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MULTIFUNCTIONAL AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE AND CHINA. A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Agnieszka PETRYK [1], Paulina ŚLIZ [1], Agnieszka WŁOCH-SZYMLA [1]

ABSTRACT

Rural development in both Europe and China has undergone profound transformation in recent decades, shifting from a productivity-oriented model toward one embracing multifunctionality and sustainability. This paper reviews and compares the conceptual frameworks, policy instruments, and practical implementations of multifunctional and sustainable rural development (MSRD) in these two regions. Drawing upon policy documents, academic literature, and international development reports from 2000 to 2025, the analysis highlights similarities in the pursuit of rural diversification, environmental protection, and social inclusion, yet underscores distinct institutional pathways shaped by governance systems and cultural contexts. The study concludes that mutual learning between European and Chinese rural policies can foster more integrated, resilient, and inclusive rural futures.

Keywords*: multifunctionality, sustainable rural development, rural policy, comparative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas across the globe face increasing socio-economic and environmental pressures resulting from globalization, demographic shifts, and climate change (OECD, 2020; Woods, 2021). In response, the concept of multifunctional rural development has gained prominence, emphasizing the diverse roles of rural spaces beyond agricultural production such as ecological conservation, cultural heritage, renewable energy, and rural tourism (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; van der Ploeg and Roep, 2003). In Europe, multifunctionality has been institutionalized within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and EU Rural Development Programmes, aiming to balance economic viability with environmental and social objectives (European Commission, 2023; Dwyer et al., 2007). These policies promote sustainable land management, community-led local development (LEADER), and the diversification of rural economies

[1] *Krakow University of Economics, Department of Spatial Management, Kraków, Poland*

(Shucksmith, 2018). In China, the Rural Revitalization Strategy, introduced in 2017, represents a comprehensive effort to address rural–urban disparities, integrate ecological civilization principles, and promote diversified rural economies (Long and Liu, 2016; Liu and Li, 2017; Zhang and Treiman, 2023). The strategy reflects China's broader commitment to sustainable development and the modernization of agriculture while ensuring social inclusion and cultural preservation (Tang et al., 2022). This paper aims to provide a comparative review of the policies and practices of multifunctional and sustainable rural development (MSRD) in Europe and China, identifying convergences, divergences, and opportunities for cross-learning. It also seeks to explore how different governance structures, policy instruments, and cultural contexts shape the implementation of MSRD principles in both regions. Furthermore, the study will highlight best practices and innovative approaches that contribute to sustainable livelihoods, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion in rural territories. By examining these experiences, the paper aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on how multifunctionality can serve as a strategic framework for achieving resilient and inclusive rural futures in an era of global transformation (Liu et al., 2020; Woods, 2021).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research adopts a qualitative, comparative approach grounded in a systematic literature review and policy document analysis. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how multifunctional and sustainable rural development (MSRD) is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated in different governance and socio-economic contexts—specifically within Europe and China. The study follows established protocols for systematic literature review, including the identification, selection, and critical appraisal of relevant academic and policy sources. The review process involved searching major academic databases such as *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, and *CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure)* using key terms like *"multifunctional rural development, "sustainable rural transformation", "Common Agricultural Policy", "Rural Revitalization Strategy"* or *"ecological civilization"*. Selection criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles, policy evaluations, and institutional reports published primarily between 2000 and 2025, ensuring both historical depth and contemporary relevance. In addition to academic literature, the study systematically examined policy documents from major institutional frameworks, including European Union policy frameworks such as the *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)*, *LEADER Programme*, and *European Green Deal*, Chinese government documents, including *Rural Revitalization Plans*, *Five-Year Plans*, and *White Papers on Ecological Civilization* or International organizational reports from the *FAO*, *OECD*, and *World Bank*, which provide comparative and evaluative perspectives on rural policy trends.

