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► To cite this version:

Yves Léon, Philippe Perrier-Cornet, Christophe Soulard, E. Pitts, . Teagasc. Rural futures. Alternative scenarios for rural society to 2020: results of a French study. Rural development conference 2004, Mar 2004, Tullamore, Ireland. hal-01931557

HAL Id: hal-01931557

<https://hal.science/hal-01931557>

Submitted on 4 Jun 2020

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Rural Futures. Alternative scenarios for rural society to 2020: Results of a French study

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Abstract

The foresight approach presented in this paper is a contribution to a work set up by the French land planning agency (DATAR) on the theme "Land planning for the France of 2020". The future of rural space is a matter of concern because of the rapid economic polarization movement towards the metropolis and their surroundings observed for the three last decades. This movement threatens the viability of rural space. The foresight study is based on scenarios building. Rural space is seen as a system which ensures various functions: residence, production, nature. Each function and the global context are considered as subsystems driven by a set of key variables. Combining the various modalities of any subsystem variables allows us to build partial scenarios. In turn those partial scenarios are combined to design four global scenarios describing the possible futures of the French rural space: a generalized residential countryside, sustainable towns and large farms, towards the nature countryside, active and competitive rural areas. The reflection leading to the design of these scenarios is marked by a growing influence of urbanized society on the future of natural and rural spaces.

1. Introduction¹

At the end of the 1940s a French geographer, Jean-François Gravier, entitled a book "Paris et le désert français" (Paris and the French desert), which aimed at showing how the centuries long centralisation policy of the French governments had had negative consequences on the distribution of wealth and activities over the territory. Actually just after the Second World War the imbalances between the Parisian region and the "Provinces" were so high that seen from Paris or outside France the capital city was surrounded by a territory with both poor cultural and economic achievements and a weak political and managing weight. At that time the central government had the leadership in almost all fields, even in those where a sound subsidiarity policy could have been beneficial.

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¹ This presentation draws from an unpublished paper written by Philippe Perrier-Cornet and Christophe Soulard in November 2003, entitled "Dynamique et prospective des espaces ruraux". We are indebted in the contributions of the working group "Espaces naturels et ruraux et société urbanisée" chaired by Bertrand Hervieu (President INRA) and led by Philippe Perrier-Cornet (Director of research with INRA).

Progressively the drawbacks of such a situation appeared clearer at least as regards economic and social matters. Général de Gaulle, the President of the French Republic from 1958 to 1969 decided to launch a decentralisation process giving a limited economic and political power to a set of new regions. The geographical basis of those regions was adapted from the set of the old French provinces of the Monarchy. For example the current Region of Brittany is composed of almost all the territory of the historic province. At the same time a land planning policy, coordinated with the successive economic plans, was established. The DATAR², an agency in charge of advising the government on land planning and regional actions was also founded in the 1960s and since this time contributes to shaping French regional and land planning policy.

Although the decentralisation process has contributed to rebalance the economic fabric and the distribution of political power in France to some extent there is still a need for further progress because Paris remains a super metropolis (15 million inhabitants) as compared with the largest French towns, Lyons and Marseille, the population (including suburbs) of which is not higher than 2 million people. In fact besides the French centralised tradition the economic mechanisms push towards an accelerated concentration of activities and population in the metropolitan areas. In that context a reflection on the possible futures of the French territories with a vision on economic efficiency and territorial development is not only topical but also crucial. It is the reason why the French government has recently asked DATAR to lead a foresight study called "Aménager la France de 2020" due to be the basis for future land planning and decentralisation policy³.

Among the concerns of the DATAR reflection appears the future of rural space in so far as countryside is more contributing to the general phenomenon of polarization and economic concentration than benefiting from it. Therefore a working group entitled "Rural and natural spaces and urbanized society" has worked over three years to build a vision of possible futures for French rural space that are the subject of this presentation.

It may be interesting to list the last foresight exercises coordinated by DATAR as regards countryside or agriculture. From the beginning of the 1990s when foresight was relaunched in France three foresight studies have been conducted with the following subjects: first, rural space, second, agriculture, last, links between countryside and towns. This reflects the changes, which occurred in the concerns of society over the last decade. The results of the third foresight study have been partly used to design the "rural space policy" law recently voted by the Parliament.

2. A method: the scenarios approach

Given the complexity of the drivers leading the changes in rural space it was decided to adopt a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach including economic, sociological, geographical and political points of view. Therefore the working group has been composed accordingly.

