

# **The Empty Rural Area Diagonal in France (“ Diagonale du vide “)**

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## **1. Introduction**

As industrialized and commercialized economy grows fast, agricultural production becomes less important. The income from agriculture is relatively low. Outflow of population leaves mostly old people to stay and villages look depressed without any early productivity, vitality and attraction. Low income and lack of employment opportunities are the major reasons for a great deal of population outflow. Furthermore, the increasing gap between urban and rural development, less developed construction in rural area, insufficient public infrastructure, poor working conditions and living environment are all the major factors that lead rural population especially younger people to move to urban areas (Liu, 2010).

The French “diagonale du vide” is an interesting case study because it illustrates a pattern that is specific to developed countries; the impact of rural exodus on rural areas. Rural exodus is a massive migratory flux of the rural population from the countryside toward the City. It often leads to demographic inequality and in the case of the French “empty diagonal” has an important impact on the development of certain rural areas. A low density zone is very visible on the density map of France. From the northeast of France to the southwest, several counties have a density below 30 inhabitants per square kilometers (the defined level for low density). This area which is extending across the whole country is called “la diagonale du vide”, or the diagonal of emptiness.

Two thirds of the territory hosts only ten percent of the total population. Low density’s counties do not have any industrial or commercial activity; the population ages. There is nothing attractive for young people to settle. Furthermore, the low densities problems are worsened. From 1982 to 1990, 20 out of 22 counties with negative growth rate were low density’s ones. In this paper, we will discuss why such

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an important migratory flux happened? What were the consequences on the French rural counties? And what policy the French government has implemented accordingly?

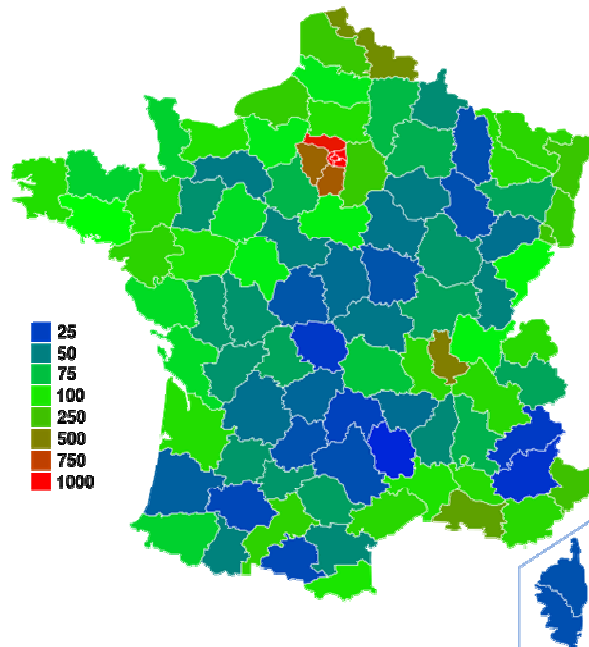


Figure 1. French Density Map per County

## 2. Origins of the inequalities between counties

All the different aspects of the inequalities observed in the “diagonale du vide” are linked to each other. One can assume that the first factor that entailed this scarcity of the services in those areas is the demographic factor. The beginning of the rural exodus occurred in the early 20th century. At this time, about 40% of the French population was living in rural area. It kept decreasing until it reached 8% in 1985. The depopulation of the countryside began with the industrial development in Europe. The modernization of agricultural practices, as farming was the first professional sector in rural area, changed the rural world. Indeed, new agricultural machines were available and reduced the labor of the farmers. One man was able to cultivate by himself a more important field. Less work available and a better life quality in the cities entailed a migratory flux toward the urban area.

This phenomenon was observed everywhere in France, but it was especially marked in the area which today form the “diagonale du vide”. Some French rural areas are very well developed with an important tourism and a good density. How to explain such differences between counties? One can explain this by the geography factor, these regions have high relief and limestone plateaus, but it is not the most

important. There are other French regions that have developed very well with those kinds of disadvantages. The Alps which presents very high altitude and significant relief have successfully developed a tourist sector.

The main factor remains the economic one. These inland regions did not develop any industrialized activity like urban areas that could have boosted their economy. A very important aspect of attractiveness in French rural tourism is the gastronomy and local products. These counties have failed in promoting these kinds of goods.

