

Workshop 4: Encouraging and Supporting Rural Vitality

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Introduction to Day 2 Cork 2.0

Yesterday we discussed the importance of rural communities and rural areas, their contribution to society, the opportunities they present and also the challenges they are currently facing. The focus of today's workshop is on what kind of governance and policy mechanisms and instruments we need to address these challenges so to enable rural communities to reach their full economic and social potential. More precisely, how would we like the future EU Rural Development Policy to look, who should govern rural areas, and how?

Indeed, there has been progress in the design of EU rural policy since its inception and efforts have been made at EU level and by the member states to promote a more inclusive, territorial and multi-sectoral rural development. However, there are voices that argue that this progress has been far too slow. Within the CAP, Pillar 2 has something of a 'Cinderella' status.

Discourses on what is 'rural' and what 'rural development' means beyond farming are often controversial. Furthermore some dispute that rural areas tend to be ignored or overlooked, though not deliberately excluded by urban-focused policy makers, and 'rural' *per se* hardly features in any other national or regional political debates. So, they argue that given the distinctiveness and diversity of rural areas, 'rural-specific' measures and institutions are required if we want them to thrive.

Others claim that the rhetoric around the urban-rural divide is inflammatory and unnecessary and suggest that decision-makers should move away from 'rural-specific' measures and promote integrated policies that facilitate and support the economic, social and cultural interactions between the two, on a level playing field. However, in practice, governments and their departments do not necessarily design and adapt their policies to suit rural conditions (a process known as rural proofing), and thus need to be reminded of the importance of areas outside towns and cities. So how can we ensure that mainstream policies and measures are effective and tailored to the needs and circumstances of rural places? How can we all work

together to make rural policies inclusive, territorial and multi-sectoral indeed? Equally important, what policy mechanisms, instruments and tools do we need to have in place to encourage a multi-sectoral rural development?

We know that, within the current multiannual financial framework, rural development will benefit from €100 billion allocated through EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) plus contributions from national budgets. EAFRD has also become a component of ESIF (European Structural and Investments Funds). This is the EU's main investment policy tool, which aims to support job creation, increase competitiveness and economic growth. Infrastructure investment in services such as broadband, IT and telecommunications, and water supplies, and support for training and skills adaptability in the labour force, including young people, refugees and legal migrants, are also stipulated as commitments for member states. But these add to a longer list of priorities for those rural areas where public transport, provision of housing, employment opportunities and other basic services, such as health care and education, are poor or non-existent.

We also know that the European Commission and the member states are working with the European Investment Bank on establishing new financial instruments under the EAFRD. Undoubtedly, all of these are very welcoming to rural communities, but the question that persists is how much rural communities and rural areas will truly benefit from these programmes? Are politicians fully committed to supporting them? How should we ensure that policies at all levels are pull together to benefit rural areas?

This leads us to another set of questions. How can the design and delivery of rural development policies and instruments be improved in conjunction with these other programmes and tools? How can financial engineering be better used to move towards more investments and fewer subsidies when private returns maybe lower in rural areas? Are rural areas across member states ready to embrace and integrate newcomers? How can we guarantee that refugees and other migrants, especially those who have been re-settled in remote rural areas (e.g. the Scottish Islands), feel 'at home' and part of the communities, rather than being isolated, lost and forgotten?

Across rural supporters there is consensus that successful and sustainable rural development can be achieved through integrated Community Led Local Development (CLLD) approaches, effective private-public partnerships and networking. Others suggest that local governance and devolution of power is paramount for rural success. The Leader programme is often praised as best practice given its grass-roots approach. The role of rural networks is also acknowledged. Nevertheless, two of my academic colleagues, Megan Swindal and Ruth McAreavey, highlight that “[c]ivic partnership is a notoriously complex dynamic that can empower some individuals and groups at the expenses of others”. Moreover, they argue “that the power within rural governance is not restricted, and creating conditions that enhance the power of local communities does not necessarily mean reducing or undermining the role of the state”. So, how do Leader and other Community Led Local Development approaches address these arguments? Are they, indeed, the best way forward? If yes, how can we build on and further develop these approaches? What role should the government play? And how can we build effective partnerships between rural communities and regional and national policy makers to realise the potential, and meet the needs of, rural areas?

I hope that the questions I raised have produced sufficient food for thought to stimulate lively and fruitful discussions and that we all together can make a difference.

Thank you.