2.1 a brief reminder of the foresight approach

Foresight is characterised by three distinctive features (Jouvenel, 1999):

- a multidisciplinary perspective including a systemic view. Foresight aims at addressing the studied facts comprehensively taking into account all aspects and variables whatever they are,

² DATAR, Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale, whose current Chief Executive is Mr Nicolas Jacquet.

³ A translation could be « Land planning for the France of 2020 ». 15 working groups were created. This reflection is likely to be compared to the one underlying The Irish National Spatial Strategy.

- an approach dealing with the long term, in its past as well as future dimension. Such an approach permits work on variables which change slowly, eliminates short term effects and provides the capacity to think of crucial transformations,
- a perspective capable to integrate wanted or unwanted breakings and discontinuities

Five stages are used by foresight

- 1 definition of the issue to address and choice of the horizon,
- 2 system building and identification of drivers
- 3 data collection and building of hypotheses
- 4 possible futures building,
- 5 strategic choices

In our case the issue to be dealt with is clearly identified as well as the time horizon fixed by DATAR. Stages 2 and 3 will be discussed later and we did not examine the strategic choices issue, which was beyond our commitment. Regarding stage 4: possible futures building, two main methods of simulations of the future exist: modelling or scenarios building.

Quantitative models use equations systems representing the interactions between the variables of a subsystem isolated from its context. A model is based on the observation of past trends. To give reliable results the model should be correctly designed. Moreover it is hypothesized that the subsystem structure is going to remain unchanged in the future on the one hand and its functioning is not to be disrupted by new or unidentified variables on the other. Finally a model heavily relies on the hypotheses made at the beginning of the work. If they are arbitrary or weakly argued the outcomes would have the same status whatever the analytical sophistication of the model.

The scenarios approach is based on the idea that a rough approximation is better than an accurate but false forecast (Godet, 2001).

2.2 Scenarios

A scenario is made up of three elements:

- the base line which is our representation of the current situation,
- the paths representing changes in the system within the time span. Those paths include the issues to answer on the basis of the chosen hypotheses and the outcomes of the chosen answers,
- the final images of the system

There are many difficulties to tackle when building scenarios. Among them the required attention to pay to the paths design and not only the final image and the ability to imagine differentiated emergence times for changes and breakings.

Finally a distinction should be made between *exploratory scenarios* exploring possible futures and *normative scenarios* (or strategic scenarios) that propose actions to reach a specific policy objective in the future.

3. Rural space and urbanized society in France

To understand the current and future dynamics of rural space one should simultaneously use three key points of view:

- first, the linkages between towns and countryside marked by people mobility between those two categories of space in an urbanized society,
- second, the various functions of rural areas focusing on the complementarities and tensions between the different usages of the land, and

- last, the rural areas management including both the aims of a public policy for the countryside and rural space seen as a common good belonging to the whole society.

Although those issues are not exhaustive they seem to be broad enough to encompass the main challenges faced by rural space in the coming twenty years (Perrier-Cornet, 2001 and 2002).

3.1 Mobility: the new relationship between towns and countryside

Since the 1970s there has been a breaking in the towns-countryside linkages. Traditionally the rural areas contributed to urban growth by the means of rural exodus. However there are now patterns of mobility characterized by new residential styles, people working in urban areas and dwelling in the countryside either permanently or in leisure time. Simultaneously a general concentration of economic activities in the metropolitan areas is going on while some limited deconcentration movements towards peripheral areas take place also. It seems clear that urban dwellers try to combine the advantages of the towns with those of the country and do not hesitate to commute daily or frequently.

The major outcome of this trend seems to be the ongoing process of urban spread in the surrounding towns and the immediate rural areas. This counter urbanisation is accompanied by a population growth in most rural areas even in some remote ones due to the arrival of new residents. Finally this phenomenon is subject to rather strong geographical disparities according to regions. Urban spread requires dynamic regional metropolis if it is to affect developments in its hinterland.

Regarding economic activities the central trend remains a steady process of jobs and activities agglomeration in the economic poles. The main driver of this movement is a decrease in transport costs and more generally in communication costs that favours the organization of firms networks in already concentrated areas. It does not seem that ICT are able to impede the economic concentration despite hopes that were placed on them in the previous decades. On the contrary ICT appear to strengthen the main trend in so far as they remove obstacles to information transfer (Rallet, 2000).