Data were analyzed using a comparative thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences across the two regional contexts. The analysis proceeded through several stages:

1. Conceptual mapping – identifying the underlying theoretical and policy frameworks that define multifunctionality and sustainability in Europe and China;
2. Policy analysis – examining the objectives, instruments, and governance mechanisms used to implement MSRD strategies;

3. Outcome evaluation – reviewing reported impacts and case evidence to assess effectiveness in achieving economic, environmental, and social goals.

To enhance analytical rigor, the study applied a triangulation strategy, integrating information from diverse data sources (academic, policy, and institutional) to cross-verify findings and reduce bias. Attention was also given to the institutional and cultural contexts shaping rural policy development, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how multifunctionality is interpreted and operationalized in different policy environments.

Finally, the results of the thematic analysis were synthesized into a comparative framework highlighting areas of convergence such as shared emphasis on sustainability and rural diversification as well as divergence, including governance structures, policy instruments, and implementation capacities. This methodological design ensures that the research provides both depth of understanding and breadth of comparison, supporting robust conclusions about the pathways and challenges of multifunctional rural development in Europe and China.

RESULTS

Demographic and spatial structure

When analyzing such important economies, it is impossible to ignore the demographic and spatial structure. From a demographic perspective, China exhibits a significantly higher share of rural population (approximately 38–40%) compared to the European Union (around 25–30%) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023; Eurostat, 2024). In absolute terms, China's rural population of roughly 477 million is more than three times larger than that of the EU, which counts about 137 million rural inhabitants (Statista, 2024). This vast rural population represents a considerable human resource potential for agricultural modernization, local processing, and rural tourism; however, it also poses major challenges in terms of infrastructure, access to public services, and socio-economic cohesion (Liu and Li, 2017). In contrast, the European Union demonstrates a pronounced spatial asymmetry: rural areas account for about 83% of the EU's total land area but host only a minority of the population (European Commission, 2021). This dispersed settlement pattern necessitates a territorially differentiated policy approach emphasizing multifunctional rural development, digitalization, and improved accessibility of public services and transport infrastructure (OECD, 2020).

Degree of urbanization and development implications

The level of urbanization in China (approximately 66%) and the EU (around 75%) indicates advanced population concentration in urban centers (World Bank, 2023; Trading Economics, 2024). In China, urbanization is dynamic and transformative, characterized by large-scale internal migration, a shift of labor from agriculture to industry and services, and the depopulation of rural regions (Chan, 2021). Consequently, rural China faces demographic "hollowing out," population aging, and weakening of local social structures (Zhang and Treiman, 2023). In the EU, urbanization has evolved more gradually and sustainably. Regional policy particularly through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) supports the concept of sustainable rural development, focusing on income diversification, local entrepreneurship, and

the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage (European Commission, 2023; Ploeg, 2018).

Development potential and determining factors

In terms of potential, China possesses a large rural labor force that can serve as a foundation for precision agriculture, bioenergy, and the rural service economy (Long and Liu, 2016). However, strong regional disparities, infrastructure gaps, and limited access to technology continue to constrain sustainable rural development (Tang et al., 2022). In the European Union, rural development potential is shaped more by qualitative than quantitative factors. High levels of agricultural mechanization, strong social capital, and comprehensive financial support mechanisms (e.g., structural funds and CAP instruments) create favorable conditions for transforming rural areas into knowledge-based, innovation-driven, and environmentally sustainable spaces (European Network for Rural Development, 2023; Woods, 2021). The concept of multifunctionality refers to the multiple roles of agriculture and rural areas in providing economic, environmental, and social goods. It extends beyond the traditional focus on agricultural production to encompass a broader set of functions that rural territories perform such as maintaining biodiversity, ensuring food security, preserving landscapes and cultural heritage, and sustaining vibrant rural communities. This perspective recognizes that rural areas contribute to society not only through commodity outputs but also through non-market public goods that enhance overall well-being and environmental resilience. Multifunctionality aligns closely with the principles of sustainable development, which call for balancing productivity, resource conservation, and social equity. It underscores the interdependence between ecological health, economic viability, and social inclusion, promoting a holistic approach to rural transformation. By integrating these dimensions, multifunctionality serves as a guiding framework for designing policies that foster resilience, reduce rural-urban disparities, and encourage sustainable land-use practices. In Europe, multifunctionality is closely associated with post-productivist transitions and the emergence of the "*new rural paradigm*".

