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albanian **rural** parliament

parlamenti **rural** shqiptar

Participatory democracy

Demokraci pjesëmarrëse



PROCEEDINGS REPORT

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About the Albanian Network for Rural Development

The Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) represents a genuine civil society initiative that contributes to the sustainable development of rural communities, taking an active role in the reform processes of the agriculture and rural development sector, especially in the alignment with European Community Led Local Development (CLLD) policy. The network promotes bottom-up advocacy for effective rural policies that are closer to the rural communities' residents, designed with the participation of local communities, understood from and implemented with people on the ground. ANRD promotes bottom-up advocacy for effective rural policies and applies an inclusive approach for effective rural policies that are closer to the rural communities' residents, designed with the participation of local communities, understood from and implemented with people on the ground.

The Albanian Network for Rural Development was established on December 11, 2015, crowning a series of efforts over the years to advance the role of the non-public sector in the rural development agenda of our country. ANRD is a membership organization, founded by fourteen and currently consisting of twenty-eight full-fledged member organizations, which have long and consolidated experience in various rural development topics and as well as geographical distribution throughout the territory of Albania.

Efforts to date have reflected willingness to support and contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable rural development policies and instruments. The Network has implemented a variety of initiatives in capacity building, networking, and bottom-up advocacy that have triggered enthusiasm and generated interest and trust of local actors. To this end, the Network has enhanced its commitment in the sector reformation processes to ensure unified focus in expressing the rural communities' interests and priorities, to link them with the governance, and to influence the policies and actions of public institutions and other stakeholders to the benefit of the economy and life in the countryside.

For more about ANRD visit: www.anrd.al

Rural Parliament Remains a European project...

Promoted as a European model and project three years ago, the National Rural Parliament in Albania remains a project focusing on both good governance and inclusive democracy. The Albanian Rural Parliament is part of the European Rural Parliament – a pan-European movement that seeks to express the voice of rural communities, articulate the concerns of people in rural areas, and promote actions taken by rural residents in partnership with the civil society and the government. Similar to European rural networks, the ANRD is committed to organizing the Albanian Rural Parliament to bring together people from all rural areas to discuss real-life challenges and actions to be taken, or to influence governance and other development actors to improve the wellbeing of the rural area residents.

The Albanian Rural Parliament represents a platform of advocacy, capacity building, and networking dedicated to rural development. This platform is of great importance as we are aware that the efforts of various actors to improve the quality of rural life should be based on the clear need for stronger advocacy regarding improved and effective public policies.

The second Albanian Rural Parliament – a joint effort of the Albanian Network for Rural Development with a membership of twenty-eight local CSOs in coordination with the Agricultural University of Tirana and Epoka University– brought together on 4-5 March 2021, physically and online, people from various rural communities and key stakeholders of agricultural and rural development to discuss on specific challenges and actions that need to be taken for the wellbeing of rural residents. The second Albanian Rural Parliament created the right atmosphere and marked an important moment for dialogue, cooperation, exchange, and elaboration of issues of importance to rural development as well as to draw recommendations on the development and revitalization of rural communities' life and economy.

THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT MARKED A CULMINATION

FIRST DAY OF THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT 4 MARCH 2021

1

- **Six greeting remarks** from high representative of event organizers and supporters;
- **Three cases from current rural realities** that served to break the ice for plenary debates;
- **Eight panelists** in plenary debates;
- **Two rounds of concurrent workshops;**
- **Eight workshops** – eight current and relevant issues of rural development were explored from the various perspectives of stakeholders;
- **Twenty-four experts engaged** – three for each workshop (moderator, main speaker, and



MORE THAN 600 ATTENDANTS, PRESENT PHYSICALLY AND ONLINE,
STRICTLY COMPLYING WITH PANDEMIC PREVENTION RULES



60 COMMUNITY CELLS – A MEETING PLACE OF UP TO TEN
REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL ACTORS ATTENDED BOTH DAYS OF THE
SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT ONLINE.

OF RURAL ADVOCACY, NETWORKING, AND EXCHANGE

SECOND DAY OF THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

- **Three greeting remarks** and interventions from supporters and friends of rural parliament;
- **Two plenary sessions;**
- **Conclusions from conversations in the rural café:** presentation of results from discussions by topic;
- Plenary session: **Youth of rural areas at crossroad;**
- Two groups of five youths: from of Rural Youth Hub and University of Tirana;
- **Two mentors for the preparation of youth** for debate;
- **Five high representatives of public and non-public institutions** provided their feedback and comments on debates of youth;
- A conclusion session: **Reading out and adoption of the Joint Declaration**

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A PRESS CONFERENCE HELD ONLINE ON 3 MARCH 2021 WITH THE MEDIA AND THREE TOP REPRESENTATIVES OF ORGANIZERS OF THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT – ALBANIA NETWORK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA, AND EPOKA UNIVERSITY • LIVE BROADCAST OF BOTH DAYS OF ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT ON THE OFFICIAL FACEBOOK ACCOUNT OF ANRD • MORE THAN 150 ATTENDANTS REGISTERED IN THE ZOOM PLATFORM TO ATTEND THE EVENT • **100 CONNECTIONS IN THE ZOOM PLATFORM** • THREE TV INTERVIEWS WITH THE ANRD STAFF ON SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT • **ANRD OFFICIAL FACEBOOK ACCOUNT REACHED MORE THAN 18 000 VISITORS** • ONE BOOKLET ON THE ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT PUBLISHED • **JOINT DECLARATION OF THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT PUBLISHED** • **THIS SUMMARY DOCUMENT PUBLISHED ONLINE.**



OPENING OF SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

Greeting remarks by event organizers and supporters

Evelina Azizaj, National Coordinator, Albanian Network for Rural Development

At the opening of the second Albanian Rural Parliament, Ms. Azizaj expressed her enthusiasm in organizing this activity of importance to all farmers, residents, and rural development stakeholders regardless of the pandemic situation. Using digital innovations in addressing the challenge of communication and interaction in such unusual times made the realization of this great meeting of various stakeholders possible.

In her greeting remarks, Ms. Azizaj assessed the issue of rural development as a great national and public good issue. The link of each of us to a rural area due to family roots, the incomplete agricultural reform, uninterrupted exodus, agritourism development, rural landscape, food safety –so much controversial during this pandemic time– and other concerns make rural development a significant national issue. And, as such, it calls for instruments and alternatives to connect, discuss, and listen to each other as well as seek attention and support for rural life and the economy.

To sum up, Ms. Azizaj relayed the journey from the first Albanian Rural Parliament to the second one, including ongoing efforts to revitalize the dialogue and contribution of various public and non-public actors and to conclude the national rural advocacy in this second parliament.

“We have convened today to discuss on challenges and concrete actions that need to be taken to improve the wellbeing of rural residents. The second parliament confirms the actors’ efforts to turn it [Parliament’s platform] into a national regulatory framework on rural and agricultural development with the aim of promoting and sustaining the national dialogue on the sector governance. This national dialogue is important to explore the reality and become better acquainted with the needs and problems as well as to reflect on the vision and priorities on improving rural communities across the country.”

Güngör Turan, Rector, Epoka University

At first, Mr. Turan praised the rural parliament platform as an effort to reach out to all stakeholders to advance their voice in decision-making. The contribution of all stakeholders in the revitalization of rural areas is important to bring positive changes, said Mr. Turan.

“Our university is pleased to participate in this event, whose scope is in line with our mission as an institution of higher education to contribute to the improvement of the life quality of society based on national needs and challenges.”

Mr. Turan brought to the attention of the participants the involvement and contribution of Epoka University through the Department of Architecture in the 100-Village Program, initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Also, due to the pandemic situation, Epoka University has made possible a safe and small transition to e-learning for the University community through the three installments of Hy-flex infrastructure in all classrooms and auditoriums.

Mr. Turan concluded his greeting remarks saying: “I truly believe that today’s event will contribute to improving the mainstreaming of the rural development agenda into the national policies in line with a group of networks in the area. In addition, this platform is a contribution to enhancing participatory democracy and decision-making. I would like to reemphasize the readiness of my university to contribute to the expertise of our academic staff as well as our students.”

Fatbardh Sallaku, Rector, Agricultural University of Tirana

In his greeting remarks, Mr. Sallaku pointed out the increased participation and support generated by the Rural Parliament platform, which focuses on the developments of one of the main sectors of the Albanian economy.

According to Mr. Sallaku, this increased participation and representation of various groups and associations working in the rural area is a testimony of the fact that ANRD has built and shaped its identity in the system of policies and governance in the rural sector.