Beside the demographic aspect, there are many consequences on the life quality and the land management in these counties. Thereby, one can notice a real imbalance in the transportation system and in the extent of the Internet access. As well, there are few job opportunities in those counties and their contribution to the national GDP is often weak.

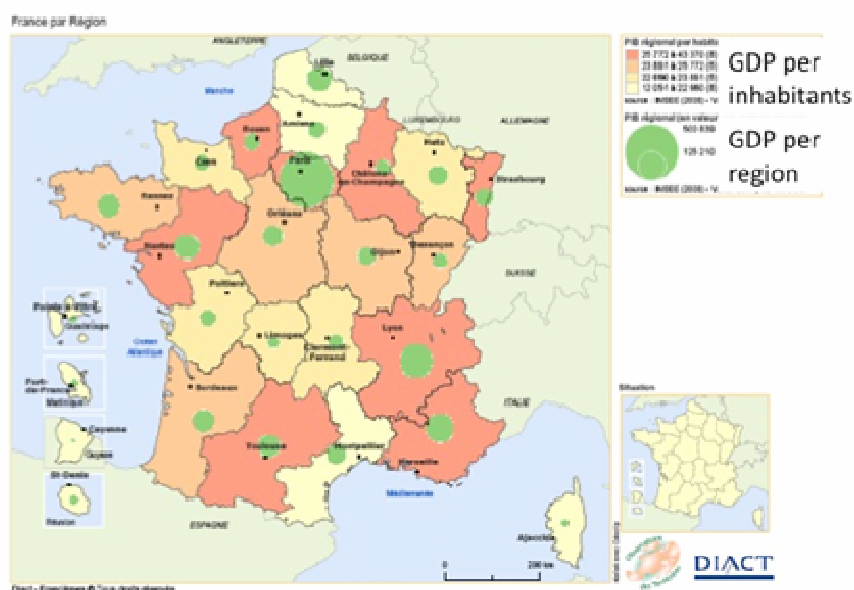


Figure 2. Repartition of the GDP

Paris appears like the center of a big network of the transportation, where are the majority of the population and most of the economic resources of the country are concentrated here. We can observe the pattern of the Central-Place theory of W. Christaller, with the capital as the center of the network. But at a national scale the repartition of the resource is not equal. How come such an imbalance occurred in French rural counties?

If these problems in rural area can not be solved, the gap between urban and rural development continue to expand, rural population continue to flow out, then it

will not only cause insufficient rural construction and public investment but also leave historical and culturally significant buildings and relics worn and torn owing to lack of repair and maintenance. In the contrary, in urban area, concentration of Industries and businesses and rapid increase of population outpaces that of the public construction. It results in insufficient public facilities and housing, rise in price of land, shortage of green land, which as a whole affect urban living quality and environment. The continuous increase of urban population will also cause disorder in urban area, traffic chaos, and noise pollution and so on. The increasing gap between urban and rural development and overpopulated city will introduce various social and economic problems. Therefore, if the problems with the rural cannot be solved, then the problems with city cannot be solved either. (Liu, 2002)

It is usually used as an important index of national development of different countries to see if the urban and rural development is balanced or if the regional income is even. Territorial planning target to guarantee all the national residents balanced quality living conditions. Therefore, how to improve rural residents' working conditions and living environment and seek balanced regional development is a major topic of territorial planning and economic development.

### **3. Measures taken by the government to improve the rural life quality**

Low-density areas represent a cost for the community. The government must provide to all the citizens, the ones living in the city and the ones living in those counties, an equal life quality. That is why rural development must be completed in the counties that require it. The first reference to this unbalance between rural and urban areas was made in 1947 in a report of Jean-François Gravier called *Paris and the French desert*. Since then, the French government has been trying to implement rural development policy laws to tackle this issue.

In France, rural policies are made by the DATAR (Délégation interministérielle pour l'Aménagement du Territoire et l'Attractivité Régionale), the Interministerial Delegation for Regional Planning and Regional Attractiveness. It created the rural revitalization zones (ZRR) in 1995. There are defined as areas facing special difficulties: low density and structural socio-economic handicap. Those areas will have special law enforcements in order to boost their development. Thereby, every company that would settle in those counties will benefit tax exemption on their revenue or on their real estate. As well, there would be tax exemption for every professional engaged in a non-commercial activity (such as physicians, nurse,

lawyer, ...), for investors in the tourism sector. Artisans or merchants willing to take over a business in those areas would benefit financial support from the government. The government will compensate every year the turnover's losses of the local authorities entailed by those measures.

