

JOINT DECLARATION OF THE FIRST ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

Held on 27-30 September 2017

Tirana, Albania



Adopted in the closing session of the First Albanian Rural Parliament (ARP I), held in the Parliament of Albania on 30th September 2017.

Introduction

Over 300 participants attended the first ARP and contributed to and approved its Declaration. Participants represent all rural development stakeholders and interest groups, including farmers and rural residents, various civil society organizations, representatives of local, regional, and central authorities, senior experts of development and policymaking agencies, academia and renowned researchers from the Agricultural University of Tirana, students, young people, the donor community, and media representatives.

The work to organize this Parliament built on the cooperation of the Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) with the four Regional Development Agencies in delivering and conducting many roundtables at local level with representatives of municipalities, businesses, and civil society. To reach some of the objectives of the Rural Parliament, with particular focus on the introduction of good practices, experts from Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Germany and other countries were invited to play an important role.

Background

Albania's rural area population accounts for 49% of the country's total population and about 52% of the employed are engaged in the agricultural sector, which generates 20% of the GDP. Poverty level is 50% higher in rural areas compared to urban centers. Agriculture in Albania is still coping with the effects of de-collectivization initiated in the early 1990s. A significant part of the agricultural land is uncultivated, while fragmentation continues to hinder growth and competitiveness in many areas of the country. Insecurity on agricultural land and low access to credit impedes farmers' investments in the agricultural sector. In the social aspect, 87% of women in rural areas are employed in the agricultural sector and only 7% of them are entrepreneurs, while employment prospects for young people remain low.

In many areas, rural communities suffer from isolation, low access to basic public services, and limited access to markets. Little success has been achieved in the development of social capital as well as in the relationship among farms and their networking at local and national level. The involvement of the non-agricultural economy has been hampered by the lack of an attractive business environment. The survival agricultural sector is dominant and the economic diversity is low. Only 22% of small and medium-sized enterprises are located in the rural areas. The business

environment is affected by sluggish development of the rural markets, scarcity of skilled labor, the loss of labor power due to the movement of young people and women to urban areas, shrinking services and environmental degradation.

Civil society is also facing developmental problems. A significant number of civil society organizations are little involved in rural suburbs, have scarce funding and are often affected by the donors' agenda rush. Scientific research is not getting adequate access to decision-making and is not responding to the diverse local needs.

The Territorial and Administrative Reform and the Law on Local Self-Government *a priori* require the establishment of a more integrated dynamics among urban, suburban and rural territories. The strategies in rural areas of municipalities are still to be designed and implemented.

Common Vision of Rural Parliament Stakeholders

Participants in the First Albanian Rural Parliament shared the vision of the need to strengthen the common socio-economic cohesion and that the LEADER (“Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économique Rurale” – “Links between the rural economy and development actions”) approach represents a long-term key instrument for the sustainable development of the territory. The LEADER approach also aims to empower the voice of rural communities and most vulnerable groups in these areas, such as women and the youth.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) established as a functional partnership between the public and private sector, including civil society, can turn into an irreplaceable development catalyst in rural areas.

Civil society was evaluated as the initiator of change in the establishment of local partnerships with local institutions and businesses.

This vision built on the country's potentials for a variety of traditional products, farming households, promotion of agro-tourism, agro-processing, and evaluation of cultural heritage.

Participants agreed that Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is the framework by means of which local stakeholders can promote development not only through production, environment, culture, territory but also through human resources. It is up to decision-making authorities to use these opportunities or to leave them covered in oblivion.

Challenges of Community-Led Local Development

Government's priorities in this four-year mandate should consider rural development as a fundamental strategy to ensure not only the increase of production and productivity but also the diversification of local activities and strengthening of the role of local stakeholders.

The instruments of public policies in rural areas should pursue two directions: improvement and intensification of economic activity; design of a specific social and environmental strategy to improve living standards.

A new form of rural, urban, and sub-urban development, Community-Led Local Development and LAGs enables local communities to gain importance as initiators of change. The Government of Albania should consider supporting these rural policies as the fulfillment of its programs in support of territorial reform and employment growth.

Members of the rural parliament pointed out the need to access information, foster innovation and vocational training for rural development.

It is also required that the national public sector enhances the managerial and operational capacities of all sectors involved in rural development as a policy and crosscutting approach, prioritizing the adoption of regulatory practice for the LEADER implementation. A key partner of LAGs, municipalities are almost unfamiliar with this experience and lack of relevant capacities.