Mr. Sallaku underlined the economic importance of the agricultural sector in Albania and the need for attention, especially in terms of increasing production potentials and boosting the efficiency of their use. Also, in his speech, the Rector reported on some concerns, summarized as follows:

- The political discourse and development policies at national and European level are dominated by urban focus and perspective thus overlooking remote areas, villages, municipalities, and small towns, although the latter represent areas of economic, social and cultural interaction among people, entrepreneurs and local administration.
- The lack of attention to rural areas has prompted a downward spiral that has caused an exodus of people. As a result, there are fewer services, there is unemployment, poverty, isolation, and property depreciation.
- The distance among the politicians, decision-makers and rural actors is visible in politics, action, and communication.
- The development potential and economic added value provided by rural people and resources are not yet fully recognized.
- The low rate of absorption of financial support for foreign and domestic investments remains the main obstacle to the agricultural sector.
- Issues of land ownership (property in general) are factors that block or slow down investment initiatives in agriculture and other economic activities, which contribute to the development of rural areas.
- Lack of information, knowledge, and professional training related to farm management and administration, market demands, new agricultural techniques and processing technologies and many other issues that concern Albanian farmers have and still continue to have an impact.

Prof. Sallaku addressed the audience by sharing the conviction that the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Government of Albania consider ANRD and the Rural Parliament to be broad and open partnership between the public, private and civil sector, and will use this partnership to generate positive energy and resources in their

developmental process. As a representation of the interests of the private sector, civil society, and local government in the country's challenges for sustainable rural development, this meeting will discuss and deliberate on various issues to give voice to the rural population, to influence politics, and to develop new networks in rural areas.

"In this initiative [of National Rural Parliament] launched three years ago, I want to assure you that the Agricultural University is your partner. We are ready to work with and support this distinguished forum and, above all, to contribute directly to the acceleration of the reform process of European integration of the agricultural and rural sector. I want to urge you here today to call through your voice for joint efforts by all stakeholders in rural development, people, politicians, and decision-makers to stop this downturn, strengthen rural services and support the diverse rural economies through various projects as well as their decentralization. Your voice and advocacy need to be recognized and you need to increase your presence in the programming and investigation of domestic government policies. Your messages and suggestions should be incorporated and reflected in national rural development policies and programs so as to achieve a balanced approach to the three dimensions of rural areas' sustainability - social, economic and environmental.

Mr. Sallaku spoke of the great importance of the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT) to the development of the agricultural and rural sector in the country and on the contribution to Albania's economy. To play this important role and to the benefit of our society, AUT has changed its conception of functioning to become an institution of excellence: an institution which all people feel proud of, students want to study, and the best researchers want to work for. Mr. Sallaku rightly touched on the issue of the ever-lower interest of the younger generation to study at the Agricultural University of Tirana. This bitter reality occurs at a time when there are platforms like this of the Rural Parliament discussing current challenges, when the agricultural sector is of great economic importance, when responsible institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development through the Rural and Agricultural Development Agency, have made progress towards the absorption of EU funds, and moreover when AUT has started reviewing and improving the curricula by adapting them to the requirements and focus of EU policy, including knowledge of green economy, adaptation to climate change, biodiversity protection, the role of forests and fisheries, etc.

The Rector emphasized the important role played by the human capacities of the sector in the implementation of the sector strategies, especially when the Ministry has initiated the planning process of the Strategy for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries (2021-2027), which will present

the concepts and EU requirements for the sector and will provide a vision of where the agricultural sector will go for the next 10 years in Albania. And, in this regard, AUT is the only institution in Albania that provides professions such as agronomy, zootechnics, forest engineering, plant protection, horticulture, etc. However, AUT is facing the challenge of the low number of students enrolled in these programs, which are considered traditional for AUT and vital for the Albanian economy. Statistical data show that if this trend continues and the current university-admission threshold (as per the average grade determined by the DCM) continues to be applied, programs offered by AUT, such as Agronomy, Zootechny, Forest Engineer, Plant Protection, Horticulture, Fishing, Woodworking will be significantly affected and risk their closure due to lack of students. The support of the Albanian government and the Ministry in facing this challenge by acting today is important for the supply of the sector continuously with the right and adequate specialists.

Milva Ekonomi, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

In her greeting remarks, Ms. Ekonomi shared the conviction that the Albanian Network for Rural Development is another organism in the Albanian civil life, whose identity has consolidated.

“The network has done a great job in improving the role of communication among various rural organizations, regardless of the fact that they work in different areas. ANRD has been a good communicator among representatives of civil society or various interest groups, executive agencies, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, ARDA or other institutions. One of the striking thoughts at the time of programming the work for the new strategy was the need to cooperate with the Network.”

Ms. Ekonomi brought to the attention of the participants the work priorities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, such as increasing the competitiveness of farms, agro-processing businesses and boosting exports, improving food safety, etc., which have provided support and attention to the rural development. The development of agro-tourism or rural tourism or handicrafts or the empowerment of women in all these processes – all these have been the focus of the work of the Ministry considering them to be opportunities and potentials for improving the wellbeing of families in rural areas. The Minister also underlined the successful performance of the agricultural sector during the difficult pandemic year of 2020, sharing the achievements through figures: increased exports with a value added of 9.7% compared to 2019; significant increase of agricultural crop production by 14.3%; fisheries by 12.8% and agro-processing by 4.9%. This increase,

according to the Minister, was attributed to the support of the Government and the work of the farmers themselves. The Minister also mentioned the financial support provided by national schemes and the IPARD program, but without forgetting to point out the latest project the free petrol for farmers.

It is worth mentioning the special attention that the Minister paid to the empowerment of rural women and farmers. These issues that have triggered the Ministry's cooperation with international organizations such as UN Women, European Union, Italian Cooperation, and German Cooperation. As a result, the number of farm women who have benefited from national support schemes has increased from year to year. To substantiate this, the Minister shared the following figures: 99 million ALL were granted to farmers in 2019 and 217 million ALL in 2020. In this line and aware that the path of modernization of the Albanian agriculture and sustainable rural development is not an easy path, the Minister shared the Ministry's commitment to increase the pool of the national scheme as well as to make available to farmers a share of the credit risk required for the activity.

“What you are going to discuss over these days is linked with many aspects of the structure of the Albanian agriculture, which is dominated by small farms. Issues of discussions will also include other phenomena, such as emigration, scientific research, access to information, or human resources. Addressing these issues here today will undoubtedly require another institutional approach. The Ministry is preparing the strategy to cover the period 2021-2027 and is also working on the preparation of the IPARD III program. Hence, we are at a phase where we can combine the results coming out of this rural Parliament with what the Ministry is doing today. We have the opportunity to receive and make part of the strategy the conclusions coming from this Parliament. I believe and have full conviction that the communication between us will be a communication that will bear fruit to a document, which will serve us and will be endorsed by all those who will be implementers of this strategy.”

Mario Mariani, Head of Cooperation Office, Delegation of European Union to Albania

In delivering his greeting remarks, Mr. Mariani pointed out that the second Rural Parliament was a great opportunity for dialogue and exchange for those who know the sector best, who live in the sector, and for those who can contribute to the sector, such as the policymakers, CSOs, administration, donors, and the private sector. The Head of Cooperation Office highlighted the economic and demographic importance of the agricultural and rural sector, clarifying that “We are not talking about a secondary part of the Albanian society or economy.”

Mr. Mariani summarized future objectives of the Albanian agricultural and agri-food sector harmonizing them with the European ones – *“...a sector that creates income and economic opportunities and jobs that contributes to the economy of other sectors, also, a sector that is sustainable and takes into account the long-term perspective of the environment and natural resources that we preserve, preserving also the Albanian agriculture.”*

However, Mr. Mariani took the opportunity to point out some challenges confronting the sector, including property rights and land ownership, fragmentation and size of farms and business in the sector, the skilled labor, and the aging population in the rural world. Regardless of these problems, the great belief in the ability of the sector is why over the years the EU have provided something about 10 million euros of support specifically to agriculture in the last decade. Then, Mr. Mariani confirmed the continuous support through IPARD, whose implementation has taken up in full speed and it is already improving in many aspects. In three courses of IPARD over 1000 applications have been submitted and today around 2500 farms are benefiting from IPARD.

“This makes us [EU] the largest partner and the biggest donor in the sector and for some reason we are convinced that the potential is there, and we want to engage in the long term with you and the authorities on the development of the agriculture and agro-food sector in Albania. But whatever we can go, whatever other donors can do we cannot bring the solutions to all the issues, we need a very strong role and the full taking of responsibilities by the Albanian authorities. It is important that this is done in the right direction, with the right resources and dialogue. This is proof that the rural parliament contributes to directions which shape the sector for the next years”.

At the end of his greeting remarks, Mr. Mariani flagged a couple of areas where EU would like to see increased attention and support by all the actors in the sector. The first one is linked with a huge potential for Albania in the area of organic farming, and on protecting and promoting quality and traditional products. This has a huge potential for the domestic market and for the international market, particularly in accessing EU market. For this, the right framework and the right institutions to do this seriously are required. The second area is linked with the agriculture developed by taking into account the longer-term impact on the environment, that reduces the degradation of the natural resources such as land, water, and that makes agriculture stronger in facing natural disasters. For all this, Albania needs institutions that are strong and that have resources.

“I hope that in the next two days, your aspirations, concerns, proposals, will be taken into account by the relevant institutions and actors. I would like to

thank the ANRD, because they have had a lot of challenges organizing this event at those challenging times, we are all facing – and I believe they did a pretty good job at organizing it.”

