**Regional Rural Forum of Drin kicks off the journey to the 2nd Albanian Rural Parliament**

The Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) organized the Regional Rural Forum of Drin on March 6, 2020 in the city of Lezha. The forum was organized in the framework of the 2nd Albanian Rural Parliament and represents the first out of the four forums that will precede the Parliament. The forum was welcomed by AGROPUKA, one of the ANRD member organizations

The one-day forum saw around 80 participants, representatives of various public institutions, local authorities, civil society organizations, farmers' associations and productive groups, women and youth from rural areas, local entrepreneurs, active citizens and other participants from all over the Drin region, respectively from the counties of Shkodra, Lezha, and Kukës. The Forum was conceived as a combination of the plenary session that broadly addressed the development challenges of the Drin region, agrarian and rural policies, followed with a motivating speech by the guest speaker on social business as an alternative of providing necessary services in rural areas. In the end, simultaneous workshops on the public consultation on the new cross-sectoral strategy of agriculture and rural development were organized, transforming the Forum into a dynamic space of interaction.

The greeting speech was held by Mr. Sabah Djaloshi, Executive Director of Agro Puka, who underlined the aim of the Forum on creating opportunities for rural development actors to connect with the sector's decision-making and policy-making processes. The Forum will also discuss the development challenges of the region, will provide consultation space on sector-led policies and strategies, and will guide stakeholders on concrete actions for the sustainable development of rural communities.

The Mayor of Lezha Municipality, Mr. Pjerin Ndreu, welcomed the participants and assessed the sustainable rural development as an important element for the development of quality tourism, one of the economic priorities of the Municipality of Lezha. Mr. Ndreu emphasized the support provided by the Municipality of Lezha for rural development initiatives that increase confidence and spark hope for a better life in rural communities.

The Honorary Consul of Austria in Albania, Mr. Gjergj Leqejza, was also present at the Forum. He pointed out the importance of issues at the core of the Forum discussion, considering rural development as a complex and multi-stakeholder concern. Tourism is Albania's future, and rural development is inextricably linking to each other, Mrs. Leqejza highlighted among others.

At the opening session, Ms. Rigerta Loku raised concerns over the stagnation of the situation in the village and the depopulation of rural areas due to the lack of real development interventions.

At the opening of the plenary session of the Forum, Ms. Evelina Azizaj, ANRD National Coordinator, highlighted the evident need for advocacy for more support and attention from public policies for rural areas. Ms. Azizaj, among others, said that the focus of the ANRD's advocacy are small farmers, mountain and disadvantaged areas, women and youth from rural areas, integrated and participatory rural development through the Leader approach, the enhanced role of municipalities in rural development, etc. Ms. Azizaj drew attention to the importance of connecting rural actors with the government in the process of policy formulation, enabling the latter to create a clear picture of the needs and challenges of rural communities. In this regard, she presented the ANRD initiative on consultating the new Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy from the early stages of its drafting. She also informed the participants that the consultation ideas and suggestions brought up during the current and following Regional Rural Forums will serve as an input for the working group set up at the Ministry.

The presentations and discussions at the panel brought to the attention of the participants the current challenges of the rural and agricultural sector of the region from various perspectives, including representatives of local authorities, public institutions investing in rural development, CSOs and youth in rural areas.

The summary of the panel discussion is given below:

Mr. Shpëtim Quku, representative of the Albanian Development Fund (ADF), informed the participants that the draft of Regional Development Strategy is being prepared and it is mainly focusing on human capacity building and productivity growth at the regional level. The Strategy will be accompanied by the relevant Regional Development Law, which is in the advanced draft phase waiting on the approval. In line with the problems and challenges of rural development in the region, he also presented ADF's priorities on improving infrastructure in rural tourism areas conceived as development poles.

Mr. Mustaf Kopani, Deputy Mayor of Municipality of Puka, provided a comprehensive overview of the current situation in the municipality of Puka after the administrative-territorial reform, while highlighting the challenges related to agribusiness development and the creation of a functional physical infrastructure in rural areas. Mr. Kopani pointed out the municipality's financial inability to fulfill its functions related to rural development. He also underlined the great financial dependence on central institutions.

Ms. Anna Carboni, the representative of VIS Albania, described the good results of RTM, COSPE, and VIS in terms of rural communities’ development. Referring to the LEADER approach, she focused on the quality of life as the main pillar of interventions, and appealed that rural communities themselves should be the main drivers for the municipalities development intervention. She also mentioned the role of the VIS organization in mobilizing and empowering youth in rural development, and highlighted the role of development agent who connects and works to build confidence in the values of a given area. She concluded her presentation by stating that people stay in one place when they love it, and social welfare is a significant factor in achieving that.

ANRD Youth Hub Guide, Gent Imeraj, brought up the perspective of rural youth with a focus on the challenges of digitization. He noted the phenomenon of mass migration of rural youth and assessed that the strategic framework for youth (Action Plan 2015-2020) have not proven relevant in this regard. He emphasized that youth migration is a moral issue above all, so creating policies that address the issue of youth as a cross-sectoral theme is urgent.

Mr. Shkëlzen Marku from the YUNUS Social Business Foundation was invited to share his experiences and opportunities on reducing unemployment and providing services in rural areas through social enterprises. The presentation of Mr. Marku urged participants to evaluate other alternatives, rather than waiting for the Municipality or the Ministry to meet the current needs of communities and to generate jobs at community level.

The Forum also created space for discussion with stakeholders regarding their needs and concerns. The discussions were focused on national support schemes for agriculture and rural development, the role of municipalities and the impact of territorial reform on rural development, the program of 100-villages and its progress, forestry, vocational education, prospects for the rural future, extension service and support of farmers, etc.

The discussion continued in two simultaneous consultation sessions regarding the new agricultural and rural development strategy. The discussions were structured into problems and needs, priorities, vision for the future, and recommendations for improvements. They were recorded to be organized together with the information that will be collected in upcoming forums. All this to get closer to decision-making and policymakers of the sector, as well as to unify the needs, priorities and interests of various actors of rural development.

This activity was developed in the framework of the project: **Networking for Participatory Rural Development**