This paradigm shift moves away from intensive, production-oriented agricultural models toward diversified rural economies that emphasize environmental stewardship, innovation, and community-led development. Policy instruments under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have evolved to support this transformation by encouraging agri-environmental schemes, local value chains, and rural entrepreneurship, thereby fostering a more balanced relationship between agriculture, environment, and society. In China, multifunctionality has been conceptualized within the framework of "*ecological civilization*" and "*common prosperity*". These national goals emphasize harmonizing economic growth with environmental protection and social justice. The Rural Revitalization Strategy embodies this vision by promoting rural diversification, ecosystem restoration, and the revitalization of cultural and social life in rural areas. Through initiatives such as ecological compensation mechanisms, rural tourism, renewable energy development, and the modernization of traditional industries, China seeks to build multifunctional rural systems that support both ecological sustainability and improved livelihoods.

Overall, the multifunctionality concept provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding the evolving roles of rural areas in different socio-political contexts. It encourages a shift from sectoral to integrated rural policy

approaches and opens pathways for comparative learning between Europe and China in pursuit of sustainable and inclusive rural development.

Comparative Analysis of Policies

In Europe, multifunctional and sustainable rural development is primarily embedded within the policy framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its associated Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), as well as the LEADER initiative. These frameworks collectively provide the institutional foundation for promoting a diversified, environmentally responsible, and socially inclusive rural economy. The evolution of the CAP, particularly since the 1990s, has reflected a gradual shift from production-oriented support toward broader rural development objectives that align with the principles of multifunctionality. The key objectives of European rural policy include promoting economic diversification, enhancing environmental sustainability, and strengthening social cohesion within rural areas. The CAP's "second pillar," focusing on rural development, supports these aims through measures that encourage innovation, cooperation, and the valorization of local resources. Environmental sustainability is particularly emphasized through agri-environmental schemes, which incentivize farmers to adopt practices that preserve biodiversity, protect water and soil quality, and maintain traditional landscapes. In terms of approaches, European countries have embraced a range of strategies designed to support multifunctionality. These include the development of rural tourism, organic farming, renewable energy production, and the establishment of short food supply chains that connect producers directly with consumers. The LEADER initiative plays a crucial role in fostering local partnerships and community-led local development (CLLD), promoting participatory governance and place-based innovation. This bottom-up approach encourages rural communities to design and implement projects tailored to their unique socio-economic and environmental contexts. The European governance model of rural development operates through a multi-level governance system encompassing the EU, national, and regional levels. This structure facilitates coordination between different policy domains and administrative layers, ensuring coherence while allowing flexibility for local adaptation. Participatory planning and stakeholder engagement are key features of this model, reinforcing local empowerment and social inclusion as integral components of sustainable rural transformation. In China, the policy framework for multifunctional and sustainable rural development is primarily defined by the Rural Revitalization Strategy, launched in 2017, complemented by initiatives such as the Ecological Civilization Plan and the Beautiful Countryside Initiative. These policies collectively represent a comprehensive approach to transforming rural areas by integrating economic modernization with ecological protection and social well-being. The key objectives of China's rural development agenda center on agricultural modernization, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, and rural industrial integration. The Rural Revitalization Strategy emphasizes improving rural infrastructure, enhancing agricultural productivity through technological innovation, and narrowing rural–urban disparities. Simultaneously, it prioritizes ecological restoration and the construction of "*beautiful villages*" that embody the principles of ecological civilization and cultural revitalization. China's approaches to multifunctionality reflect the integration of agriculture with a broad range of rural industries and services. This includes the promotion of agritourism and cultural industries, the expansion of e-commerce platforms to