■ **Frida Krifca, General Director, Agricultural and Rural Development Agency**

In her speech, Ms. Krifca brings her personal experience regarding exposure to countryside life and people in rural communities. Highly important to the development of agriculture and rural development, her job tied her on daily basis with the life, economy, and dynamics of the Albanian village. She recounts that she has met working people –all dedicated and sacrificing– who care for small and large farms, their wellbeing, their friends, and their families. She has concluded that villages have tremendous potential to create development and ensure wellbeing for small economies and to develop the country’s economy. Recognizing the potential and commitment to work, Ms. Krifca, has led the and Agricultural and Rural Development Agency implementing the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which have aimed at transforming agriculture from a subsistence sector into a modern agriculture. She emphasized the contribution of ARDA, which is not only related to modern investments in the sector, but also to show that the countryside and rural space of the country are an inherent development factor for the economy and demographics of the country.

“What have we done to discover the treasure of the Albanian village? Our main goal is to transform the agriculture, starting the work done with plots to its mechanization in an economy of scale that saves time, reduces costs, and improves the quality of products, by paying special attention to new technological investments and upgrading Albanian products to the European Union standards. Other investments will go to various agricultural livestock enterprises for technological innovations that seek to provide an example of a modern mixed farm of European quality and standards. A farm like this not only boost its revenues but also contributes to the country’s economy and to the protection of the environment. Today we go to a village not only for agro-tourism. Companies go to villages to diversify their business portfolios and startups establish in villages to generate revenues.”

Among other things, the General Director acknowledged that the road to substantial development and modernization of agriculture is long. However, she maintained that ARDA has reached some milestones for this development to be sustainable. In addition, Ms. Krifca shared statistics from the last three years in providing financial support to the sector:

- About 345 investments in fixed physical assets were supported in 45 municipalities of the country; 143 of them are startups, new businesses;
- Over 3,100 new jobs are created in the village as a result of the above investments;
- The average age of people engaged in agriculture has decreased; it is reported that an addition of 41% of young people are engaged in the agricultural sector as applicants;
- The involvement of women in the agricultural sector as entrepreneurs and leaders of the agricultural development process has increased; it is reported that more than 40% of women are engaged in the agricultural sector as applicants;
- Some 60 businesses have diversified to agri-tourism, culinary, and accommodation destinations.

While acknowledging that the group of applicants is not representative of the whole sector, but sufficiently shows the formality and the future and longevity of those engaged in agriculture, who see agriculture not as survival but as the main source of income, the Director assured attendants that these data are considerable and a testimony of the importance of investing in agriculture and the benefits generated from this sector. By encouraging and involving more women and young people in this sector we make a significant contribution to the rural economy and wellbeing.

Ms. Krifca spoke also about the approach of ARDA work, which focuses on the farmer and the facilities that should be created in access to information, finances, assistance, etc. to make rural life easier. ARDA has made radical changes to facilitate procedures, documentation in the application of direct measures, formalizing processes and enabling online application in order to avoid confusion and queues and reduce administrative costs. This work approach has been rewarded with the rise of farmers' confidence, as evidenced by the increased number of applications to support schemes and the IPARD Programme. The number of applications to the national scheme has increased by 20% from 2019 to 2020 only.

"In 2018 we gained the trust of the EU to implement the IPARD Programme and thanks to the latter we put at the disposal of farmers and agro-processors a fund of 94 million Euros. The tripartite among the EU, the Government of Albania, and the Albanian farmers and agro-processors made it possible for this fund to increase to 124 million Euros. We have administered three calls under this program; some 288 investment contracts have been supported with funding starting from 10 thousand euros to 2

million euros. These investments are important generators of rural and agricultural development in the country.”

Petar Gjorgievski, President, Balkan Rural Development Network

Initially, Mr. Gjorgievski expressed his pleasure in addressing the participants of such a great event on behalf of all rural networks of the Balkans, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. He congratulated ANRD for organizing the Rural Parliament amid hardships caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic. Among others, the BRDN President said:

“We have the opportunity to share our experiences through this event as much as possible in order to contribute and, why not, to replicate those issues and aspects that are similar. It is known that the countries of the region face similar challenges and problems. The trend of organizing rural parliaments in the Western Balkan countries is growing and now rural parliaments are taking place in some of them. Currently we have rural parliaments in Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and now they are developing at a higher level, at the regional and European level. The European [Rural] Parliament will be held this year – this year is the fifth parliament – and the Balkan [Rural] Parliament will be held this June in the city of Ohrid in North Macedonia. Parliaments are participatory forums of local and central actors, where they have the opportunity to discuss and debate issues that are important to their rural communities. Parliaments are advocacy initiatives organized by civil society in partnership with the government. We believe it is an opportunity to raise the voice of communities on their important priorities and issues.”

PLENARY SESSION: Current Discourse on Rural Albania. Opportunities and Challenges

Two cases from the current rural realities that served to trigger the plenary debate were presented by two online participants in the Rural Parliament, who represent different actors of rural development in the country. Each of them presented a 'specific case', a rural reality experienced by a certain community, but at the same time they relate an issue or concern for other communities in Albania.

Case 1: Frashëri - its past, present, and future: Frashëri's past features a glorious history, its present finds it abandoned and depopulated, its future eyes hope and resilience.

Presented by **Tomor Kotorri, Head of the "Frashëri Brothers" National Cultural Association.**

The Flowering Period

With a stunning natural beauty, close to the Hotova Fir Wood, Frashëri is a heavenly place among the mountains that gave so much illumination and knowledge to Albania and Albanians.

Documented around 1650-1655 as a settlement featuring a history of more than 600 years, Frashëri lays bare its magnificence and glory. This is the very first area that awakened the national spirit and strongly influenced the nascence of the Albanian nation. But what makes Frashëri a monument of our national history and culture is that it has given the nation three titans of history, thought and culture: the statesman and diplomat Abdyl Frashëri, the national poet Naim Frashëri, and the ideologist and scientist Sami Frashëri, without whose work the rebirth of our nation cannot be understood.

Frashëri experienced an economic development and blooming until 1914. For Sami Frashëri and the 18th-century French Diplomat François Pouqueville, in the second half of the 19th century, Frashëri was not just a village, but "a small mountainous town of gentlemen" with an educational infrastructure in six foreign languages, with services, trade, etc. that are a characteristic of a real town. The village experienced its second boom before the '90s, despite the limitations of the communist system as

elsewhere in the country. The population reached over 772 inhabitants; each village housed an 8-year school and a health center. The village of Frashëri had a high boarding school, a district hospital, 5-6 stores, a regular urban shuttle line, telephone lines, etc.

The present is marked by blight and abandonment: We all recognize Frashëri and its inhabitants and consider them to be part of our national consciousness. But, alas, if you could only see with your own eyes how this area has been abandoned and deserted! The desolation has come not only as a consequence of free movement for a better life, but also due to vital shortages. Damage and irreparable lack of road infrastructure, economic collapse, departure of intellectuals, and shortages of health and education services, brought the departure of more than 75% of the population. Today the village of Frashëri is inhabited by 22 families with 72 inhabitants in the summer season, while in winter and other seasons only 7 families and 28 permanent residents live there.

Eyeing the future: Although abandoned, neither the Municipality of Permet, nor the Prefecture, nor the County of Gjirokastra can keep Frashëri today. This village belongs to the Nation and that is how we should evaluate it. It is unique, it wants the Albanian state and society to consider it as unique, as a separate voice in the development and progress of the country. The activities organized by the former commune, by the Municipality of Permet and the Frasherri Brothers National Patriotic Cultural Association have also contributed to this.

The organization of these activities is also a call to preserve and promote the name of Frashëri and to raise awareness among Albanians, the state, friends, and donors to strongly support and help Frashëri by means of special projects to turn it into a historical, tourist, and museum center. Irrespective of efforts, we have not achieved any concrete results.

What are the resources on which Frashëri rebuilding can rely on: The history of Frashëri is a great monument of culture and tourism of Albania. This is due to the Frashëri Brothers, the nature, the museum house of the Frashëri Brothers, the tekke of the patriots Father Nasibi, and Father Alushi. Frashëri and the surrounding area have a rich flora and fauna, a rare climate and ecological resources, the Hotova Fir National Park, crystal clear water springs, real opportunities for the development of mountain tourism. Hotova Fir ozone is a special case in our country, as claimed by European specialists who have seen this park up close.

The community of Frashëri, outside and inside the village, in cooperation with specialists of various fields, have designed and submitted projects on the resilience of Frashëri to the relevant state institutions.

1. A major problem is the construction of the Permet-Frashëri road, which today is in a terrible condition. This road is no longer than 30.5 km and is complemented by a reconstruction project of secondary roads that link Frashëri with the surrounding hamlets.
2. Construction of a hospital or curative center to cure people with lung diseases.
3. Reconstruction and revitalization of the museum house of the Frashëri Brothers and the reconstruction of the first Albanian language school for the district of Permet, in Frashëri.
4. Frashëri should be oriented towards family-run tourism through the implementation of the study on the preservation of the urban planning of the old town of Frashëri. This project envisages the establishment of tourist guest houses and villas for visitors.
5. Construction of the national axis of the Saranda-Gjirokastra-Permet-Korça Road, which also passes through Frashëri, thus shortening the distances.

