researcher and Project Manager at Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, and a contract Professor at the Politecnico di Milano. Her work focuses on cost-benefit analysis of regional development projects and the assessment of monetary costs of environmental externalities. She has been working on pesticide risk, air and noise pollution and biodiversity, using stated preference methods, multicriteria analysis and environmental risk and sustainability indicators.

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Our world is sometimes artificially subdivided into urban and rural areas. Since most people live in the urbanised part of the world, up till now research and policy attention has mainly been directed towards urban areas. But rural areas cover a major part of the surface of our planet and are increasingly becoming foci of sustainability initiatives and strategies. In addition, the rural world has drastically changed, with more emphasis on innovative activities ('modern rurality').

In the coming years, rural areas will face big challenges as regards growth, jobs and sustainability. Along with the opportunities they offer in terms of growth in new sectors (e.g., bio-fuels, genetically modified organisms, GMOs), the provision of food, amenities and tourism, and their role as groundwater reservoirs and highly valued landscapes, rural

areas also run the risk of producing unsustainable and vulnerable economic development conditions. With nearly 40% of land use and water consumption in OECD countries devoted to agriculture and almost 90% of land in the European Union used for agriculture and forestry, the relevance of rural areas for sustainability cannot be underestimated. Greening and integrating the agricultural and rural development policy is therefore nowadays a part of a wider process of addressing local, regional, national and even global sustainability concerns. These relate to climate change, pollution by nitrates and pesticides, soil preservation, water and land management, and biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, the recent considerable increase of farm product prices driven by temporary factors such as droughts in wheat-growing regions has shown how vulnerable this market can be if it is not prepared to react to such environmental shocks. Moreover, when the focus turns to the longer term, structural changes are also underway which could well undermine the sustainability of this strategic sector. Reduced crop surpluses and a decline in export subsidies are contributing to these long-term changes in markets, thus exacerbating regional disparities and the problem of food insecurity. But more important is the threat posed by the growing use of cereals, sugar, oilseed and vegetable oils to produce the fossil fuel substitutes, ethanol and bio-diesel. This tendency is expected to maintain high nominal prices for many agricultural products over the coming decade, as it underpins crop prices and indirectly, also the prices for livestock products.

All in all, the resilience of rural areas, both in developed and developing countries need to be reinforced by rethinking the role that both policy makers and farmers can play from now on. Agricultural and rural development policies are being increasingly required to head off the risks of environmental degradation, while simultaneously encouraging farmers to continue to make a positive contribution to the maintenance of the countryside and the environment by targeted rural development measures and by securing farming profitability in the different world regions.

It is noteworthy that at a recent FAO meeting in Rome (July 2008), some 100 delegates from 36 countries called on farmers to join the ongoing 'Greener' revolution represented by a form of farming known as Conservation Agriculture (CA). This farming system aims to help feed the world more sustainably by building up soil ecosystems and reducing unnecessary soil disturbance wherever possible. Similarly, the European policies and the Community Agricultural Policy (CAP) in particular are largely designed to enhance the sustainability of agro-ecosystems by integrating environmental protection into different community policy areas.

As many policy initiatives are currently being undertaken at the global, international, national, regional and local levels an abundance of new ideas and knowledge related to rurality and sustainability is being produced by researchers. Against this general background, the aim of this publication is to provide scientists, researchers and professional planners and policy makers with a collection of original papers covering some of the crucial topics related to the development, sustainability and economics of rural areas. They offer useful proposals for catalysing a new research and policy agenda on the most controversial topics related to the sustainability of the rural world. This special issue contains 11 contributions, the contents of which are summarised below.

In the first paper, Teresa de Noronha Vaz and Peter Nijkamp try to shed new light on the future of the rural world and on how it is adjusting to novel and challenging opportunities associated with a globalising world. With a special focus on Europe, the authors discuss how the traditional urban-rural dichotomy is increasingly vanishing, while the CAP price-specific incentives have created regional asymmetric support

instruments which, from a long-term perspective, have caused considerable differences in rural development across Europe, thus intensifying, in particular, the North-South divide. The authors analytically justify both rural diversity and the complexity of the rural world.