facilitate direct sales of agricultural products, and the implementation of ecological restoration projects aimed at improving land quality and environmental resilience. Additionally, rural industrial integration policies encourage value chain development, linking primary production with processing, marketing, and rural-based service industries to create diversified and resilient local economies. The governance model in China is characterized by a combination of centralized planning and localized experimentation. National strategies provide the overarching direction, while regional pilot projects and demonstration zones allow for policy innovation and context-specific adaptation. In recent years, there has been a gradual shift toward greater community-based participation, with local governments and rural cooperatives playing more active roles in project design and implementation. This hybrid governance structure seeks to balance state-led coordination with bottom-up engagement, fostering both efficiency and inclusivity in the pursuit of multifunctional rural development. In summary, while both Europe and China share common goals related to sustainability, diversification, and rural well-being, they differ significantly in governance models and policy instruments. Europe's approach is rooted in decentralized, participatory, and market-oriented mechanisms, whereas China's strategy combines strong state direction with targeted local experimentation. These contrasting yet complementary experiences provide valuable opportunities for cross-learning in the design and implementation of multifunctional and sustainable rural development policies.

Comparative Insights

The comparative analysis of multifunctional and sustainable rural development (MSRD) in Europe and China reveals both convergence and divergence in policy orientations (Tab. 1), implementation mechanisms, and developmental outcomes.

Table 1. The comparative analysis of multifunctional and sustainable rural development in Europe and China

Dimension	Europe	China
Policy Orientation	Decentralized, participatory	Centralized, strategic
Economic Focus	Diversification, SME support	Industrial integration, infrastructure
Environmental Focus	Agri-environmental measures	Ecological civilization goals
Social Dimension	Rural inclusion, gender, culture	Poverty eradication, rural welfare
Innovation Drivers	LEADER, Green Deal	Digital agriculture, e-commerce

Source: Author's own elaboration

While both regions recognize the importance of balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being, their approaches are shaped by distinct historical, institutional, and socio-political contexts (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; Liu et al., 2020). In Europe, the MSRD model has evolved through gradual policy reforms emphasizing post-productivist transitions, environmental stewardship, and participatory governance. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and related Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) have progressively integrated multifunctionality as a central policy objective, supporting rural diversification, innovation, and

ecological sustainability. Bottom-up initiatives such as the LEADER programme illustrate Europe's commitment to local empowerment and community-led development (Ray, 2000; OECD, 2006). In China, multifunctional rural development has been embedded within a broader state-led modernization agenda. The Rural Revitalization Strategy, together with the principles of ecological civilization and common prosperity, reflects a multidimensional approach that integrates economic restructuring, environmental restoration, and cultural regeneration. Although the governance model remains predominantly centralized, there is a growing emphasis on local experimentation, pilot projects, and the active participation of rural communities (Zhang and Long, 2022; Xu et al., 2020). Comparatively, Europe's approach is decentralized and participatory, driven by policy instruments that encourage regional innovation and local agency. China's approach is strategic and coordinated, characterized by strong government leadership and large-scale programmatic interventions. Despite these structural differences, both models share a common pursuit of sustainable transformation seeking to revitalize rural economies, preserve natural and cultural resources, and enhance the quality of rural life (Lowe et al., 2019; FAO, 2020). The comparative insights suggest that cross-learning between Europe and China can foster more holistic and adaptive models of rural development. Europe can draw lessons from China's integrated planning and rapid implementation capacity, while China can benefit from Europe's experience in multi-level governance, stakeholder engagement, and environmental mainstreaming (Fig. 1). Together, these perspectives offer valuable contributions to the global discourse on sustainable rural futures in the face of climate change, demographic shifts, and globalization (World Bank, 2022; Zhang, 2023).