Once these measures are implemented, Frashëri will turn into a nationwide health center for the development of historical-cultural and ecological tourism, contributing to the economic development of the region of Dangelli and the town of Permet. Many countries of the world invent symbols and invest in them, while Frashëri, a living symbol of the nation, calls at all times for protection and development taking into account that within it lies the history fused with the Albanian nature and beauty. Thank you!

Case 2: Puka rural women amid challenges and efforts for empowerment

Presented by **Marie Frroku, Leader of Women's Group, Gjegjan, Puka**

This is the narrative of a woman battling with the restraints stemming from the conservative mentality, the difficult environmental conditions, the negated contribution to family and society, who seeks, first of all, to introduce the history, the challenges and achievements of Puka women who share the same problems and efforts for development and empowerment.

Ms. Frroku gave an overview of the problems in the area where she lives, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the social and economic development in the territory she refuses to abandon. Her call is an appeal to society and the state for more comprehensive contributions to disadvantaged rural areas and, in particular, to women who seek more support to realize their role in society, community and family.

“I am Marie Frroku from the Administrative Unit of Gjegjan of the Municipality of Puka. By profession, I am an economist. I am the mother of five children. For about 17 years, I have led a group of 22 women from our village set up by the Agropuka Association with the assistance of WE Effect. Over the years, the challenges have varied from confronting a mindset of the area on the role of women in society to other problems that have affected the families of the area. We are basically engaged in processing fruits and vegetables, providing products for family consumption but also generating economic profits, contributing to our household economies. In addition, our group is also engaged in social problems that are numerous, such as: early marriages, divorces, etc. Women in rural areas are wronged in their daily life, including the exhausting and unpaid chores, which are not recognized as work, but as an obligation.”

In her remarks, Maria summarized the most recognizable problems experienced by rural communities, particularly by women: the departure of young people and the able-bodied workforce; lack of promotion of our areas; lack of public investment in the area; poverty; unaffordability and inability to open small businesses; lack of facilities for businesses; lack of support for startups focused on remote areas, etc. The capstone problem facing the entire community is the failing hope to continue living in Albania not only among the youth but also among the community.

In concluding her remarks, Maria focused on major problems of women, pointing out, among others, the following:

Management of village affairs: Women are excluded from decision-making. Village life is organized according to the structures defined by law, such as the village council, the elders, and the village head. We still do not know of any village in Albania that has elected a woman as its head.

Rural Economy: The impossibility of women to participate in national schemes, as property and land are unlegalized. Lack of ownership documents excludes rural communities as well as women farmers from investing in the farm.

Social life of rural women: women do not have a social life; there are no activities for women to gather and talk, except for election campaigns, etc. Social centers are either missing or, in case they are established, they keep their doors closed.

Public services: education, health, banks, and ATMs are still services that women can only access by traveling miles.

On behalf of all women and girls in rural areas, Maria called upon various governmental and non-governmental actors to come down to the village and listen to the voice of women.

Case 3: Ideas by Shkodra farmers on an opportunity of improving the support from national schemes of agriculture and livestock

Presented by ***Isak Bajrami, Head of Agricultural Federation of Shkodra***

The importance of including the feedback and ideas of all stakeholders in the conceptualization of support schemes for agriculture and livestock is presented by a farmer and representative of the interests of farmers and producers of the Shkodra Region. He gave a living overview of the contrast between the great potential for agricultural and rural development that the Shkodra area has and the difficult social and economic conditions of the most remote mountainous and rural areas.

While assessing what has gone well in the design and implementation of support schemes, particularly in relation to the harmonization of funding from the IPARD Programme with that of the National Schemes, Mr. Bajrami offers and seeks better cooperation with the responsible state bodies on this issue. The institutionalization of this cooperation is seen by Shkodra farmers as the main factor to increase the effectiveness of these schemes in promoting agricultural and rural development in the Shkodra area.

Case 4: A positive example of the contribution of agricultural cooperatives to food safety and coordination within the value chain

Presented by ***Piro Jongari, Head of Agriculture Cooperative, Lushnje***

Development gaps in the field of food safety in Albania call for stronger vertical coordination within food value chains. Some positive experiences that strengthen vertical coordination through the development of agricultural cooperatives and informal farmer groups are already given out.

Mr. Jongari's presentation shows two reported positive cases where cooperatives have proven to be quite useful in meeting the needs of improving vertical coordination. In addition, there are cases which reveal that agribusiness agents promote, support, and even initiate cooperatives and informal groups of farmers in order to apply food safety standards. Improved cooperation among farmers not only increases their participation in the value chain, but also generates mutual trust.

Ilnisa Agolli, Top Channel TV journalist of “Villages of Albania”

Building on her rich experience in exploring the villages of Albania from north to south, Ms. Agolli focused on highlighting the contrast between rural realities and the idealization of these areas because of lack of information on them. After referring to the case studies, with special focus on the case of the rural exodus from the village of Frashëri in Permet, she underlined the crisis in the socio-economic development of the area triggered by this exodus. While emphasizing the importance of rural areas to the country’s development, she pointed out the gap that exists between the endogenous potential of these areas and the current socio-economic development often halted due to lack of interest and attention from the state, as revealed by lack of investments and infrastructure.

Ms. Agolli continued her story of the travels in rural areas and highlighted the need to reflect realistically and as faithfully as possible this reality and convey the voice and priorities of local communities to policy-making and decision-making bodies and the public at large. She pointed out the primary role that the media, with its sensitivity and objectivity, plays in increasing the attention of the state and actors of sustainable agricultural and rural development to depopulated areas to restore the hope and will of rural communities to live there. Ms. Agolli ended her story saying:

Villages of Albania have great natural and cultural resources. Let us make efforts to identify them and to gradually improve the lives of farmers and all Albanians in general. We must have tangible results to present them with more pleasure as successes when we gather at the table of the next rural Parliament.”

Lauresha Grezda, Director of Agricultural and Rural Development Policies in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

While emphasizing the good cooperation among MARD, ANRD and AUT, Ms. Grezda commended the role of the Rural Parliament in establishing a more direct link and communication with rural communities and other rural development actors. Ms. Grezda described the Parliament as an important instrument in addressing the problems of rural development in Albania, especially in the framework of the process of designing the new Strategy on Agricultural and Rural Development.

Referring to the cases presented by the previous speakers, she underlined the importance given to the Strategy on the Empowerment of Rural Women both through the gender bonus in support schemes and funds dedicated to building their capacities. In response to concerns raised about issues

of ownership title and the use of property as collateral for borrowing with regard to support schemes, Ms. Grezda mentioned the guarantee funds implemented by KfW and the EBRD which help to resolve this issue. Regarding the Law on Agricultural Cooperative Companies, the MARD Director of Policies underlined the need for advocacy to address the new dynamics and priorities of rural communities, further encouraging the established cooperation with civil society and especially with ANRD and academia in this field.

Further on, Ms. Grezda underlined the importance of addressing the country's problems in agricultural and rural development in an integrated way. In the framework of designing the new Strategy, she mentioned the importance of the process of identifying active production groups in the country, women's groups in particular, and their orientation towards traditional and organic products as well as the certification processes, geographical indications, and identification of markets for their products. Ms. Grezda also highlighted the important role of print and visual media in promoting local products and the value chain, inviting the media to boost their cooperation with the MARD in the course of conveying more information and knowledge to the public on MARD activities.

With regard to the Rural Parliament, Ms. Grezda declared: "To the Ministry, the Rural Parliament is one of the main umbrella events for the very fact that we solicit feedback and information to convey to and incorporate with our stakeholders in the best possible way. In addition, the constant cooperation with ANRD and AUT has produced a positive impact on the initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development."

Erinda Lika, Vice Rector of Science and Projects, Agricultural University of Tirana

In her greeting remarks Ms. Lika commended the academy's involvement in advocacy initiatives on agricultural and rural development policies and instruments. In response to the case studies presented in this event, the Vice Rector focused on the rural exodus as a not isolated case that calls for solutions. Bearing this in mind, she presented experiences and scientific methods for addressing the causes and consequences of rural exodus, pointing to the implementation and promotion of territorial development models and the LEADER approach through the IPARD program as a way to success. From the academic perspective, Ms. Lika focused on setting up forecast and information stations for diseases of plants and trees, protection from hail, environmental and landscape protection, etc., which

she considered to be important preconditions for the development of rural tourism and agritourism, economic empowerment of rural areas, and for the prevention of waves of emigration. While focusing on the issues of rural women's integration, she emphasized the need for coordination and capillary expansion of activities and presence of civil society and other actors across rural areas of the country as well as in the involvement of an increasing number of rural women in these activities.

