

Rural territories in the 2014-2020 policies of territorial cohesion and inclusive growth

The RUMRA (Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas) Intergroup meeting on “Rural territories in the 2014-2020 policies of territorial cohesion and inclusive growth” took place on 22 September 2015. The meeting counted with the participation of the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Crețu. The European Countryside Movement (ECM) – platform of which Euromontana is a member - took the chance to hand in to Commissioner Crețu a Supporting Document calling for a White Paper on rurality.

The challenges in rural areas - the intergroup scope

Anthony Buchanan¹ opened the session pointing out the need to move to an integrated rural-urban approach and to take ownership of the rural development. He considered a priority to boost areas of opportunity and consolidate the role of rural areas in the Europe 2020 Growth Strategy. Randel Lants² referred as well to the Europe 2020 Strategy and noted that cities are regarded as main engines of growth, while rural areas tend to lack behind.



In his view, a harmonious approach addressing cities and villages as an overall concept should be implemented. He considered that rural areas suffer from inadequate funding. In this respect, he said that “*there is not enough willingness to transfer money to the 2nd pillar of rural development*”. In addition, funding should not be based on mere numbers but on social and environmental aspects. In his view, some paths to follow in the future are the modernisation of the learning system, the creation of a link between local communities and vocational centres, the use of new technologies and training people to use them.

Mercedes Bresso³ introduced the European Parliament Intergroup role for the sustainable development of rural, mountainous and remote areas. “*These areas should be properly represented and taken into account*” she claimed. In her opinion, rural areas present above all opportunities. However, political commitment is needed in order to capitalise their potential. She admitted that these regions present multiple challenges as well. “*If recommendations are taken into account, the challenges will become opportunities*”, she added. Ms. Bresso gave the example of territorial products whose unique characteristics can be transformed into key elements for regional development. She concluded that

¹ Vice-president of the NAT Commission of the Committee of the Regions

² Rapporteur of the Committee of the Regions on innovation and modernisation of rural economy

³ Chair of the Intergroup, Member of the European Parliament

collaboration with EU Commissioner Crețu is of vital importance for achieving the Intergroups' objectives.

White Paper request

Gérard Peltre⁴ called for recognition of rural territories as partners of sustainable and smart growth. He stressed that rural development is in line with the objectives of the Lisbon Treaty and of the Europe 2020 Strategy, especially in what concerns a harmonious and inclusive growth. He called for immediate action on rural development by asking EU Commissioner Crețu to draft a White Paper on rurality. He motivated the choice of a White Paper and not a Green one, explaining that urgent action is needed with concrete proposals and that there was no time to establish again a diagnosis which has already been done.

EU Commissioner Crețu answered to the request by saying that in collaboration with EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Phil Hogan, they would search common means of action. She considered current legislation is contradictory to a harmonious development since it considers "pools of growth" granting thus urban space a privileged approach. She added that though cities are hubs for innovation, they have multiple problems like congestion, pollution, stress so one should not neglect the proven development capacity of rural territories. She pointed out that the substance of policy relies in the capacity to create the conditions for a balanced territorial development and give all regions the opportunity to grow.

Euromontana supports the request of a White Paper on Rurality and has signed the supporting document written with the European Countryside Movement. We hope that the positive signs given by the EU Commissioner Crețu during the conference will help to push forward the idea and to have an initiative of the European Commission in the coming months.

In support of the balanced territorial development, Kasto Swen from Smaland Blekinge South Sweden presented the example of his region. He said their target is to create smart urban-rural interconnected territories based on an ecosystem approach. Their final objective is to boost a creative self-sustainable system capable of generating jobs.

Local empowerment

One of the most recurrent ideas of the second part of the session concerned the local authorities' role in rural development. EU Commissioner Crețu reminded there are many Operational Programmes that are implemented at local level and that funds are not always fully absorbed because local actors are not well aware of their existence or about the possibilities they can provide.

Markus Holzer from the European Commission (DG AGRI) stressed that strengthening capacities is the starting point for reviving local initiatives. He said that the European Commission is putting a lot of efforts to form and inform on the new Rural Development programmes and to encourage public entities to work closer with local networks.

⁴ President of the European Countryside Movement (E.C.M.) and of the international association Rurality-Environment-Development (R.E.D.)



While representatives of civil society organisations from Prepare and Eurogites underlined the need of a coordinated action based on a White Paper, Ms Bresso closed the session evidencing the benefits of a White Paper. She added that one of its priorities will be to take into account the differences and the diversity of the EU rural space. She concluded that the RUMRA intergroup objective was to promote initiatives like the White Paper.

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