OECD REVIEW OF RURAL POLICY IN SWITZERLAND

The OECD Group of the Council on Rural Development reviewed rural policy in Switzerland in the course of its meeting in Paris from 7th to 9th December 1994. After Finland, this was the second review by the OECD of the rural policy of a Member country.

Switzerland is densely populated in comparison with most OECD Member countries, but 40 per cent of its population lives on more than 80 per cent of territory which is described as rural. In fact, rural areas make a significant contribution to the national economy and to Switzerland’s image in the world. The table (in annex) summarises the main features of Switzerland’s regions.

As part of its government programme for the period ending in 1995, the Swiss Federal Council has set the goal of re-orienting its current regional policy. One result of the co-operative efforts of the federal offices concerned with the new orientation of regional policy has been the development of a draft Action programme to overcome structural changes and promote co-operation in rural areas (REGIO-Plus)(1). The design of the draft programme was carried out with the support of the Advisory Commission to the Federal Council on Regional Policy.

From the outset, Switzerland collaborated actively with the OECD, which has been addressing this issue for several years. Thus, the Organisation was invited by the Swiss authorities to carry out an "ex-ante" review of the REGIO-Plus Programme before its submission to the Swiss decision-makers for approval. In that context, OECD experts also carried out on-the-spot studies of the current structures and forthcoming challenges in various rural areas of the Jura, the Plains and the Alps.

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(1) The draft REGIO-Plus Programme was drawn up by the Centrale pour le développement économique régional of the Office fédéral de l’industrie, des arts et métiers et du travail (OFIAMT/CEDER), in co-operation with the Office fédéral de l’aménagement du territoire (OFAT), the Office fédéral de l’agriculture (OFAG), the Office fédéral de l’environnement, des forêts et du paysage (OFEFP), and the Service du tourisme of OFIAMT.

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In view of the coming structural adjustment in the agricultural sector (agricultural policy reform and the GATT Agreement) and the tendency of the industrial and services sectors’ tendency towards spatial concentration, the development of Switzerland’s rural areas requires, as in other OECD countries, appropriate structural measures to be taken by the federal authorities.

The problems and challenges of rural development must by their nature be dealt with locally, but consideration must also be given to their regional context as well as to the growing integration of rural areas into the national and international economy. These issues must also be addressed in the light of the major spatial impact of many of the sectoral policies introduced by the federal authorities.

The draft REGIO-Plus Programme is aimed at helping to resolve these issues. By design a multidisciplinary, market-driven incentive programme, its goal is to help rural areas adapt to structural adjustment by promoting and turning to account their economic and socio-cultural diversity and multifunctionality.

By promoting the implementation of innovative, exemplary and economically viable projects, the establishment of new kinds of partnerships and institutional arrangements and, finally, the enhancement of Switzerland’s rich natural and man-made heritage, REGIO-Plus gives rural policy sufficient scope to deal with changing conditions in Switzerland and in the world. As one of a series of similar initiatives taken by other OECD Member countries, it is of international importance.

In conclusion, the OECD considers the expected implementation of the REGIO-Plus Programme an appropriate and necessary addition to Switzerland’s present array of regional policy tools. It would be a means of answering the challenges facing rural communities while at the same time fulfilling the expectations of society as a whole where rural areas are concerned.

Members of the press who require a fuller report of the review or any other information should contact Mr. Christian Huillet, Acting Head, Rural Development Programme, OECD, Paris (tel.: +33 1 45 24 90 78) or Mr. Rudolf Schiess, Section Head, Centrale pour le développement économique régional, OFIAMT, Bern (tel.: +41 31 322 28 20).