Ms. Lika also highlighted the role of universities in preparing local experts and agriculture and rural development extension service specialists to assist farmers, policymaking institutions, law enforcement agencies, etc., in response to the current challenges of competitiveness, productivity growth, biodiversity protection, etc. This role can be identified in the area of consultancy and activities for producer groups and associations as well as in the selection and planning of participatory approach projects that take into account the needs and priorities of local communities.

Among others, Ms. Lika added that "As representatives of the University, we are honored to be involved in sensitive issues of the agricultural and rural development, such as food safety, social and economic integration of rural women and youth, or rural exodus. From an academic viewpoint, the issue of rural exodus is an issue that affects all of us. Given the knowledge and evidence collected to date, we would propose development models that are in harmony with the climatic conditions, with the experience, tradition and history of these areas."

Birgit Schaefer, Consultant, German Agency for International Cooperation, GIZ

An expert with rich experience in agricultural and rural development, Ms. Schaefer is the team leader of GIZ Project implemented by jRC consulting in Germany in the framework of GIZ project on Sustainable Rural Development. In continuation of what was said earlier by the Minister and top ministry officials, Ms. Schaefer informed that the Ministry is elaborating a strategy on Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries for the next seven years. This strategy will be prepared with the support and assistance of national and international experts and will follow EU guidelines. To this end, she appreciated the participation in this event as a way to solicit participants' reflections. She also shared information on the preparatory nature of the planning process, which is very important to solicit the feedback of rural population, farmers, rural entrepreneurs, etc. The strategic process is headed by a steering group in the Ministry led by the Minister.

“As an umbrella organization and representing 26 civil organizations and representative associations, ANRD will have this opportunity to discuss more closely on challenges and how to tackle this in the intervention in support of measures that are available and will be made available during next years.”

The strategy planning process will provide opportunities for feedback and contribution from stakeholders, including ANRD in both the verification process and stakeholder consultation. In this background, Ms. Schaefer is enthusiastic about exchanging more on all the challenges mentioned in the assessment of the situation, such as the difficulty of investments, lack of access to land tenure, lack of access to credit, but also how it can be improved, the role and participation of the member youth for having strong rural development in next upcoming years. In addition, the team leader provided information on other topics that the Strategy will address, such as issues tackle issues such as given by the EU framework like the training for rural economy, climate change adaptation, how smart villages can be supported, and how to get smart and connected, how to get rural areas better connected, etc.

Zigo Rutkovskis, Pre-Accession Assistance Unit, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission

Mr. Rutkovskis started his greeting remarks by bringing to the attention of participants the successful implementation of the IPARD II Programme and gave a comprehensive overview of the IPARD III Programme. According to the DG AGRI representative, IPARD II proved its popularity among farmers, among population and had a significant quantity of applications submitted claiming more than 100.000.000 million Euros. While not all applications can be fulfilled at this moment, it shows the importance of this financial instrument and opportunities it can provide in the country. The next period will provide even more opportunities for the country in terms of funding and in terms of additional measures. Albania is implementing only 4 measures at this moment, which are mostly related to farm infrastructure, infrastructure improvement and processing facilities, also diversification in rural area and technical assistance. In the new program, there will be opportunity to choose among 13 measures. Mr. Rutkovskis assured that the managing authority in Ministry of Agriculture has set ambitious targets to go for at least 11 measures in the entire program, which will provide additional opportunities for many stakeholders in the country. In this background, Mr. Rutkovskis mentioned that the rural networks and local action groups as well as project which emphasize the importance of women as well as cooperation of local groups will have priority. National rural networks will

be provided with opportunities of strengthening through the technical assistance. Albania has chosen to go for implementation of measure on LEADER approach, which is very important to promote local action groups, local actions, and empowerment of women's role starting from 2021. As regard cooperation, this is particularly important and will be particularly important for Local cooperation, which will be supported. He continued with his remarks by presenting future opportunities on implementation of measures that promote cooperation, like training, advisory services, which provide support for collective projects, which promote innovation in rural areas, and which include cooperation among farmers, business entrepreneurs, and researchers.

The considerations he shared on the Programme of national support and the importance of increasing this support were quite valuable, reemphasizing the European Commission opinion considers that National Programs have to complement support by EU.

“It can be considered that you will have access to EU Programs and that this funding can replace the National Program, but this is not the approach that it is correct. In principle, National Programs have to provide additional support to farms, to producers, local action groups in addition to measures under IPARD Programme.”

What can be taken into consideration is the difference, for example, in the national support schemes that can be offered to small household farms, while IPARD support can be directed to bigger projects, which require more efforts in preparation, and which require also more funding. It is also important that during this programming stage we can consider other funding opportunities, because there are quite many donor organizations operating in Albania and is important to avoid any overlapping over these founding opportunities.”

In response to the case of abandonment of rural areas, Mr. Rutkovskis mentioned that IPARD III contains a measure on rural public infrastructure and the Managing Authority has decided to implement this measure under this program in the next programming period. This measure includes road infrastructure, among others. IPA support will be needed when it comes to larger infrastructure.

“I hope that you will fully benefit from the mentioned measures on LEADER, which is particularly important for local action groups, and I know very well that local actions groups in Albania are strengthening every year. So, it will be the right time to provide additional support to these local action groups. This measure will also include support for small scale projects up to 5000 Euro, so this can be used also for regeneration of some rural

areas, also for support for social inclusion projects to support some kind of small infrastructure. And, of course, I mentioned support for national rural networks and technical assistance. This is, again, a new opportunity to develop this networking, which is particularly important for this event and also for stakeholders of this event, because it will provide additional opportunities for rural development in the country and also broader networking opportunities in region.”

Mr. Rutkovskis concluded his speech by pointing out some weaknesses with national legislation that are quite significant issues, which affect the implementation of IPARD Program in Albania. He called the attention of the Ministry representatives on the national legislation on national rural network, farm register, and other issues that need to be resolved ahead of the opening of negotiations for Albania for EU accession. It is important to start aligning national legislation with IPARD legislation in order to speed up the national accession into EU as well as to help implementing programs provided by EU. This would make this process a success story, such as the implementation of the IPARD II Programme.

Sotirag Hroni, Board Chairperson, Albania Network for Rural Development

Mr. Hroni’s response to the above issues focused on the role and contribution of the civil society actors in addressing the challenges of sustainable rural development and good governance of the agricultural and rural sector. To answer the question of what exactly civil society can do, Mr. Hroni brought to the attention of the participants the ANRD experience over the last five years as a positive experience of the civil sector in this direction. The Board Chairperson indicated the increase of ANRD membership from the first rural parliament in 2017 to the second national rural parliament in 2021. Currently ANRD has 28 member organizations, and this increased membership guaranteed the success and magnitude of the second Rural Parliament: attendance exceeding 600 participants from all 61 municipalities of the country bringing together the most representative people at the local level who are fully aware of the problems.

“In these years of its operation, ANRD has constantly managed to acquire substantiated legitimacy. I would like to underline “substantiated”, because it is not simply 28 member organizations, but throughout our journey we have consulted with up to 400- 500 farmers, local authorities, civil society actors, and other local actors in various activities in order to shape and uphold a certain position in relation to the sector governance. We have published several policy documents to show the progress and the challenges of the sector. These papers have met different receptions by different institutions.”

Among other things, Mr. Hroni shared with the participants the fact that the network, as a membership organization, has consolidated its profile in the recent years through capacity building and advocacy, involving various actors, such as the civil society, farmers and other actors, and local governance in particular, and is identified as the only entity that insists on linking local government with development policies. Mr. Hroni highlighted the ANRD mission point out that it seeks to link positive models and practices across the country, to identify cases and issues, to make them public, and to link them to policymaking. And all this serves to the decentralization of decision-making as close to citizens as possible, while working to ensure a decision-making as open, transparent, consulted upon, and close to local authorities as possible. This mission is not an easy task to accomplish for a civil society organization, as it works to be independent and represent the interests of local communities and groups and is oriented towards building partnerships with institutions.

“The network has sought to build its identity by representing the interests of various groups, by building partnerships with the governance, and by serving as an opportunity of hope for underrepresented groups of the society. Rural regional forums and this parliament with such a great attendance give people hope to believe, because some policies can be advocated, some decisions can be changed, and so things get even closer to the direct interests of the beneficiaries of the Ministry, ARDA, and various groups.”

In concluding his remarks, Mr. Hroni shared with the participants the ANRD's objective for the future regarding the efforts to establish a partnership with the Parliamentary Committee of Productive Activities, Trade, and Environmental with the aim of turning this Committee into its main ally amid efforts to improve the governance of the agriculture and rural sector and to boost the local-level contribution.