At the regional, sub-regional, and local level, the cross-sectoral and public-private partnerships should play an increasingly important role in bringing together all societal segments in this movement for sustainable development. The experience of many European countries shows that the initiators of change towards the LEADER approach come from civil society, which should be considered as an essential partner of local government institutions in this venture.

For many reasons, the creation of LAGs cannot be considered a process that can happen by itself. It is a relatively long and inclusive process consulted with local communities. Building trust and confidence between partners and the communities is the core of the success of this venture. Therefore, any hesitancy on the part of the government, donors, or institutions to create an encouraging and supportive environment in this regard increases the cost and does not guarantee good management of rural development and the financial support expected to be granted in the near future.

Recommendations

For the Parliament of Albania:

- Enhance the space of dialog among actors and factors of rural development in Albania;
- The Parliament in general and the Production Activity Committee in particular should continuously monitor the implementation of the 2014-2020 Crosscutting Strategy on Rural Development, which includes all sectors through the line ministries, and should promote development of new evidence-based policies and strategies in close cooperation with academia.
- The Production Activity Committee should be more active and communicative with the Investment Council to create opportunities for absorbing local and foreign capital in order to improve the infrastructure and services of rural areas.
- The Parliament should utilize institutional mechanisms to resolve problems related with land ownership and registration as well as promote land market.

For the Government of Albania:

- The Government should assess the successful implementation of the LEADER approach as an additional opportunity to help territorial reform in integrating urban, sub-urban and rural territory, and thus encourage the involvement of all local actors (including citizens) in modern development practices.
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development should clearly identify its role as the main institution for the implementation of the 2014-2020 Crosscutting Strategy on Rural Development vis-a-vis the line ministries. It is important that this integrated approach be conveyed to public institutions at the local level so as to guide them towards the LEADER approach.

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development should prioritize the development of regulatory infrastructure on implementation of the LEADER approach. This would guide and facilitate the efforts of local actors to formalize public-private partnerships as well as establish and develop LAG development plans. The Government should redevelop appropriate instruments through its sectoral and cross-sectoral programs and through the coordinating role of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure a supportive climate in the juridical, legislative, administrative, and financial spheres.
- In cooperation with international partners, the central and local governments should collaborate to enhance involvement and establishment of essential decision-making systems based on consultation and cooperation, in order to enable rural stakeholders to participate in the development and implementation of national and local policies.
- The Government should functionalize the National Council of Civil Society.
- Encourage inclusive social policies and rights to enable a decent living to women, children, youth and men living in rural areas.
- Promote upper secondary agricultural and rural vocational education.
- Undertake additional actions to improve access to financial instruments or services, extension service, and controlled agricultural inputs.

For the Business Sector:

- The business groups and academia should create opportunities of interaction to promote innovation, adoption of technology, facilitation of access to capital, and building risk-based systems to enable good opportunities for the generation of new businesses.
- The Government and the business community should provide various solutions to public-private partnerships, which not only would improve rural services and markets, but would also diversify rural economies and enable the youth and women to stay in or to return to rural areas.
- The business community should improve communication with other stakeholders, especially local government units, to establish a better tax environment, an improved transport system and a better reach-out of private services as a replacement of the lost public good, thus becoming a form of communication between urban and rural areas and reduce disparities and barriers that exist between them.

For the Civil Society:

- Civil society should intensify its efforts to ensure an enabling environment for its strengthening through national advocacy.
- Civil society should increase its good self-governance as an important factor to successfully take on the role of the instigator of change.
- Good practices of civil society that focus in the development and regeneration of suburban and rural areas should be promoted. Even isolated initiatives have the potential of transforming into LAGs.

For the Academia:

- The academia and scientific research should have a greater access to the development and consolidation of agricultural and rural development policies as well as to the identification and monitoring of solutions that are sustainable and easily applicable to address rural challenges.
- Ensure a more functional linkage between research institutions and policy- and decision-making at national and local level to help an agenda that facilitates the solution of concrete problems in rural areas.
- Promote education programs that increase not only professionalism in rural areas but also bring capacity building, resources and support to promote local governance that encourages innovative, sustainable, and accountable leadership.
- Academic programs should be encouraged to renew the necessary professional skills in rural areas and provide effective access to education services, including the introduction of innovative instruments, such as distance learning and vocational training tailored to the needs of the rural lifestyle.