The second paper, Aliye Ahu Gülümser, Tüzin Baycan Levent and Peter Nijkamp is an overview of mapping out rurality in Europe. They also analyse the rural structure of Turkey, on the basis of methodologies proposed by international institutions such as the OECD and the EU, and present various rural indicators with multivariate techniques and the application of geographical information system (GIS).

The third contribution is provided by Martina Schäfer, Benjamin Nölting and Astrid Engel, who examine the role of organic agriculture as a new player in sustainable regional development. Two case studies on East German rural areas are explored, which suggest that enterprises in this sector can play an important role by supporting regional networks, establishing regional value chains, preserving a varied landscape and contributing to the transfer of knowledge and experience related to both organic agriculture and healthy nutrition.

Garri Raagmaa, Viktor Trasberg, Donatas Burneika, Zaiga Krisjane and Taivo Tali then discuss the restructuring of the primary sector in the Baltic states with a special focus on the local governance and administrative structures of the main rural areas. In their theoretical part, the authors question the functionality of the export base theory in rural/regional development and analyse opportunities for a post-productivist approach. Taking post-productivism as their starting point, they elaborate on a principal transformation model for Baltic rural areas and outline the main differences compared with Western and other Central and Eastern European countries.

The next contribution is written by Agata Spazianta and Chiara Murano, who consider the new European rural development programme for 2007–2013 that disciplines the financial support to the rural development of the member states. The paper explores in particular the role of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) in monitoring the evolution of the territories involved in the ‘urban-rural’ duality, by elaborating the results from a study of two regions in the Northern Italy (Piedmont and Valle d’Aosta).

In her paper, Vania Paccagnan analyses the effects of policy innovation in rural afforestation in a case study centred on Milan, Italy. Firstly, by analysing the governance of rural afforestation policies, the paper provides insights on how planning by public authorities interacts with private actors to deliver landscape and environmental quality. Secondly, it shows whether and how different stakeholders are able to collaborate in the case considered, where the regional government has created public-private partnerships in afforestation policy.

In the following paper, Nava Haruvy and Sarit Shalhevet examine the actual potential of ‘food miles’ policies in reducing the environmental impact of the foodstuff market in Israel. The study compares the sustainability of local versus imported agricultural production by considering the environmental and human health impacts of transport (including climate change) and their effect on growers’ profits.

In an analytically-oriented paper, Stéphanie Blanquart discusses the role of multi-criteria decision-aid (MCDA) to promote sustainable agriculture, with a focus on heterogeneous data and different kinds of actors in a regional agricultural decision process involving pesticide risk management. The ELECTRE-tri multi-criteria approach is applied in a critical review of key factors and impediments concerning the implementation of low-input agricultural practices are identified.

Another analytically-oriented paper is that of by Stephen Hynes, Karyn Morrissey, Cathal O'Donoghue and Graham Clarke, who explore the impact of future CAP reform on the distribution of family farm income in rural Ireland. A static farm level microsimulation model is developed and applied to Ireland by using new spatially disaggregated farm population microdata that match the Irish Census of Agriculture to the 2005 Irish National Farm Survey (NFS).

From a policy perspective, Tiina Heikkinen studies the effect of the reduction and decoupling of national support when taking into account disinvestment flexibility and policy uncertainty in the agricultural sector. The paper presents the results from a case study undertaken in Finland. The conclusions provide mixed evidence. The reduction and decoupling of national support will cause a significant reduction in investments. However, assuming disinvestment flexibility, decoupling, if accompanied by fixed compensating payments, will increase income stability and a higher level of investments can be achieved even with lower subsidies. Increased income stability may also diminish the dynamic cost of income uncertainty.

The final paper gives an Asian perspective. In her paper, Lily Y. Kiminami focuses on food security and sustainability in Asia. The paper analyses the impact of economic growth on food consumption in Asia by taking the wealth gap into consideration.

The various papers in this special issue on 'Rurality and Sustainability' of the *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology* inform the readership of recent advances in the analysis of the changes in rural development and the challenges faced by the research community. They illustrate that sustainable rural development is a rich research field, where more progress is needed and is to be expected in impact assessment, evaluation and policy analysis regarding the new opportunities for 'modern rurality'.