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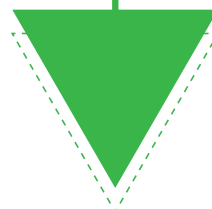
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# Declaration of the Second Albanian Rural Parliament European Perspective of Rural Albania

4-5 MARCH 2021





**We**, over 600 participants from all over Albania, convened virtually and physically in the second *Albanian Rural Parliament* held on March 4-5 by the Albanian Network for Rural Development in coordination with the *Agricultural University of Tirana* and *Epoka University*, and with the participation of representatives of public institutions, local authorities, farmers, civil society organizations and other local-level stakeholders. Regardless of the difficulties created by the Covid-19 pandemic, the second Albanian Rural Parliament, through the digital platform and thanks to the organizational and coordinating efforts of the *Albanian Network for Rural Development*, **made possible this important meeting for dialogue, cooperation, exchange and discussion of critical issues of rural development as well as draw recommendations on development and revitalization of the life and economy of rural communities.**

**This Declaration is based on the feedback and input given by participants during the sessions of the 2nd Rural Parliament as well as on the regional rural forums organized during 2020.** The Parliament and the regional forums offered space for discussion and consultation, thus enabling other forms of soliciting feedback from various stakeholders. This has been an important moment to explore the reality and to get better acquainted with the needs and problems, to reflect on the vision and priorities aimed at improving the rural communities in the country. **We call on the Government, the Parliament, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency, the Local Self Government Units as well as on other public and private actors, including academia, civil society organizations, business, and others, to invest in the revitalization of rural communities' life and the economy taking into account the priorities and recommendations stated in this Declaration.**

The survey conducted with the regional rural forums helped to determine the **three elements of the value chain according to the level of urgency for public policy support.** Financial support (direct support with grants and payments) was assessed as very important by 77% of the survey respondents; **human resources** (training and empowerment of young people and women) was considered very important by 50% of participants; and **local public infrastructure** (water supply, roads, power supply, markets, agricultural product collection infrastructure, etc.) was deemed important by 42% of participants.

### **National supporting schemes of agriculture and rural development**

National schemes are an important instrument to support agriculture and rural areas in general. **We emphasize the vital importance of institutionalizing the design of supporting schemes with the participation of farmers and other stakeholders.** Soliciting the opinion and consideration of farmers' priorities in the process of designing national schemes should become a regular institutional practice. A detailed calendar needs to be designed in pursuance of the core principles of dialog and the rules and procedures on public consultation.

Frequent or annual changes to the schemes' structure leads to confusion

and instability for both farmers and rural and agricultural development stakeholders. **To address this, we suggest creating fixed supporting schemes for a period of 3 to 5 years. The promotion of cohesive and balanced development of local territories calls for the application of the effect of equalization of funds,** differentiating measures and funds by regions. This approach needs to be combined with a map of agricultural crops.

**We ask that transparency is improved** by digitalizing the entire process, from application and selection up to payments to farmers.

**We insist on increasing the budget support by at least 3 times for the next four years when compared with year 2020 and increase the direct payments by at least four times to meet farmers' current needs and align them with countries in the region.**

### Remote and mountainous rural areas

Rural development refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of people living in relatively isolated and less populated areas.

**We urge for the formulation and implementation of an incentive and stimulating policy to support remote and mountainous rural areas** through: a) setting a clear definition of rural areas and less favored areas by administrative units; b) favoring farmers coming from these areas by awarding them additional points in the national scheme; c) the imposition of specific measures related to the collection, processing, and cultivation of forest fruits and medicinal plants for licensed collectors and processors of the area provided that they employ residents of these areas.

### Small farmers

Sustainable and inclusive rural development represents the development alternative that empowers and integrates smallholders and family farms. **The problems and challenges faced by small farmers are quite specific and often untreated and unrepresented in the discourse over rural development policymaking. This Declaration is closely related with the representation of development issues encountered by small farmers across Albania and seeks to bring them to the attention of policymaking.**

The most significant reform on the countryside promoted by Law no. 7501, "On Land", still holds many agricultural holdings hostage to the formalization of property. Farmers, in particular small farmers, continue to face economic hardships and their development prospects appear to be fading. **The high percentage of small farmers and the problems they obviously face call for the formulation of a national policy to support Associations of Agriculture Cooperation and short food chain initiatives.**

To this end, **we encourage the Government, the donor community, and the civil society organizations to engage in concrete short food chain initiatives by helping to create cooperatives, cooperation associations and short supply chains.**

