

Towards an integrated rural development policy

The Cork declaration

(November 1996)

The declaration issued at the rural development conference (“Rural Europe – Future Perspectives”), organised in Cork from 7 to 9 November 1996 under the Irish presidency of the Europe Union, still provides today the basis for what could be the integrated rural policy in the years to come, on the model of LEADER. The 10-point proposal is presented below:

Aware that rural areas - which are the home of a quarter of the population and account for more than 80% of the territory of the European Union - are characterised by a unique cultural, economic and social fabric, an extraordinary patchwork of activities, and a great variety of landscapes (forests and farmland, unspoiled natural sites, villages and small towns, regional centres, small industries);

Believing that rural areas and their inhabitants are a real asset to the European Union, and have the capacity to be competitive;

Mindful that by far the largest part of rural Europe is covered by agricultural land and forests, which have a strong influence on the character of European landscapes, and that agriculture is and must remain a major interface between people and the environment, and that farmers have a duty as stewards of many of the natural resources of the countryside;

Recalling that agriculture and forestry are no longer predominant in Europe’s economies; that their relative economic weight continues to decline, and that, consequently, rural development must address all socio-economic sectors in the countryside;

Conscious that European citizens pay growing attention to the quality of life in general, and to questions of quality, health, safety, personal development and leisure in particular, and that rural areas are in a unique position to respond to these interests, and offer grounds for a genuine, modern development model of quality;

Recognising that the Common Agricultural Policy will have to adapt to new realities and challenges in terms of consumer demand and preferences, international trade developments, and the EU’s next enlargement; that the shift from price support to direct support will continue; that the CAP and the agricultural sector will have to adjust accordingly, and that farmers must be helped in the adjustment process, and be given clear indicators for the future;

Expecting that the justification for the compensatory payments of the 1992 CAP reforms will be increasingly challenged;

Persuaded that the concept of public financial support for rural development, harmonised with the appropriate management of natural resources and the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity and cultural landscapes, is increasingly gaining acceptance;

Recognising that, while successive reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy and European rural development policies have improved transparency and effectiveness, a number of inconsistencies and overlaps have developed and legal complexity has grown;

Determined to promote, in all possible ways, local capacity building for sustainable development in rural areas, and, in particular, private and community-based initiatives which are well-integrated into global markets;

Announces the following ten point rural development programme for the European Union:

Point 1 - Rural Preference

Sustainable rural development must be put at the top of the agenda of the European Union, and become the fundamental principle which underpins all rural policy in the immediate future and after enlargement. This aims at reversing rural out-migration, combating poverty, stimulating employment and equality of opportunity, and responding to growing requests for more quality, health, safety, personal development and leisure, and improving rural well-being. The need to preserve and improve the quality of the rural environment must be integrated into all Community policies that relate to rural development. There must be a fairer balance of public spending, infrastructure investments and educational, health and communications services between rural and urban areas. A growing share of available resources should be used for promoting rural development and securing environmental objectives.

Point 2 - Integrated Approach

Rural development policy must be multi-disciplinary in concept, and multi-sectoral in application, with a clear territorial dimension. It must apply to all rural areas in the Union, respecting the concentration principle through the differentiation of co-financing for those areas which are more in need. It must be based on an integrated approach, encompassing within the same legal and policy framework: agricultural adjustment and development, economic diversification - notably small and medium scale industries and rural services - the management of natural resources, the enhancement of environmental functions, and the promotion of culture, tourism and recreation.

Point 3 - Diversification

Support for diversification of economic and social activity must focus on providing the framework for self-sustaining private and community-based initiatives: investment, technical assistance, business services, adequate infrastructure, education, training, integrating advances in information technology, strengthening the role of small towns as integral parts of rural areas and key development factors, and promoting the development of viable rural communities and renewal of villages.

Point 4 - Sustainability

Policies should promote rural development which sustains the quality and amenity of Europe's rural landscapes (natural resources, biodiversity and cultural identity), so that their use by today's generation does not prejudice the options for future generations. In our local actions, we must be aware of our global responsibilities.

Point 5 - Subsidiarity

Given the diversity of the Union's rural areas, rural development policy must follow the principle of subsidiarity. It must be as decentralised as possible and based on partnership and co-operation between all levels concerned (local, regional, national and European). The emphasis must be on participation and a 'bottom up' approach, which harnesses the creativity and solidarity of rural communities. Rural development must be local and community-driven within a coherent European framework.

Point 6 - Simplification

Rural development policy, notably in its agricultural component, needs to undergo radical simplification in legislation. Whilst there should be no renationalisation of the CAP, there must be greater coherence of what is presently done through many separate channels, a limitation of EU law on general rules and procedures, more subsidiarity in decisions, decentralisation of policy implementation and more flexibility overall.

Point 7 - Programming

The application of rural development programmes must be based on coherent and transparent procedures, and integrated into one single programme for rural development for each region, and a single mechanism for sustainable and rural development.

Point 8 - Finance

The use of local financial resources must be encouraged to promote local rural development projects. More encouragement must be given to using financial engineering in rural credit techniques in order to mobilise better the synergies between public and private funding, reduce financial constraints on small and medium size enterprises, promote productive investment, and diversify rural economies. Greater participation by the banking sector (public and private) and other fiscal intermediaries must be encouraged.

Point 9 - Management

The administrative capacity and effectiveness of regional and local governments and community-based groups must be enhanced, where necessary, through the provision of technical assistance, training, better communications, partnership and the sharing of research, information and exchange of experience through networking between regions and between rural communities throughout Europe.

Point 10 - Evaluation and Research

Monitoring, evaluation and beneficiary assessment will need to be reinforced in order to ensure transparency of procedures, guarantee the good use of public money, stimulate research and innovation, and enable an informed public debate. Stakeholders must not only be consulted in the design and implementation, but involved in monitoring and evaluation.

Conclusion

We, the participants at the European Conference on Rural Development assembled in Cork, urge Europe's policy-makers:

- > to raise public awareness about the importance of making a new start in rural development policy;
- > to make rural areas more attractive to people to live and work in, and become centres of a more meaningful life for a growing diversity of people of all ages;
- > to support this ten-point programme and co-operate as partners in the fulfilment of each and every one of the goals, which are embodied in this declaration.
- > to play an active role in promoting sustainable rural development in an international context.

9th November 1996