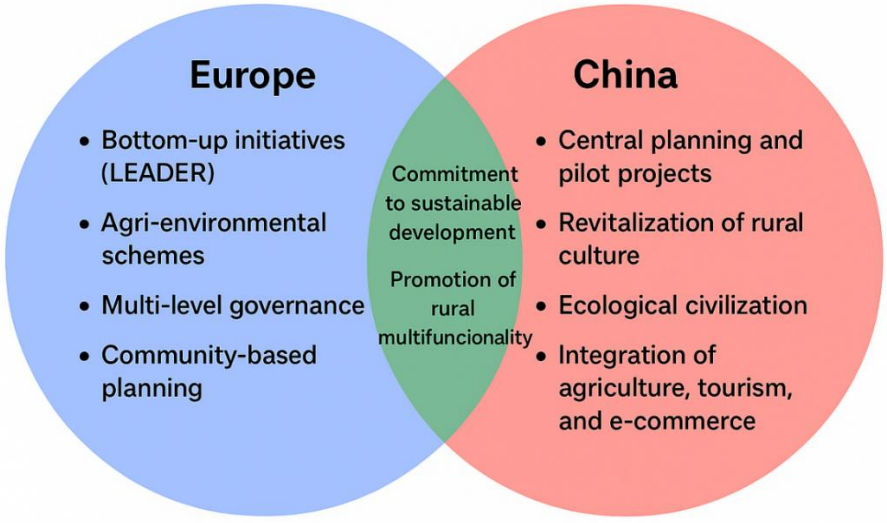

Figure 1. Common and Distinctive Elements of MSRD Policies in Europe and China.

Source: Author's own elaboration

DISCUSSION

Both Europe and China recognize multifunctionality as a strategic framework for achieving sustainable rural transformation, yet they operationalize this concept through distinct governance traditions and developmental paradigms. Europe's approach is rooted in decentralized governance and community empowerment, reflecting a long-standing commitment to participatory and place-based policy design. Through initiatives such as the LEADER programme, European rural policy prioritizes local innovation, social inclusion, and the integration of environmental sustainability into regional development strategies (Ray, 2000; Dax and Fischer, 2018). Conversely, China's rural development trajectory is guided by centralized coordination and state-led implementation, emphasizing the coherence of national objectives and the rapid diffusion of pilot innovations through administrative hierarchies (Liu and Li, 2017; Zhang and Long, 2022). While these contrasting approaches stem from differing institutional cultures and governance capacities, both seek to harmonize economic modernization with social equity and ecological resilience. A key challenge shared by both regions lies in balancing the often competing goals of economic growth and ecological preservation. In Europe, the pursuit of competitiveness within the agricultural sector occasionally conflicts with the objectives of biodiversity protection and low-carbon transition, despite the environmental orientation of the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (European Commission, 2021). In China, the drive for rural industrialization and infrastructure development may similarly place pressure on fragile ecosystems, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions (Xu et al., 2020). The imperative, therefore, is to strengthen policy coherence between economic, environmental, and social domains through integrated territorial governance. Another pressing issue is the demographic decline and aging of rural populations, which threaten the long-term viability of rural economies and communities. Both Europe and China experience rural outmigration of young people toward urban centers, leading to labor shortages, reduced local entrepreneurship, and a diminished capacity for community-led initiatives (Lowe et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). Addressing these demographic shifts requires policies that improve rural quality of life such as investments in healthcare, education, and digital infrastructure while creating diversified employment opportunities beyond agriculture. A further common concern involves equitable access to resources and services. In Europe, disparities persist between more dynamic and peripheral rural regions, while in China, inequalities between prosperous eastern provinces and lagging western areas remain pronounced (OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2022). Inclusive policy design ensuring fair distribution of financial support, infrastructure, and knowledge remains a cornerstone of sustainable rural development in both contexts. Despite these challenges, the comparative analysis also reveals significant emerging opportunities. One promising avenue is EU – China cooperation in domains such as sustainable agriculture, circular economy, and rural innovation. Joint research initiatives and policy dialogues could enhance the exchange of knowledge on agri-environmental management, renewable energy systems, and rural entrepreneurship. Mechanisms such as Horizon Europe, bilateral academic partnerships, and China's rural pilot programs provide institutional platforms for such cross-regional learning (FAO, 2020; Wang and Scott, 2021). Moreover, the digitalization of rural economies presents transformative potential for inclusive and resilient development. In Europe, digital technologies facilitate

smart farming, precision agriculture, and rural service delivery through e-governance systems, whereas in China, e-commerce platforms (e.g., Taobao Villages) have become a vital tool for connecting small producers with national and global markets (Zhang, 2023). The convergence of digital innovation and multifunctionality may thus represent a critical driver of future rural sustainability, enabling greater productivity while preserving ecological integrity and social cohesion. In summary, both Europe and China are navigating complex transitions toward multifunctional and sustainable rural futures. While their pathways differ in structure and pace, each provides valuable insights into how policy frameworks can reconcile the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of rural transformation. The ongoing dialogue between European and Chinese rural development paradigms not only deepens mutual understanding but also contributes to the broader global agenda for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly those related to sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and life on land (SDG 15).