ASSEMBLY IN RURAL CAFÉ - Small group discussions (round I)

The main objective of these assemblies is to explore an issue from multiple perspectives and solicit input and feedback from all stakeholders (farmers, public institutions, civil society organizations, youth, women, producer groups, rural residents, etc.) participating in the Rural Parliament, engaging them in two rounds of small group discussions on eight topics.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THEMATIC WORKSHOPS

To be rural? Needs and challenges, positive experiences and opportunities

Host organization: Mountainous ADAD and COSPE (Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries)

Moderator: Liljana Isaku, Mountainous ADAD

Main speaker: Xhevaire Dulja, Agricultural University of Tirana

Rapporteur: Rozeta Gradeci, COSPE

The “To be rural? Needs and Challenges, Positive Experiences and Opportunities” Workshop focused on exploring issues, experiences and feelings relative to the concept of being rural by attempting to give a general overview and the modern trends of being rural. What are the needs and challenges confronting rural communities? How are they addressed? What are the future opportunities? What positive experiences do we identify from being rural? These are some of the main questions of discussion. Regardless of the various issues of discussion, participants shared opinions and experiences regarding current needs and challenges in rural areas. Following the discussion, participants shared recommendations to support the development of the economy and rural life.

Strengths/Drivers/Potentials/Identified Opportunities

The development of agribusiness sector has a positive impact on the revitalization of agricultural and rural development sector all over the country;

Agrotourism contributes to increasing the sustainability of agricultural farms, as well as to linking landscape, tourism, organic and sustainable agriculture;

Preservation of agricultural land and green spaces to promote and encourage agriculture and rural development;

Rural areas strive to ensure the stability and adaptability of existing farms; economic sustainability of farms will help maintain its long-term ecological and cultural sustainability.

Assessing local agriculture creates community self-development and enables farmers to rely on local resources and assets to improve their economic wellbeing.

Diversification of the production of local agricultural products of the area and their promotion at national level and beyond;

Conservation of local culture and traditions that have been nurtured over the centuries as a form of adaptation and survival; friendly use of resources;

Rural areas create food reserves, preserve the environment, landscape, and diversify products.

Challenges/Needs/Concerns

Abandonment of villages causes overpopulation in some areas and cities;

Overexploitation of natural resources, increasing pressure on natural resources and the environment;

Failure to exploit natural resources in abandoned areas thus missing the creation of value;

Preservation of land and environment: misuse of agricultural land and change of its destination to mainly residential and industrial constructions;

Limited provision of health, education, infrastructure and utility services.

Misuse of resources - the strong connection of the inhabitants of the area as users and guardians of natural resources has been lost: deforestation (although declining), water use, cases of power plants constructed without criteria and that do not respect the established standards;

Infrastructure creation: road, energy, water supply, telecommunications.

Recommendations

- Create markets close to farmers so that they can trade their products at no cost.
- Support small farmers and encourage them to produce in order to supply the local economy, agritourism of the area, with local products from the territory;
- Certify products from local territories;
- Preserve the natural and cultural resources of rural areas to increase the tourist offer;
- Provide ongoing support to small farmers for livestock registration as well as for the construction of slaughterhouses as needed;
- Support all farmers in various forms in order to create as many facilities as possible for applications for subsidies and grants;
- Invest in the irrigation systems;
- Provide regular services, such as electricity, infrastructure and drinking water supply, throughout the year for accommodation facilities and agritourism resorts as well as for rural tourism operators.
- Protect farmers and their products; subsidy remains a priority in supporting small farms. The pandemic year showed their importance to national food safety.

Workshop 2: Rural Exodus – Cause or Consequence?

Host organization: Volontari Nel Mondo RTM and Alliance of Albanian Alps

Moderator: Benito Prendi, Volontari Nel Mondo RTM

Main speaker: Fatmir Guri, Agricultural University of Tirana

Rapporteur: Gent Imeraj, Alliance of Albanian Alps

Featuring a title that presents the everlasting dilemma on demographic changes in rural areas, the “Rural Exodus - Cause or Consequence” thematic workshop focuses on rural exodus as a global phenomenon, which is becoming more visible on daily basis in our country. In its first session, the workshop addressed general aspects of the rural exodus, including the reasons of people for leaving the village, the extent and trends of migration, the methodology of curbing exodus, and the support programs for rural youth. During the second session, participants had the opportunity to

exchange ideas regarding the challenges, the needs, and the problems they face and suggested and proposed relevant solutions.

Rural Exodus: causes/challenges/needs/consequences	Rural Exodus: Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities for living in rural areas
<p>Low level of public services in the village (a cause but also a consequence);</p>	<p>Friendly and quiet rural environment, simple and stress-free living, peace-loving and hardworking people;</p>
<p>Uncertainty about land tenure hurts long-term investment (cause) and application to support schemes;</p>	<p>Diversification of investments and rural activities through new experiences gained from emigration;</p>
<p>Stigma towards agricultural work: it is considered difficult, poorly paid, and little liked (cause);</p>	<p>Shrinking rural population reduces the pressure on natural resources;</p>
<p>Exclusion from support schemes for non-fulfillment of criteria (due to mountainous relief, land fragmentation and distance);</p>	<p>Mitigating impact of national schemes even though small producers in rural areas find it difficult to benefit from them;</p>
<p>Few development opportunities and low social capital (a cause but also a consequence);</p>	<p>Focusing attention to rural development, investments in SMART villages in recent years;</p>
<p>Shrinking rural population reduces the scale of agricultural holdings and the effectiveness of investments in rural areas (a cause but also a consequence);</p>	<p>The European integration process – support to rural holdings through IPARD Programme.</p>
<p>Rural migration as a global trend.</p>	

Recommendations

- Provide support to young farmers to implement business ideas related to sustainable rural development;
- Review the law on agricultural land documentation and legalization of properties to facilitate farmers' access to support schemes;
- Promote the value chain in the village as a set of activities, closely related to rural life, with the ultimate goal of promoting development.

Workshop 3: Small Farmers – Important Contribution – Major Problems

Host organization: Rural Association Support Programme (RASP) and Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD)

Moderator: Petrit Dobi, RASP

Main speaker: Orion Xhoxhi, Agricultural University of Tirana

Technical input: Klodjan Rama, Representative of German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)

Rapporteur: Desjana Grymshi, ANRD

The “Small Farmers – Important Contribution – Major Problems” thematic workshop focused on three main issues: (i) the small farmers’ role in the economic development, (ii) the problems confronting small farmers, and (iii) recommendations on ways and means to promote rural development. Given the fact that most farmers operating in the field of agriculture in Albania are small-sized holdings (86%), this topic is of particular interest to many farmers running their activities in the country. Unlike other thematic workshops, the third workshop brought together not only online participants and the three engaged experts but also representatives from the donor community - GIZ - who highlighted the important role that donors can play (especially GIZ through the Co-Solve program) in the resilience of small businesses operating in the field of agriculture, processing and beyond, damaged by the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Below are the opportunities, challenges and recommendations related to the topics discussed in this workshop.

Small farmers: Challenges/needs/concerns

Regardless of the existence of food safety standards, quality and food safety continue to be low;

Low interaction among farmers for cooperation;

Low involvement of farmers in the extension service;

Insufficient capacity to use integrated technology in agricultural products;

Small farmers: Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities

Agriculture is one of the most important sectors of Albania’s economy, as it employs 39.4% of the population and contributes by 18.4% to the GDP (INSTAT 2021);

Over 86% of farms in Albania are small farms (0-2 ha), which increases their relevance in terms of the focus of policies and interventions by the state and donors;

Small farmers: Challenges/needs/concerns	Small farmers: Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Problems in the value chain and marketing;	Existing potential to utilize new agro-processing technology and tools;
Limited innovation and limited access to finance;	Promotion and development of handi-craft products;
Lack of land tenure titles is an obstacle to benefit from support schemes;	Potential to create and absorb added value;
Limited information on good practices used in the region and beyond, and access to grants;	Small farmers are the focus of both national and IPARD support schemes;
Indication of corrupt practices in providing grant support.	There is an interest in diversifying local products produced at the farm level and promoting them nationally and beyond;
	The development of the tourism sector is seen as an opportunity that not only encourages economic activity but at the same time stimulates the consumption of agricultural products;
	Organic link of rural tourism, agritourism and rural development;
	Small farmers have higher yields for labor-intensive products (high value products)

Recommendations

- Strengthen capacities for supporting youth in rural areas;
- Raise awareness on the quality and safety of agricultural products;
- Strengthen development capacities for producers in rural areas;
- Promote vocational training and create new enterprises/startups;
- Develop the tourism sector, apply the short value chain;
- Promote local tradition through local agricultural products;
- Ensure municipal support schemes according to territorial priorities;
- Manage natural and water resources more efficiently;
- Increase the cooperation between producers and traders;
- Strengthen networks and cooperation among small farmers.