3.2 Functions and usages of the countryside

Some decades ago rural areas were essentially devoted to a productive function. The main rural activity was agriculture and by and large most rural dwellers organized their activity in connection with this industry. The mountainous and coastal areas had a more diversified pattern of activities due to tourism, fishing and marine industries although they were also deeply involved in farm activity. Nowadays this picture is no longer typical even if agriculture and other traditional rural activities maintain a significant proportion of employment and value added and contribute to maintaining the productive role of rural areas. We have already mentioned how rural areas are now settled by housing for urban people. The residential function including the leisure function of rural space is considerably growing because of the attractiveness of the landscape and other rural amenities for urban people. Transport facilities now available also facilitate commuting while transport costs decline. This change is likely to have been the main one in the last thirty years.

The last function of rural areas we would like to stress regards "nature". Our conception of nature should be briefly clarified to be well understood. In our view nature is a set of resources (water, biodiversity, soil, etc.) and functions (climatic and ecosystemic regulation, etc.). In that perspective nature is a biodynamic system on which human activities impact, independently of consumers preferences. Such a conception does not refer to rural amenities included in the second function we have just mentioned.

Keeping these functions in mind the main trends affecting the usages of rural space can be analysed. Until now the countryside has been organized by and for agriculture. With the

decline of this activity and the growth of new life styles and values of the urban society, other usages become prominent so that competition, tensions and often conflicts are growing regarding land use. From this point of view the Breton case may be of interest because it emphasizes the range of conflicts that arise in a rural area where an intensive agriculture generating a serious non-point pollution is severely competing with an increasing use of countryside for residence in the urban periphery and leisure and tourism in the coastal areas (Daucé, Léon, 2002). Therefore, two main features are likely to shape the coming changes in the countryside:

- first, a new vision of the relations between its productive and residential functions and the space to be devoted to each,
- second, the growing concerns on the nature function and the policy to be implemented. Regarding the territorial organisation the way decisions will be taken on both issues may lead to contrasted situations.

3.3 rural space management

This issue can be examined according to three items. The first one regards the contents and objectives of a rural public policy. In France rural policy has long been based on a spatial equity principle. According to this principle the countryside – in fact the farmers – deserved aids to struggle against the territorial disparities and avoid desertification. However because of the changes mentioned earlier such a position can be challenged all the more so since there exists a trade off between two objectives: allocative efficiency versus social cohesion. Should a distinctive policy be maintained in rural space? European integration is likely to impact this issue by the means of CAP and rural development policy and the orientations given to the common nature policy

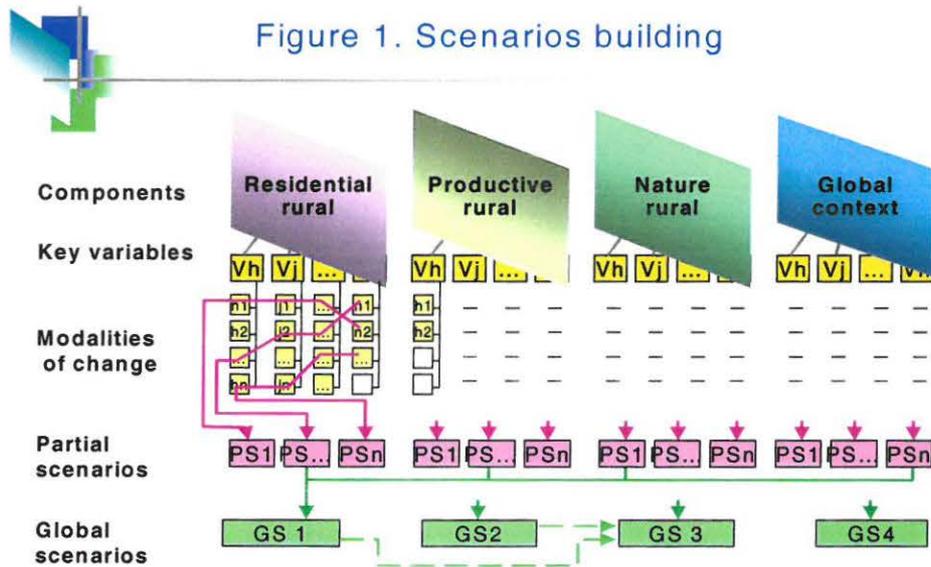
Another item concerns the devolution and distribution of competences among the various levels of public administration. France has entered a long-term process of political decentralisation with the creation of regions, grouping together several *départements* on the one hand and *pays* (infra-*départemental* territories) on the other. Given the already ancient existence of *communes* (parishes) and *départements* (95 in France) there is a debate on the role of those various levels of administration regarding the design and implementation of policy in general and of rural policy in particular.