CONCLUSIONS

Multifunctional and sustainable rural development (MSRD) has emerged as a convergent policy priority in both Europe and China, reflecting a global recognition of rural territories as critical spaces for ecological stewardship, social cohesion, and economic innovation. Although these regions pursue similar objectives, their trajectories are shaped by divergent institutional, cultural, and governance frameworks. Europe's experience underscores the enduring importance of participatory governance, policy integration, and territorial cohesion, achieved through mechanisms such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), LEADER, and the European Green Deal. In contrast, China's model exemplifies the effectiveness of state-led coordination, strategic planning, and large-scale mobilization under the framework of the Rural Revitalization Strategy and the Ecological Civilization agenda. Together, these experiences offer complementary insights into the diverse pathways through which multifunctionality can support sustainable rural transformation. Looking toward 2050, both Europe and China will face intensified socio-economic and environmental pressures, including climate change, resource scarcity, demographic aging, and technological disruption. To address these challenges, future rural development strategies must evolve toward greater integration of local innovation, digital transformation, and community resilience. The digitalization of rural economies through smart agriculture, data-driven resource management, and digital public services will play a pivotal role in enhancing productivity and connectivity while preserving environmental integrity. Likewise, investing in human capital, education, and youth engagement will be essential to counteract depopulation and sustain rural vitality over the long term. In the European context, the Green Deal and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) provide a roadmap toward climate neutrality, bioeconomy growth, and inclusive territorial development by 2050. These initiatives emphasize not only environmental sustainability but also social innovation and cultural preservation as integral dimensions of rural resilience. For China, the path toward 2050 will likely involve deepening the integration of ecological civilization principles with market-oriented reforms, expanding eco-compensation mechanisms, and promoting balanced regional development across urban and rural systems. Strengthening rural

governance capacity and fostering greater participation of local communities will further enhance the adaptive potential of China's rural revitalization process. At the global level, EU – China cooperation represents a strategic opportunity to accelerate progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement. Collaborative research, joint pilot programs, and policy dialogues can facilitate mutual learning in areas such as circular economy, low-carbon agriculture, biodiversity protection, and rural digital ecosystems. By aligning their efforts through multilateral platforms such as *Horizon Europe*, *Belt and Road environmental cooperation mechanisms*, and *FAO-led partnerships* both sides can contribute to shaping an inclusive and sustainable global rural agenda. In conclusion, the pursuit of multifunctional and sustainable rural development in Europe and China demonstrates that there is no single model for achieving rural sustainability. Rather, success depends on adaptive governance, cross-sectoral integration, and continuous learning between local, national, and transnational actors. Looking ahead to 2050, the challenge will be not only to sustain agricultural productivity and ecological balance but also to cultivate resilient, innovative, and inclusive rural societies capable of thriving amid global transitions.

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Corresponding Author: Agnieszka Petryk
ORCID: 0000-0003-4662-1964
e-mail: agnieszka.petryk@uek.krakow.pl
Department of Spatial Management
Cracow University of Economics,
Kraków, Poland

Paulina Śliz
ORCID: 0000-0001-8369-2775
e-mail: paulina.sliz@uek.krakow.pl
Department of Spatial Management
Cracow University of Economics,
Kraków, Poland

Agnieszka Włoch-Szymla
ORCID: 0000-0002-0995-1035
e-mail: wlocha@uek.krakow.pl
Department of Spatial Management
Cracow University of Economics,
Kraków, Poland

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