THEME 5
RURAL DEVELOPMENT.
THE NEW RURALITY
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1. INTRODUCTION

The rural world has for some decades now been facing a complex and changing environment, but its development is always a determining factor in strategies for national development in impoverished countries, in terms of both the implementation of adjustment policies and remittances from emigrants, in order to continue the fight against poverty or to promote human development.

Agriculture, which has been at the centre of the rural world for centuries, is now facing massive challenges, ranging from the impact of macroeconomic policies to the problems of pricing and markets which occupy much of the multilateral debate. These issues range from the crisis in production systems to the constant migration of the rural population to the cities, from problems of availability of credit to obstacles in accessing education and health services.

The agricultural export model which has been the basis of the development policies in the countries of the South is now reaching its limits, and is being governed by processes of liberalisation. These processes offer the opportunity to take advantage of markets in developed countries, but also create the risk of competition from these same countries on the domestic markets of developing countries. The negative impact of the processes of trade liberalisation and the progressive reduction of official subsidies for the agricultural sector are two further factors increasing the vulnerability of the rural world.

Agricultural negotiations within the framework of the WTO have suggested a debate of considerable interest as to the extent to which the liberalisation of trade and the removal of barriers to agricultural products in rich countries is favourable to developing countries and those of the South. The question is whether it is better to open up the markets of the South, or to encourage the South to defend its markets. The importance of balanced internal markets with the capacity to withstand external shocks has emerged as a key factor in underpinning the fight against poverty and food safety. This last concept represents a central point in the recent analysis of the challenges facing agriculture and the rural world.

But the rural world goes beyond simply agriculture. The process of the diversification of activities in the rural environment, although not new, is on the increase. The debate as to these new functions opens up options for development and provides solutions to some problems of the rural world. Multi-functionality is also at the centre of multilateral debates as to whether or not agricultural subsidies are appropriate.

Beyond WTO negotiation strategies, there is a wealth of experience of rural development based on such new functions. The European Union, with its LEADER programmes, and the focus on the new rurality in Latin America are good examples of this. Following a period of revision of integrated rural development programmes, the demands for a territorial focus in the planning of international development cooperation are again giving way to rural development as an area of action.

The experiment of rural development in various regions of the world highlights the importance of certain factors in reducing rural poverty and promoting the productive transformation of the rural world. For example, the need for a specific institutional framework, for ties between rural development and territorial development strategies, and the need to seek shared interests among the various agents involved in the territory.
2. OBJECTIVES

The specific aims pursued by the Thematic Line on “Rural Development: the New Rurality” of the International Congress on Human Development are as follows:

1. To analyse the impact and appropriateness of trade liberalisation in agriculture for rural development and the fight against poverty in developing countries.
2. To establish the factors in the agricultural crisis and the potential for new functions within the rural context.
3. To evaluate those elements of adjustment and reform programmes which have the greatest impact on development and rural policy.
4. To identify the determining factors of rural development in the developing world.
5. To identify and compare factors in the success and failure experienced by territorial rural development programmes.

3. TARGET AUDIENCE

The thematic line on rural development is intended for those professional, academic and political sectors of civil society, the business world, public authorities and aid organisations in both the public and private spheres which are involved in the global debate on the future of the rural world. The impact of globalisation and the crisis in agriculture is the central focus of international negotiations on trade and development, of international strategies for the fight against poverty, and the debate as to development policies at a national and local level. The thematic line will be publicised in research centres and university departments connected with the field of development, along with the official European aid agencies and the head offices of NGOs in Europe and the regions of the South. The sectors affected by international negotiations and the civil servants and experts involved in them. International organisations such as the ECLAC, the IAD and the World Bank may also serve as a prominent channel of information.

4. WORKING FORMAT

The working format of the thematic line on Rural Development is based on the following sequence:

1. Presentation of the thematic block and the speakers by the moderator (5-10 minutes).
2. Main speaker (45 minutes, if only one speaker; 1 hour if two speakers)
3. Commentator (15 minutes, if only one speaker).
4. Debate among speakers and questions from the floor (30 minutes).