

Introduction to Workshop 4 - Rural viability and vitality

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Intro

My headline for this workshop and the important question for rural viability and sustainable future is YOUTH. **Without young people interested in and attracted to spend, their future in rural areas, there is no sustainable future, in fact there is no future.** But do not just say that youth is the future. Young people are here now already. They have to be included not in our plans but in our planning process. We have to listen to, engage and include young people now. The governance of rural development has to be inclusive, built on partnership between all the stakeholder especially targeting young people.

Positive potentials

A low carbon society

What are the assets and resources the rural areas can offer to achieve a sustainable development and economic viability? The transition to a bio based economy is a great opportunity for agriculture, forestry and fishery that is to say, rural areas. Innovation is crucial and also discussed in workshop 3.

We have a momentum about bioeconomy and a more circular economy, which for me means rural revitalisation. Many of the resources for a sustainable production of food, fibre and fuel are in the rural areas. The rural areas is a large part of the solution.

Attractiveness in different stages of life

When people want to relax, and especially when urban inhabitants go for vacation, they go to the countryside. When you raise a family or it is time for retirement the cleaner environment, the lower stress level, the open landscape and biodiversity, created by a long time agricultural land management, are things that are attractive. A warm social context and just the fact that you have more space, are things longed for. We don't want rural areas to be regarded just as a playground for tourists and stressed people from the cities, but this attractiveness is a potential for economic development. Do not forget the resources and networks that the summer house owners or occasional visitors can bring to the local society. A "we and them" approach is rarely successful anywhere.

Digital transformation

Twenty years ago we could not foresee the digital revolution we are living in. Even though it is hard to find Pokémons in rural areas the IT development is a large opportunity. Provided

good infrastructure, fast broadband connections and mobile coverage, there are lots of jobs that could be done independently of where you are situated. We cannot imagine all the possibilities. And we really need lots of high qualified jobs in the rural areas.

Actually there are people claiming that most of the driving forces for the urbanisation is not existing any longer. You do not have to go to the city to do shopping, find a partner, access culture or get education or even get healthcare. It can be done on the web. The only problem is that we have one or two decades of perception time to realise the change.

Challenges or possibilities

Climate change

We have a climate change challenging agriculture and all society. Some of the resources and activities needed to mitigate or combat some of the threats are based in rural areas. The transition to a bio based economy is already mentioned. Converting the transport sector into non fossil fuel requires bio based fuels produced in the rural areas.

Migration

We have a large migration wave towards, and even within, Europe. People from war zones and afflicted regions are trying all ways possible to reach the security in Europe. European citizens from socially neglected areas are searching for a better life within the Union. So we have on the one side a lack of people in rural areas and on the other side people knocking at our door to come in. Could these two needs match each other? With an engaged rural community, the integration seems easier than in an urban, quite segregated, setting. What competences and skills do newcomers have that are needed in rural communities? Can the welcoming of refugees be an investment for rural areas?

One of the barriers for development

There is a depopulation of rural Europe due to the urbanisation. Young people leave, especially young women, creating a demographic problem with less and older population. There is something often called »the urban norm" suggesting that, »To be somebody and to achieve something you have to live in the city«. That is the message and attitude in many cases. But there are also people searching for other ways of living, in the countryside.

There is much talk about »sustainable cities«, but I say there is no such thing. Less unsustainable maybe, but a city is always depending on resources from rural areas, in Vietnam or Brazil as well as nearby. Without rural areas the cities cannot survive. But rural areas are also depending on cities for commerce, special services, education etc. We are mutually depending on each other. It is, and has to be, a balanced two-way connection.

What do young people say?

There is a large diversity of rural areas in Europe. The situation for Fanny, a 16-year-old girl in the village of Soukolojärvi with about 200 inhabitants 1000 km north of Stockholm is not the same as for Lucia 31 in Medinaceli, 155 km northeast of Madrid, with 250 inhabitants. Or 17-year old Catalin in Corabia in Romania or Jack 16 on the Orkney Islands.

Fanny will move to Stockholm after finishing secondary upper school. She wants to play football in the highest league. The home village is fine though, she says. Quite many of the families living there are young and have small children. They have good broad band and mobile phone connections but lack public transport to the nearest town of Övertorneå. There is a future in the village, but not for Fanny.

Lucia is really committed to live in her rural area and to help other people to find ways of creating their own living there. She wants us to recognize the social, cultural, economic and environmental importance of the rural heritage and, taking into account the global changes, she urges us to imagine future scenarios where rural areas are living places.

Catalin lives in Corabia, Romania, a small port at the Danube river and has, through the activities of the FLAG, started to discover the possibilities to learn about local fishery traditions within the fishing community and also the businesses that might be developed in the tourism around the port. He is also more familiar with the local marketplace for fish and other marine products that have been established with the support of the FLAG.

Jack lives on the Orkney Islands. Two years from now he plans to go to university but then he has to move to the mainland. After that he will decide about returning to Orkney or not. If Jack will return or not will be due to if he can find a job matching his education. The development of renewable energy from wave power at the Orkney might need qualified engineers in the future.

In a project between rural youth organisations in the Baltic Sea region we asked them to identify support programs for rural youth. No special support program targeting rural youth was found except for the RDP, but then you had to be a young farmer. We know that the majority of rural youth today will not be involved in agriculture.

So can we deliver support for some of the dreams and wishes of Fanny, Lucia, Jack and Catalin? You give the answer.
