
Résumé : In the European Union (EU), two major recent changes are framing the development of the regulation of agriculture. First, a decentralisation trend can be observed in most of the member states, resulting from both national and EU policies: the modernisation of state apparatus combines with the “subsidiarity” principle of the EU which assumes that policy decisions have to be decentralised as much as is rationally and functionally possible. Second, changes in agricultural policies, shifting from market support to rural development (“Second Pillar” of the CAP) and then to multiple forms of support for the multi-functionality of agriculture, are resulting in a renewed policy framework, generally directed by the EU and implemented differently in the member states and regions. A cross-examination of these parallel trends is necessary to answer some basic questions, mainly: is there a change in the regional frameworks which organise the regulation of agriculture? What kind of differences can be observed in several European regions and how can these differences be explained? What is the particular shape of this evolution in the regions of a semi-centralised country like France? To answer these questions, field and institutional data have been collected in several European regions: Rhône-Alpes (France) as a central reference for the analysis, and other regions located in Germany, Spain and the United-Kingdom.

The implementation of European policies in the regions and the creation of specific regional policies show that the regionalisation process actually results in a growing involvement of the regions in the regulation of agriculture. This process must be accurately analysed because of the major issues which are at stake: increasing risks of new inequalities in the EU, an uncertain future for sector policies, the possible shift from a Europe “of the states” to a Europe “of the regions”, and the possible evolution and diversity of support for the multi-functionality of agriculture. Even in France, where the regions have little power to influence agricultural policies, their role is real and growing. Yet generally, beyond regionalist discourses, the European regions do not always appear to be a key level for the coherence of multilevel policies. The regional level often tries to integrate rural development, agro-environment and most territory-centred regulations, but in many cases it does not represent a coherent level of general regulation. A good example can be observed in the support for and marginalisation of agricultural pluri-activity at regional level.

In highly decentralised regions of federal (Germany) or quasi-federal (Spain, UK) countries, the regions play a key role in implementing both sector (“First Pillar) and rural
(“Second Pillar”) policies. This results in extensive diversification of regional policies, primarily for the implementation of the EU Rural Development Policy (RDR regulation): the EU, State and Region financial support and institutional reorganisation are oriented either towards support to farmers, in a close relationship with the dominant farmers unions as in the past, or towards more innovative policies centred around new actors involved in rural development, and organised in new local institutions.

Consequently, the diversification of policies at the basic political level of regions (and of “departments” in some countries) results in opposite trends which shape different models of policies in Europe. The determining factors of this dichotomy are: i) the huge inequality of regions’ resources and especially of those available for agricultural policies; and ii) the ability of every region to decentralise itself and to build sub-regional regulation levels.

Decentralisation appears to be a new and growing part of public regulation of agriculture. This leads to a new pattern of the relationship and of the competences between the EU, State and Region levels. It would nevertheless be risky to overestimate the regional role. The region is frequently not the main regulating level. In France, even a creative and “rich” region like Rhône-Alpes plays only one of the regulatory roles, without really co-ordinating the supra-levels, the State and the EU, and the sub-levels, the departments. Moreover, diverse and sometimes contradictory regional policies shape a number of possible ways to develop agriculture, or not, and to include it in new structures such as rural development and the multi-functionality of agriculture. Therefore, an analysis of regional policy trends is important, not because the European regions are ruling the new CAP – which they are not – but because they may be outlining future forms of involvement of agriculture in the general liberalisation trend.