Workshop 4: Role of municipalities in the development of rural areas

Host organization: Institute for Democracy and Mediation and Young Entrepreneurs' Club

Moderator: Lorena Totoni, Institute for Democracy and Mediation

Main speaker: Agron Haxhimali, Association of Albanian Municipalities

Rapporteur: Denis Lushi, Young Entrepreneurs' Club

The Administrative-Territorial Reform and the subsequent legal framework (Law 139/2015 "On local self-government") granted municipalities new powers in the field of agricultural and rural development. In this thematic workshop, experts in the field, representatives of local government, rural communities and civil society discussed on the role of municipalities in the development of rural areas to shed light on how close or far from rural reality these powers are and to identify challenges and opportunities for their effective exercise. Discussions focused on the current approach of municipalities in relation to rural development, funding support programs and community involvement in drafting local rural development policies. The challenges, opportunities, and recommendations identified during this thematic workshop are provided below.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Limited capacities and resources of municipalities to implement the requirements of the law; lack of will on the part of local leaders;	The legal framework clearly defines the role and tasks of municipalities on agricultural and rural development
Municipalities face difficulties in communicating and interacting with farmers and businesses	Sufficient natural resources to bring a positive impact on the development of rural communities if used effectively
Disproportionate distribution of investments between urban/rural areas in local development plans	Cultural and natural heritage assets as potentials for the development of rural tourism
Insufficient investments in rural infrastructure by municipalities	Good programs that seek to support rural development, albeit without significant impact, e.g., the 100-Villages Program

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Low level of municipal initiatives on promoting/marketing rural enterprises	Continuous growth of initiatives to connect communities with the culture and agricultural land in rural areas
Deficient information on subsidy and grant schemes, their ineffective management, lack of meritocracy in selecting winners	
Low reaction to suggestions/requests and problems raised by youth groups; lack of proper local employment policies that force young people to leave the village and lack of motivation for them to return.	

Recommendations

- Strengthen municipalities with powers, bylaws, etc., to support rural and agricultural development;
- Establish a local fund to support farmers who do not have access to national schemes;
- Improve interventions of municipalities in infrastructure, services and communication platforms of rural areas;
- Ensure processes of broad participation of public information and consultation in the sector of agriculture and rural development;
- Promote agribusiness activities as an important asset for agricultural and rural development;
- Ensure greater involvement of information and employment offices for young professionals;
- Strengthen the internal market and create facilities for farmers' access;
- Design and implement projects that promote youth employment;
- Create interest-affordable lending programs for new rural businesses;
- Ensure a fairer planning and distribution ratio for investments in urban and rural areas;

- Establish local grant schemes for startup businesses and farmers in rural areas;
- Create a budget item dedicated to rural women in municipal budgets..

Workshop 5: Agricultural and rural development in the context of challenges of natural disaster

Host organization: Institute of Biological Agriculture (IBA) and Agro Puka

Moderator: Enver Isufi, IBB

Main speaker: Shpresim Domi, Agricultural University of Tirana

Rapporteur: Vitor Malutaj, Agro Puka.

In the conditions of high incidence of natural disasters (our country was hit by a number of major natural disasters such as earthquakes, pandemics, etc. within a two-year period), it is important to make known their impact on social and economic development of affected rural communities. Given this background, the main objective of the “Agriculture and Rural Development in the Context of Challenges from Natural Disaster” Workshop is to provide an in-depth analysis regarding the impact of natural disasters on the agricultural and rural development sector. Underlining the importance of a proactive approach, an important part of the workshop also focused on providing recommendations regarding the most effective management of challenges and natural disasters to enable cost minimization for rural communities and their economies.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Low level of agricultural holdings, high production costs, limited market access, informality and land fragmentation reduce resilience to natural disasters.	Agriculture is an important sector at the national level providing 18.4% of GDP and has high development potential.
Insufficient programming and funding to deal with natural disasters	A significant number of the population are still living in rural areas.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Fragmented institutional leadership for proactive response and disaster management	Global development facilitates networking and the use of innovation and smart approaches to coping with natural disasters.
Limited diversification makes agricultural activities the main or the only source of revenues and living for a significant part of the rural population.	Support programs and contribution from donors to cope with the consequences.

Recommendations

- Get involved in dialogue and advocacy for the development of a strategic and sustainable legal framework for managing the natural disasters;
- Ensure continuous cooperation and coordination among various decision-making and institutional levels;
- Provide continuing education, awareness, and training for the population on coping with natural disasters and include them in educational curricula;
- Participate in joint regional, European, and even global programs for the prevention, reduction, and management of natural disasters in the country;
- Promote and increase awareness of farmers for indigenous varieties and breeds that are resistant to the climatic conditions of our country and to various diseases;
- Raise awareness of farmers on regular basis to insure their products;
- Provide support and subsidies through national support schemes granted by competent bodies and donors for the insurance of farmers' agricultural products;
- Design a proactive approach to planning and implementing precautionary measures before natural disasters in order to minimize their impact on rural communities;
- Utilize expertise, capacities, resources, and information throughout the region (Balkans) and cooperate with various regional centers in Europe and beyond;
- Digitize agriculture and use technology and data system efficiently.

Workshop 6: European Union for Rural Areas – What Current Experience with IPARD II Programme Teaches Us?

Host organization: Creative Business Solution (CBS)

Moderator: Grigor Gjeçi, Managing Authority of IPARD II at the Ministry of Agriculture

Main speaker: Saimir Musta, Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA)

Rapporteur: Ergent PIRE, CBS

The “European Union for Rural Areas – What Current Experience with IPARD II Programme Teaches Us?” thematic workshop was focused on the promotion and presentation of the current experience with the IPARD II Programme. The workshop featured an interdisciplinary approach, which built on both the experience of the IPARD II Programme to date and its impact on the development of the sector. In order to present the successful experience in implementing the IPARD II Programme regarding the strengthening of the agricultural sector and sustainable rural development, this workshop identified the potentials, challenges, and needs to promote the positive momentum created in the sector owing to the implementation of this program. Among other things, the main objective of the workshop was to provide information on how farmers can access the IPARD II Programme. At the end of the workshop, recommendations to be considered for the implementation of IPARD Programmes in the future were presented.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Lack of land ownership title hinders and makes it difficult for farmers to access support schemes.	The IPARD III Programme starts in January 2022 with a fund of about 160 million Euros, thus continuing to support investments in farms, agro-processing, and diversification of activities in rural areas.
Delays in approving construction permits and issuing licenses to farmers	Increase support for the production and processing of medicinal plants in measure 1 and measure 3
Difficulties in selling agricultural products because of lack of markets	Inclusion in the support schemes of olive and olive oil sector

Challenges/needs/concerns

Strengths/drivers/potentials/ identified opportunities

Addition of new support measures for environmental protection, support of organic agriculture, indigenous products, implementation of the LEADER approach, support for rural infrastructure, technical assistance for capacity building of the extension service.

Recommendations

- Introduce in the government's priorities the facilitating framework on upgrading the agricultural lands and issuing property titles to expand the map of beneficiaries of the IPARD III Programme;
- Create and provide concrete incentives for the formalization of agribusinesses and farms as a necessity to benefit from the support of the IPARD III programme;
- Facilitate and accelerate the procedures for obtaining construction permits and relevant licenses for investments with high impact in the sector of agriculture and rural development;
- The regular coordination among institutions involved in issuing legal and tax documents to applicants would facilitate procedures and increase the quality of farmers' applications.

Workshop 7: Innovation, Technology, and Human Resources (research, digitalization that narrows the village-city gap, mechanization and technology, information and exchange)

Host organization: Women in Sustainable Agriculture and Agrinet

Moderator: Tatjana Dishnica, Women in Sustainable Agriculture

Main speaker: Edvin Zhllima, Agricultural University of Tirana

Technical input: Roland Çela, Representative of German International Cooperation

Rapporteur: Nikolin Karapanço, Agrinet

The “Innovation, Technology, and Human Resources (research, digitalization that narrows the village-city gap, mechanization and technology, information and exchange)” thematic workshop seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis on areas and capacities of scientific research in our country, the needs and potentials of this sector, the capacities of the extension service, scope of work, and extension of contribution and assistance of EU and other donors in it. In this context, in the framework of the assistance provided by GIZ, a publication on the Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) in the field of agriculture and rural development is presented in the form of technical input in order to inform farmers and other stakeholders vis-à-vis services and innovative solutions in the area of agricultural and rural development. Finally, the workshop focused on providing recommendations on improvements in terms of innovation, technology, and human resources that would ensure progress in introducing AKIS in Albania.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
<p>Farmers’ problems in achieving high competitiveness and market reach are related to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapid changes in technology at global level; 2. Ensuring production that meet food safety standards; 3. Deficient information on development of the sector and innovation. 	<p>Engagement of ANRD in open processes of dialogue and participatory advocacy, as well as in networking for exchange of information and knowledge;</p> <p>Efforts to raise awareness of various stakeholders on the importance of research and innovation in the wellbeing of the agricultural and rural development sector.</p>
<p>Deficient information on sector development and innovation affect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor sale of products • High production costs • Failure to understand the market. 	<p>Positive efforts to improve the complementarity of funds and increase the benefit of synergies and initiatives in the sector</p>

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Insufficient coordination among stakeholders of agricultural and rural development	Creation of spaces for networking and participation in innovative interactive projects, parts of international, regional platforms or funds
Insufficient development of collection and trade networks of agricultural products	Development of a measure to support/fund innovative support services through a targeted grant scheme for research or consultation institutions
Low capacity to adapt to climate change	ATTC are institutions with over 50 years of existence; they are set up in typical areas of agricultural development, have territorial divisions according to the typology of areas and have great development opportunities
Poor political will and commitment	

Recommendations

- Open dialogue and participatory advocacy processes to promote the inclusion of Agriculture and Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) as an integral part of the Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy 2021-2027 as well as to raise awareness of rural communities and farmers on their use;
- Introduce AKIS in agriculture based on scientific research and which focuses on farmers and their challenges;
- Follow guidelines and best practices provided by the Common Agricultural Policy and European countries;
- Improve institutional and administrative framework;
- Raise capacities and skills of the extension service;
- Improve networking and coordination capacities of rural development actors related to AKIS;
- Allocate sufficient financial resources to support the establishment and access of AKIS.
- ANRD can provide expertise as well as networking opportunities and exchange spaces among AKIS stakeholders to foster innovation and research in agriculture and rural development.

