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a conference organised by
the international association
Rurality-Environment-Development (RED)
and the NAT Commission of the European Committee of the Regions



A European Rural Agenda to strengthen the EU and make Cork 2.0 a reality

Adopting a European Rural Agenda would bring greater coherence and efficiency to European policies and instruments for rural areas after 2020 - this was the main conclusion of the conference held by the European Committee of the Regions' Commission for Natural Resources (NAT), and the Rurality-Environment-Development (RED) international association in Brussels on 4 May 2017.

The Cork 2.0 Declaration, adopted in September 2016, crystallises the main expectations of those working in the field, and offers ideas on how to guide the EU's agricultural and rural policy. How can we respond in terms of policy commitment to the challenges and objectives raised? Participants at the seminar voiced the hope that the European Commission would adopt a truly cross-cutting, ambitious policy approach, set out in a European Rural Agenda. Adopting an Agenda, hopefully complementary with the Urban Agenda, would provide a strong guarantee that all territories will, as is necessary, be mobilised to attain EU objectives. The Agenda would also provide a strategic reference - currently lacking - to make the most of the EU's work on all its policies by linking them, ranging from the CAP to regional development policies, social or environmental policies, for the benefit of rural areas.

Facilitated by **Patrice Collignon**, R.E.D. Director, the meeting was opened by **Guillaume Cros**, Vice-President of the Regional Council of Occitanie and European Committee of the Regions rapporteur on the Future of the CAP after 2020. Guillaume Cross presented his proposals for the future rural development policy in the following terms: *"There can be no development of Europe's rural areas without prosperous and sustainable farms on a human scale, and they need a radical overhaul of European agricultural policy where markets, farm prices and sustainability are concerned. In order to counterbalance the current concentration of agricultural production, which generates wide regional disparities, and to tackle the rural exodus, funds under the present second pillar of the CAP must be boosted, as must the EU's overall financial support for rural development - which has been cut significantly compared to the previous programming period. Adopting a Rural Agenda would enable all European policies, structural policies in particular, to contribute to the development of rural areas as a priority"*.

Gerard Peltre, R.E.D. President, **called for rural areas to be recognised as being of vital importance to the EU**, illustrating how adopting **the Rural Agenda would provide a response to the urban-rural imbalance and strengthen rural-agricultural cooperation**: *"Including the sustainable, integrated development of our diverse rural areas as a major ambition of a European Rural Agenda would serve to harness their potential in meeting Europe's present and future challenges, meeting the territorial cohesion objective and fostering initiatives by local actors"*.

Speakers from Finland and Canada contributed their experience with implementing rural proofing, as proposed in the Cork Declaration. They highlighted the benefits of this model for rural areas, while also drawing attention to the mechanism's limits. Two experiences of positive connections between rural and urban clusters - a prerequisite for high performance and territorial cohesion, and one of the EU's main objectives - were presented by German and French representatives. The ensuing debate clearly showed that to be effective, rural proofing must be able to count of clearly-stated policy guidelines: the European Rural Agenda is then positioned as a necessary operational benchmark for carrying out the evaluations under the rural proofing mechanism.

In the second part of the day, a debate bringing together all the European institutional pillars broached the transition from the current rural development policy under the CAP's second pillar to a more modern policy for rural areas.

Mihael Dumitru, Deputy Director-General at DG Agriculture, called for European forces and resources to be combined for multipartner rural development. He argued that *"the contributions made by rural areas to the Europe 2020 strategy objectives and to the Sustainable Development Goals are substantial but go unrecognised. I have heard the message very clearly: there are two sides to the future CAP: support not only for agriculture, but also for rural territories"*.

Other positions put forward:

Czeslaw Siekierski (EPP/PL), Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development: *"The new Common Agricultural Policy must be based on the Cork Declaration"*.

Sofia Björnsson, rapporteur for the European Economic and Social Committee's opinion *From Cork 2.0 Declaration to concrete actions*: *"The Cork Declaration must lay the foundations for a common framework for all the European structural funds"*.

Mathieu Fichter, responsible for rural development within Commissioner Corina Crețu's cabinet: *"Territorial divides are widening, and there is a risk that some areas may move backwards. A territorial approach must be at the heart of future European policies"*.

All the speakers noted a lack of political and financial commitment to recognising rural areas, although these same areas represent a solution for restoring the European venture's power of attraction. Many voices, including those of the European Parliament's RUMRA intergroup and of numerous national and regional authorities, had already spoken out in support of the call made in 2015 by the European Countryside Movement for a **European Rural Agenda at the heart of EU policy** after 2020. Many speakers also expressed their interest in the proposal for a European Rural Agenda, supporting this initiative that seeks to build the rural dimension into all European policies.

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