**We call on the Government to create fiscal facilities to boost the creation of new agriculture cooperation associations (cooperatives) and to strengthen and grow the existing associations. We suggest that a certain budgetary pool (at least 35%) be intended for direct payments to small farmers to ensure that they have fair and equal chances for success, given the**

**incomparable conditions with the rest of the other agricultural economies. To this end, it is definitely necessary to make the definition of the small farm.**

### The youth

Young people are important for the continuity of life in rural areas, for agriculture as well as for food security. However, young people are underrepresented in the structure of the agrarian economy. Only 1% of managers of agricultural economies are up to 25 years of age. Studies show that in the agricultural economy the increase of middle age, the migration, and the lack of training programs have led to a significant reduction of human capital. Currently, the opportunities for young people to be educated or trained in agriculture are considered scarce.

Improving the quality of life in rural areas is likely to make the countryside attractive for the young people to stay. **We call on all development actors to work with young people in order to increase their desire to contribute to their country**, through training, employment and self-employment opportunities and on-the-job training. **It is important to identify adequate mechanisms and incentives to boost young people's interest in vocational secondary education. Also, similar to the EU Common Agricultural Policy 2021-2027, we suggest that a special support measure for agricultural enterprises launched by young farmers (under the age of 39) needs to be set.**

### Rural women and girls

Similar to young people in rural areas, special attention needs to be paid to improving the socio-economic status

of rural women and girls. **Aware that sustainable social and economic development of the country cannot be achieved without first supporting women and girls in rural areas in their fight against poverty and social exclusion, we insist that the inclusion of their socio-economic empowerment in the policymaking agenda of the sector is a priority.**

**We suggest resizing the agricultural support scheme by internalizing gender issues in the application process so as narrow the social and economic gap. This requires a comprehensive review of the application process to overcome the shortcomings and to guarantee the fairness of the process.**

### Implementation of LEADER approach in Albania's rural communities

As a new form of participatory rural areas development and democracy, community-led local development (CLLD) as well as abidance to the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality and the LEADER approach are at the core of this comprehensive bottom-up process. While the efforts to implement the LEADER approach in our country are relatively early and unaccompanied by sustainable support over time, the features of the country's overall socio-economic development identify it as an essential factor in improving the lives of rural communities, in alleviating poverty, in reducing gender and territorial disparities as well as in strengthening the social capital and local democracy.

**We demand political will to support and prioritize this instrument of rural development policy as well as to accelerate its effective implementation as an essential factor in improving**

**the lives of the Albanian rural communities, especially in preventing their depopulation and abandonment. We suggest investing in the role of local development agent. This agent works to raise confidence in the local values, identity, traditions, culture, environment, which are elements that intensify the desire to live in the countryside and not abandon it.**

### **Albanian Network for Rural Development, innovation and knowledge transfer in agriculture and rural development**

**ANRD is and should be considered by MARD one of the main actors in regard with promoting innovation and knowledge dissemination in agriculture and rural development** especially in three main fields like; innovation in agriculture businesses, ecological innovation and social innovation which aims to strengthen capacities and human resources in rural areas especially involving young people and women. **Funds under Technical Assistance measure of IPARD Program, as well those deriving from national support schemes of Albanian Agriculture and Rural Development Agency would create the appropriate financial instruments to address innovation in agriculture and rural areas.**

**ANRD invites and other institutions like Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and Economy, Ministry of Environment and tourism to share more funds for the respective Institutions under their responsibility** like: University of Agriculture, Agriculture Technology Transfer centers, Vocational Education Schools, other research facilities that might and should provide **contribution in enhancing the role of education and research for innovation in agriculture**

contributing like that in improving the income and life of farmers and people in rural areas and influencing their decisions to stay and do business in rural areas and not abandon them.

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**We urge the Albanian Parliament, Central Government, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the Local Self-government Units and other decision-making bodies to consider this Declaration as a document that emphasizes some of the priority and inexhaustive issues.** As a follow-up, this Declaration will be supported by a complementary document of the second National Rural Parliament - a summary of the main results solicited from the discussions in the plenary sessions and the conversations in the rural café.

**In the meantime, we state that we will engage in ongoing policy and processes' monitoring, capacity building, networking, and advocacy for the sustainable development of rural communities. The Albanian Network for Rural Development expresses its willingness to contribute jointly with our members and partners to mitigate and solve the problems of local communities.**