

Cork 2.0 Conference on Rural Development

Closing Remarks by Franz Fischler, former EU Agricultural Commissioner (1995-2004) including at the time of the 1st Cork Declaration in 1996

6th September 2016, Cork

- Check Against Delivery –

Twenty years after the first CORK-Conference about 300 stakeholders, experts and politicians met again in the nice Irish City of Cork, to discuss the future of Rural Europe and to work out Policy-Orientations for the future.

The result of good preparatory work, intensive discussions, participatory working methods and, first and foremost, the will to give the policymakers and the general public a forward looking orientation about the needs and most promising solutions for a Rural Europe in the future is the 2nd Cork Declaration. This Declaration meets the expectations of the almost 200 Million people living on the European countryside.

When we look at the enormous changes of the European Union in the past 20 years we can recognise how important a fresh look at EU Rural Development Policy is. The European Union has grown from 15 to 27+1 Member States and from 300 to 500 Million Inhabitants. Whereas in the 1990s a true believe in steady economic growth was predominant, after the crisis in 2008, which provoked a big shock to citizens, the economy and the politicians alike are still struggling with the recovery.

Politically it was almost common sense in the 1990s that the deepening of the Union will go hand in hand with enlargement and nobody believed in the possibility of disintegration.

Many things of our present daily life were simply unknown. Lifestream, facebook, social media did not exist then. Therefore digital divide between generations, educational classes, Rural and Urban Population did not exist. There was also no such discussion as climate change, the bio-economy or GMOs.

Expected Changes in the Next Decade

The dynamics of rural development will not slow down but will most likely accelerate in the years to come. Following a prospect of the Statistical Office in Luxembourg, in 2030 or so, the rural population of the EU will decrease from 200 to 100 Million whereas the urban population will grow from 300 to 400 Million. This means halving the rural population. At the same time the ageing of the Rural Population will continue and the risk that the development in remote zones will go beyond tipping points, is significant. We will therefore see more empty villages or even ruins of villages.

But the development will very much differ, depending on the dynamics in the various rural zones. The enormous growth in the surroundings of urban centres, will most likely continue, in Tourism- and other zones with positive growth expectations, the wealth of people will remain, but in the agricultural zones and in remote areas, we will see many negative developments, such as pauperisation, social divide, lack of modern infrastructure or aging of the rural population.

For all these reasons, a “one fits all” approach for Rural Development will not work. Differentiation and a good mix of policy tools will be a must for each region.

But the future policy concept must not be a pure economic strategy. The cultural dimension of Rural Europe must not be ignored. Only, if enough respect is paid to the cultural identity of the rural dwellers, we can be sure that Rural Europe will prosper.

What future role for the RD-Policy?

Already 20 years ago, when the 1st Cork Conference took place, Rural Development was seen not as a sectoral but a cross section policy. But then, in the following Agenda 2000 RD-Policy became an addendum to the CAP and, as the financing instrument, the so called 2nd pillar was introduced. And still almost 90% of the RD-budget is used for agricultural purposes and not for all people living in rural zones. For them the structural and Cohesion policy is more important than the RD-Policy.

Agriculture is no longer the dominating economic factor also in Rural Europe. No doubt: Agriculture remains fundamental but is no longer predominant and cannot rescue the remote zones.

This fact is very rightly underlined on the new declaration and must be respected in the future financing and in the administration of the RD-Policy. In the US, President Obama has set up the White House Rural Council to coordinate all relevant policies for Rural America. Under the chairmanship of the Agriculture Secretary, all Ministers, dealing with aspects relevant to rural zones, meet regularly to deal with the horizontal aspects of their policies relevant to Rural America. Something similar should be introduced in the European Commission.

Also important is, that the European Union continues the bottom up approach and involves the citizens in the development and implementation of RD-Policies. More broadly speaking, the question will be, how the subsidiarity principle should be applied in Rural Policies.

Another area for careful consideration is the financing. Should one move more into the direction of credit-financing? What is the right relation between private and public financing, between Community- and National financing? How should cohesion be achieved? Less blueprint and administrative burden is requested and the control mechanisms should be smarter and more efficient.

To conclude:

- The future RD-Policy Design is not about amending the 2nd Pillar of the CAP and a reform of the toolbox for Rural Development.
- Instead, Rural Policies should build on the identity of rural citizens and the dynamics of rural areas through the implementation of integrated strategies and multi-sectoral approaches.
- The new RD-Policy must meet the requests of the CORK 2 Declaration.
- The CAP also needs reform but will remain a sectoral policy.

- The sectoral approaches in research, politics and administration should end. Silo-thinking be abolished from our heads and in the policymaking process. Instead system-thinking interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity should be intensified.
- All policies relevant to Rural Europe should be reviewed and better coordinated.
- The engagement of rural citizens, stakeholders, entrepreneurs and rural actors must become stronger. The bottom up approach will help to make this happen.
- The traditional pillar structure should be ceased and Public Private Partnership should be strengthened.
- Raise public awareness of both the high potential of Rural Europe and also of the risks and weaknesses rural dwellers are facing.

I can only hope that the CORK 2 Declaration gets broad support and will be translated into a new visionary and ambitious Rural Development Policy.

Franz Fischler

Ends