Finally the growing room now devoted to life environment and nature in the rural areas may be the signal of a kind of “publicization” of the countryside. Using this neologism we refer to the fact that a development of the nature and residential functions of rural spaces goes together with an increased interest in public goods: amenities, biodiversity, landscape, etc. that are at the basis of those functions. Therefore rural public goods are more and more valued and consumed. How to manage their usage when their production largely relies on private property? New institutional arrangements must be imagined to deal with the emerging complexity of the local situations.

4. Scenarios for the future

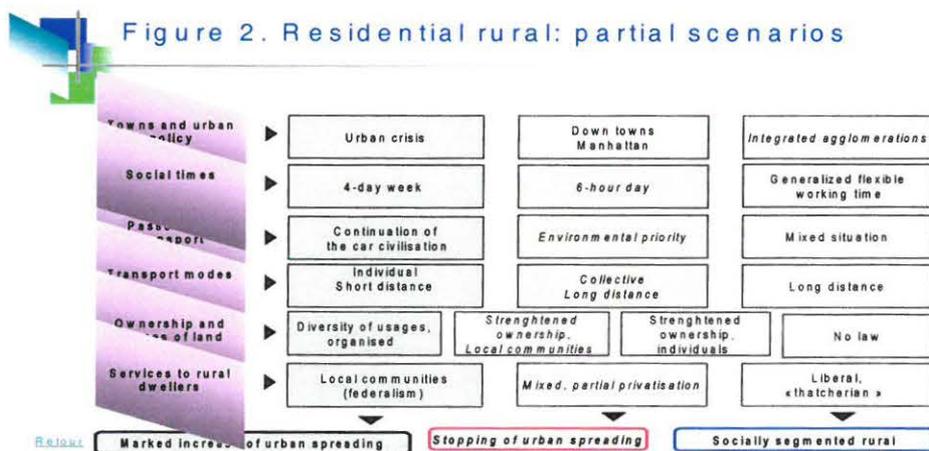
Using the principles described above scenario building has been conducted in four stages (figure 1):

1. The functions of the rural and the global environment are taken as subsystems for each of which key variables are defined,
2. Hypotheses or modalities of change are elaborated for each key variable,
3. Combining various modalities under a reasoned way ensuring compatibility lead to partial scenarios for each subsystem,
4. Combining partial scenarios leads to global scenarios



Applying the method shown in the figure 1 leads to a set of four global scenarios that combine various change modalities of the subsystems key variables.

Let us examine as an example the key variables driving the changes in the **residential rural subsystem** and leading to the partial scenarios for this subsystem (figure 2).



On the left hand side are listed the selected variables. They refer to urban policy, working styles, transport modes and styles on the one hand, ownership and usages of land as well as services to rural inhabitants on the other. The modalities taken by the variables open possible futures. In the case of the variable "Towns and urban policy" for instance we assume three possible paths: towns face serious crises due to both congestion problems and

security issues, towns concentrate life in their downtown districts, towns develop under an integrated mode. Each modality is underlain by a distinctive urban policy. Regarding the variable “Passengers transport” the trade off is clearly between a continued encouragement to the use of individual cars, despite the drawbacks such a policy generate in terms of pollution and congestion, and a priority given to environmental considerations. The assumed compatibility between the presented modalities allows to design three partial scenarios “marked increase of urban spreading”, “stopping of urban spreading” and “socially segmented rural” strongly characterised by the decisions taken in and for the towns.

In the next step the partial scenarios built for each subsystems can be combined to organize the global scenarios. Table 1 shows the various partial scenarios that have been kept for each subsystem. In most cases a global scenario will be built using only one partial scenario of each subsystem. However there is no methodological objection to combine two partial scenarios of a given subsystem (as far as they are compatible) to build a global scenario. This is the case of the partial scenarios “World governance and strong institutions” and “Powerful Europe” which are used to build the global scenario “Sustainable towns and corporate farms” that will be described next. Also any partial scenario may be included in the building of two global scenarios. “World governance and strong institutions” appears to characterize a global context favourable to the global scenarios “Sustainable towns and corporate farms” and “Towards the nature countryside”.

