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ERP Policy suggestions December 2019

Rural areas are of crucial importance to Europe. They cover 80 % of EU territory, are home to about 57% of its population and produce over 46 % of GVA (EP Resolution 2018). They provide much of the food, timber, fibre, water and minerals that we need. Smart and diversified rural economies are a possibility, actions to ameliorate climate change and protect biodiversity are needed in all of rural Europe.

Rural people deserve the same quality of life as those who live in cities. Some rural areas are well served. But other rural regions suffer from narrow economies, the exodus of young people, decline in services, poverty and social exclusion. They need continuing efforts of regional and rural development, including a strong element of support for small farmers and for diversification of rural economies. Many peripheral, sparsely populated or mountainous areas have particular need for support.

Rural communities throughout the continent are willing and able to take initiative in strengthening their own local economies and social structures. They can thereby contribute to the EU 2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. At a time of alienation between citizens and the European mission, they can help to rebuild the connection with Europe. But they need the genuine support of governments.

ERP is basing its suggestions on the article 174 of the TFEU (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), the 2019 ERP Manifesto and the People's Declaration of Candás.

ERP calls for a Rural Agenda for all rural Europe and especially for weaker rural areas based on true partnership where EU, national governments, rural and urban actors cooperate. Rural citizens and NGOs must be seen as part of the solution. EU-institutions must work more closely with one another.

Within the powers delegated by EU for 2021-2027, governments are asked to consider the cross-sectoral nature of rural development and be inclusive in policies, programming and funding. Sector-thinking must be replaced by a cross-sectoral approach.

CAP and other programs

ERP calls for

- Harmonisation of regulations for the CAP and the Regional, Social and Maritime Funds
- The EARDF to be brought back into the **Common Provisions Regulation**
- Earmarking of the budget for thematic objective 8 for vibrant rural areas of the proposed CAP strategic plans (for integrated territorial development).
- Integrated provisions for rural issues in the ERDF and ESF
- Continued commitment to Cohesion Funds, in support of regions with fragile economies.
- **Increasing** the proportion of CAP **funds** that are devoted to **Pillar 2**, with a strong focus on strengthening secondary and tertiary sectors of rural economies and on sustaining rural services and infrastructure.
- Provisions in these regulations for means of **simplification** (such as simplified cost-options for local projects) which will truly help officials, Local Action Groups and beneficiaries; and for recognition of the **value of social results and impacts** having long-term benefits on the villages, communities and rural territories in performance-based financing.



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- The 2021-2027 programme at EU and national levels to **enable and support local strategies** with smart economic, social and environmental solutions at local level, eg integrated strategies on biodiversity, energy and climate.
- Funding programs (ESF, Horizon...) to be **more inclusive** for citizens and NGOs

LEADER, Smart Villages

ERP asks for

- Support for **community-led local development** and the active involvement of civil society organisations in decision-making and implementation processes for rural development.
- **Extension of the Smart Villages programme** to include all forms of innovation, and to recognise the key role of small towns as focal points for innovation in rural regions of Europe.
- **Expansion of the role of LEADER**, as the crucial means of delivering European and national funds in a way which meets the specific needs of each area and which harnesses the energy and resources of the public, private and civil sectors. Local Action Groups should be enabled to pursue the CLLD approach and to include finance from different European and national funds and should be given a wider degree of autonomy and flexibility in the use of funds.
- **Earmarking and ringfencing of funds specifically for community led innovation** through Smart Villages in all funds managed through LAGs and - where not available - through active national rural citizens development organisations especially in animation and capacity building.

Thematic and other issues

ERP calls for

- Encouraging retention/creation of jobs on farms, and to support cooperation among **small farmers**.
- Keeping and strengthening support mechanisms for **rural entrepreneurship**.
- Increased focus on the needs of **young people in rural areas**, and on support for young farmers and young entrepreneurs, who can be the new drivers of rural development.
- Increased investment in measures to combat **climate change** and to mitigate its impact on rural regions, and to realise the strong contribution which rural areas and its communities can make to generate renewable energy, promote circular and eco-economies and provide long-term **protection for natural resources**: these should continue to be mandatory elements in rural development programmes.
- A wider programme of **networking, capacity-building and exchanges** between rural stakeholders and governments in all European countries, including continuation of the highly valuable European Network for Rural Development (CAP-network) and extension of the Erasmus+ programme to include all active participants in rural development activity.
- An accelerated process of accession or formal support for the **countries of South East Europe**, with strengthened programmes of rural development including LEADER. Rural development actors in these countries should have full ability to take part in multi-national networking and exchanges with EU partners.
- Support for the transformation of AKIS (Agricultural and Knowledge Innovation Systems) into a broader and cross-sectoral **ARKIS** (Agricultural and RURAL Knowledge and Information Systems).