Beside all these measures specific to the ZRR, the DATAR ensures the good quality life in all French counties. It achieves it by developing action plan for rural territory development, call for project of innovating industry, organization of services to public, others policies are also carried out at a county scale.

Another policy that has an important impact on the development of these areas is the Agricultural European policy. Indeed, these areas are strongly based on farming; therefore the subsidies will have a strong influence on the development of the region.

In order to improve farmers' income, the development of leisure farms and leisure agriculture as important strategies to overcome the agricultural production and marketing problems. In other words, leisure agriculture is an integrated operation system comprising production, lifestyle and eco-system. It is also an agricultural enterprise management system consisting of production and supply, processing and recreational services spanning the primary, secondary and tertiary industries. It is a business model that fuses the environment, cultural and recreational elements with the main framework of agriculture activities, while providing a leisure alternative that is close to nature and the countryside. The major objectives are to use agricultural resources substantially, to increase farmers' income effectively, and to improve rural economy actively (Liu, 2002).

According to Tsai (Tsai, 2007) "the content of rural tourism covers tourism in orchards, farm, culture, life, scenic areas, religious activities, food and air in rural areas." It comprises rural production, living and ecology, including production: agricultural activities-oriented tourism (agro-tourism or leisure agriculture); living: culture-based activities (cultural and historical tourism. or museum tourism), and ecological: nature-oriented recreation activities (nature tourism, agro-tourism, green tourism or eco-tourism).

It can be concluded that rural tourism is also a kind of lifestyle and a critical part of the rural leisure industry. In order to develop rural tourism, besides the maintenance of the natural eco-systems and landscape as well as the preservation of rural features and culture, recreational facilities in the villages should be improved and upgraded so as to increase their attractiveness and meet the needs of

holidaymakers. This is the key to the promotion of rural tourism, helping to increase employment opportunities and creating new income streams for the farmers. Therefore, the notion of rural tourism covers not only tourism on the farm (leisure agriculture), but also any tourist activity in rural areas, which is known as a way of enjoying the rural life, beautiful rural scenic and maintaining rural prosperity and environmental quality in the rural areas.

The scarcity of the population can also be turned into an asset for the counties. Indeed, new migratory fluxes have appeared, coming from the urban areas to the rural areas. Some people want to escape from the city and its disadvantages (pollution, noise, life quality). They would be able to enjoy quiet countryside in these regions. It is an angle of approach that must be considered for developing the attractiveness of these counties as well.

Rural development aims to create a long-term living environment of good quality outside urban area. It includes all improvements of rural economy, living and recreational environment through appropriate planning, preparation and implementation of various policies and measures .(Liu,2010) Based on the objectives of rural development, agriculture remains vital for our existence by ensuring a wholesome nutrition with fresh food, and preserving the natural and cultural landscape. It will help to preserve the diversity of rural life. The variety, nature, beauty and individuality of rural views make rural areas attractive. Along with the rise in national income and the increase in opportunities for holiday-making, rural diversity, naturalness and the charm of rural life have attracted urban dwellers to tour in rural areas.

It is a unique phenomena of the modern and affluent society that growing leisure time and increasing opportunities for taking a vacation. By engaging in various leisure and recreational activities, most people are released from their high-pressure working environment and routine lifestyle. Thus more and more urban dwellers are seeking the solace of nature. It is believed that rural villages are able to offer the respite that many urbanites desire. One of the main targets of rural development is sparking a new role for the rural areas by transforming rural villages into leisure and recreational paradises for the stressed out urban population. In turn, there is an increasing dependence on the rural area that will help boosting the rural tourism industry .

On the other hand, rural tourism will also generate new income streams for rural people, such as fees derived from providing services such as tour transport

and sightseeing as well as rental from farm stays and camping grounds. This supplements the relatively lower income earned by rural people. Furthermore, the rise in tourist numbers in turn increases spending on farm produce, helping to develop a profitable market for the villages. Therefore, rural tourism could be one of strategies to solve the problem of the Empty Rural Area Diagonal in France.

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