Table 1. Partial scenarios

Subsystems	Partial scenarios			
Global context	Liberal world with few regulations 1, 4	World governance and strong institutions 2, 3	Powerful Europe 2	“Law and order” societies
Residential rural	Marked increase of the urban spread 1	Stopping of the urban spread 2	Socially segmented rural 3, 4	
Productive rural	rural areas zoned 2	Rural society of local entrepreneurs 4	Rural society for services 1	Rural economy declining 3
Nature rural	Nature in the background 1, 4	Nature managed locally 2	Nature in the foreground 3	
Global scenarios	1. Generalized residential countryside	2. Sustainable towns and corporate large farms	3. Towards the nature countryside	4. Active and competitive rural areas

Table 1 can be read as follows.

In the environment of a liberal world with few regulations (Global context subsystem) a decreasing power of governmental institutions leads to a marked increase of urban spread (Residential rural subsystem). In such a case the countryside is no longer organized by agriculture but should meet the needs of its residents. The productive function of farms declines (CAP is weakening) and the farmers provide various services to the rural residents the number of which has dramatically increased (Productive rural subsystem). The

management of rural space does not aim at preserving the natural resource (Nature rural subsystem). This combination of modalities leads to a first global scenario named “a generalized residential countryside”.

The second global scenario “Sustainable towns and large corporate farms” is derived from the possible existence of a more regulated society (Global context). The global environment is characterized by strong institutions able to design and enforce policies regarding residence, production, nature etc. World governance is hypothesized and towns manage to meet the various challenges they face. Towns are sustainable and urban spread is monitored (Residential rural). As a consequence rural areas are organized according to the interests of farmers who are able to meet the environmental demands of society (Productive rural). This demand is managed at the regional and local levels (Nature rural).

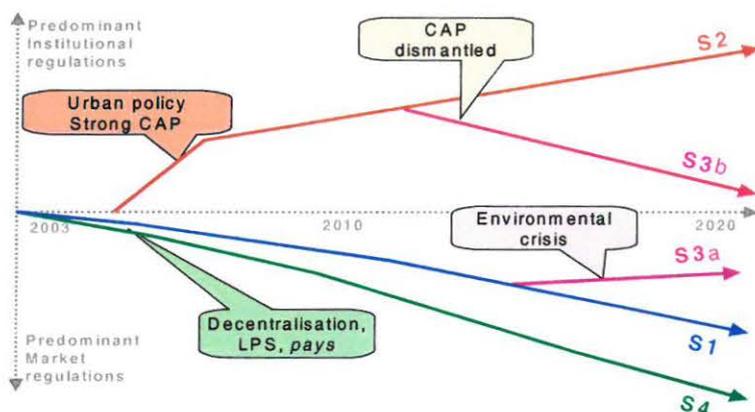
The third possible future for rural areas entitled “Towards the nature countryside” is underlain by a world concern regarding the nature challenges (climatic change, biodiversity, natural risks, etc.). Such a concern is taken over by world institutions and governments even in a liberal context. Rural residence is possible for wealthy urban people only (Residential rural). Farmers’ influence declines due to the priority given to the preservation and maintenance of landscapes and natural resources that are managed by various rural actors (Productive rural). The whole of rural space is organized to meet the environmental challenges (Nature rural).

Finally, the fourth scenario “Active and competitive rural areas” emerges when central government and institutions are weakening (Global context). This is assumed to happen in a liberal world environment where individual initiative is encouraged. Middle classes become weaker and rural residence is open to wealthy people only (Residential rural). Local entrepreneurs are the heralds of local productive systems, which allow rural people to live and work at home. Emphasis is put on the competitiveness of the rural territories (Productive rural). This option leads to a less attention paid to environmental issues (Nature rural).

Occurrence probability

These four scenarios are not equally probable (figure 3). Although the “Generalized residential countryside” cannot be seen as a trend scenario only, it seems obvious that its occurrence probability is rather high in the short term in so far as its main components are already present. On the contrary the second one “Sustainable towns and large corporate farms” needs a re-evaluation of urban priorities and a strong willingness to make towns sustainable. Therefore this scenario is likely to describe a more distant future. The “Active and competitive rural areas” scenario occurs in a global context where regulations derive mainly from markets – as in the first scenario – and may appear in the short term if the decentralisation process goes further. Finally the “Nature rural” scenario is seen as a breaking one that may emerge in the medium term as an alternative of the “Sustainable towns and large corporate farms” if there is a dismantling of the CAP. It may also happen in the case of a serious environmental crisis, which challenges the liberal approach assumed for the “Generalized residential countryside” scenario.

Figure 3. Scenarios trajectories



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