Workshop 8: Community-Led Local Development – Dynamics of Implementation of LEADER Approach and Future

Host organization: Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo (VIS Albania) and Mountainous Areas Development Agency (MADA)

Moderator: Anna Carboni, VIS Albania

Main speaker: Roland Bardhi, MADA

Rapporteur: Etleva Dashi, Agricultural University of Tirana

The “Community-Led Local Development - Dynamics of Implementation of the LEADER Approach and the Future” thematic workshop focused on the irreplaceable role of implementing the LEADER approach in empowering agriculture and rural development. The workshop elaborated the idea that community-led local development (CLLD) is a tool for involving local actors in developing responses to the social, environmental and economic challenges that rural communities face today. The main issues of discussion focused on identifying the legal and institutional framework of the LEADER approach, its evolution in the EU, the importance of establishing and consolidating Local Action Groups (LAGs) and drafting local development strategies as a necessity for the future of rural communities.

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Non-implementation of the LEADER measure within the IPARD II programme	Implementing a bottom-up and participatory approach is a good opportunity for the development of rural communities
Unconsolidated legal framework (law on LAGs still unapproved, current LAGs have the status of NGOs)	Establishing a facilitation structure at MARD (Payment Agency)
Lack of funds for the implementation of the LEADER approach	Interest of European institutions for rural development policies in Albania
Limited number of functional partnership structures	New territorial division in line with EU nomenclature increases opportunities for benefits from Cohesion Funds

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
LEADER experiences in Albania built on projects and not on a sustainable long-term platform	Extending and strengthening the cooperation of civil society, academia, central institutions, local communities (ANRD – AUT – MARD - rural communities) at the local level creates premises for a successful implementation of LEADER at the national level
Abandonment of rural areas and low level of social capital	Development of potential areas, development of tourism and agro-tourism, development of handicrafts, discovery of tradition in the regions for the improvement of local products and the creation of a value chain
Lack of skills in writing and implementing successful projects	Involvement of rural women and youth in decision-making
Lack of cooperation and coordination among various local actors	Increasing employment opportunities in rural areas
Low social capacities at local level	Application of two study programs: a) Local Development Agent (LDA) in Albania that aims at the professional qualification of local action groups; b) Executive Master in “Territorial Planning and Development” that will positively affect the policymaking level
Low institutional leadership by MARD to promote the LEADER approach.	Assistance planned in the framework of the IPARD programme
Limited capacities of different local actors on the LEADER access instrument;	Previous experiences of implementing the LEADER approach in Albania; familiarization of a significant number of actors to the know-how and practices of the LEADER approach

Challenges/needs/concerns	Strengths/drivers/potentials/identified opportunities
Lack of political will to adopt the LEADER approach as an effective instrument for integrated rural development	ANRD is becoming a national resource center for LEADER access; information and promotional materials as well as human capacities trained in the implementation of the approach.

Recommendations

- Raise awareness of local communities on the development opportunities provided by the LEADER approach;
- Create a map with the territories of LEADER and LAGs;
- Consolidate the long-term partnership among LEADER approach actors by strengthening the cooperation with the local government actors;
- Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) has the potential to contribute to local capacity building which includes specialized teams of experts for the evaluation, selection, supervision, and control of projects to be approved under local development strategies;
- Improve the dialogue and communication among participatory rural development actors to the benefit of identifying priorities, needs, ideas, and opportunities for cooperation and to find long-term solutions for a sustainable development of rural communities;
- Design and implement local development strategies;
- Avoid repeating mistakes from existing projects;
- Ensure advocacy and political dialogue to speed up the reform processes in the sector, including the LEADER approach, towards positive European practices and models.



PLENARY SESSION & GREETINGS FROM FRIENDS OF THE ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

**Thorben Kruse - Agriculture and Rural Development Component Leader -
SRD Project, GIZ**

After expressing his satisfaction for the GIZ support of this event, Mr. Kruse initially focused on the problems related with the local organic products, emphasizing the increase of their quantity, processing, and export, especially in terms of medicinal and aromatic plants, adopting as minimum standards those of the EU. The Component Leader then focused on improving the quality and competitiveness of traditional local products as an important source of revenues for rural communities.

One other discussion included the needs assessment on coordination of plans and intervention of donors at national level. This coordination needs to be replicated at the local level as well to enhance the effectiveness of these interventions and to avoid overlapping and duplication of efforts. Also, the recognition and promotion of the AKIS system by farmers and the creation of local action groups with a focus on this system that would increase the competitiveness of their activities were considered relevant issues of discussion.

In his greeting remarks, Mr. Kruse focused on the assistance provided by GIZ to MARD regarding the design of the new Strategy on Agricultural and Rural Development, which is being drafted with the contribution of the rural residents through active processes of public consultation.

“The new Strategy for Agricultural and Rural Development should affect those who live and work in rural areas. It is very important to have these people with you, to solicit their feedback on the strategy and to build a proper consultation process at all levels.”

Referring to the youth session of the Rural Parliament, Mr. Kruse underlined their important role for the future of the survival of rural areas.

“I am very happy that the Rural Parliament is taking the issue of youth so seriously, because we should all be clear that without the presence of young people, there is no future for rural areas. Hence, I strongly emphasize that young people should be helped to create the conditions and environment suitable for a decent life in rural areas.”

In conclusion, addressing the problem of the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas and in the economic activity of their inhabitants, Mr. Kruse introduced the CoSolve program, a GIZ cooperation program with the Government of Albania that aims to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and revitalize rural communities harmed by its effects.

Eglantina Gjermeni, Member of Parliament of Albania, member of the Group of Friends of the Albanian Rural Parliament

At first, Ms. Gjermeni expressed her enthusiasm for taking part in this event even in the conditions of the pandemic, appreciating the work of the organizers and the commitment and interest shown by all participants in relation to the cause of sustainable rural development. She described the Rural Parliament as a powerful advocacy tool for highlighting the problems of rural areas, providing support to farmers and rural women, and for identifying solutions to their problems.

“I think the initiative on the Rural Parliament deserves utmost consideration. It is the best way to do advocacy, to highlight the problems confronting rural areas, especially rural women and girls, but also to seek support and solutions on a set of issues.”

Regarding the assistance provided by GIZ to rural areas affected by the effects of the pandemic through the CoSolve program, Ms. Gjermeni praised the German donor’s willingness to cooperate as well as the assistance of all other donors focusing on rural development and on empowerment of rural communities, especially rural women, such as UN Women, FAO, AICS, etc. In the context of the issue of rural women’s empowerment, she underlined the achievements in this field, mentioning the increase of women’s representation in politics, without forgetting to mention the challenges

that remain to be addressed: further economic empowerment of women as a problem, the solution of which prevents many other social problems, including domestic violence, human trafficking, feminization of poverty, etc.

While referring to her experience, Ms. Gjermeni highlighted the extraordinary role played by rural women in the socio-economic life of the country, noting, on the other hand, that this contribution is often not recognized and appreciated enough by the Albanian society. In this context, Ms. Gjermeni called for increased cooperation and maximization of efforts of civil society, state structures, and international donors to the benefit of improved recognition, support, and capitalization of this contribution so that rural girls and women get out of the poverty cycle by serving as a model for other women and girls. Ms. Gjermeni also appreciated the aspiration of rural women to move forward, their courage and bravery, albeit often in conditions of lack of basic tools and services, as well as their entrepreneurial skills that have turned them into real success stories to be recognized, promoted, and replicated.

Then, Ms. Gjermeni focused on the support to rural women, citing advocacy efforts for policies that promote the increase of the number of rural women benefiting from the support schemes by setting inclusive criteria for gender, social status, geographical isolation, blood feuds status, and so on. She praised the efforts of rural women to be politically represented as a direct way to raise their voice and seek solutions to the problems of rural areas. She emphasized that the development of the second Rural National Parliament before the parliamentary elections generates impetus for an energetic process of advocacy and lobbying for the integration of rural issues in the programs of running candidates and political parties. While appreciating the event on a second note, the friend of the Rural Parliament called on the agricultural and rural development stakeholders to benefit from the outputs and momentum created by the second Rural Parliament to build policies and best practices with the participation and to the benefit of rural inhabitants.

Rigerta Loku, farmer, member of the Group of Friends of the Albanian Rural Parliament

In her speech, Ms. Loku made a comparison of the situation of farmers from the first rural Parliament to the second one. Referring to her emotional calls to the first parliament for more attention to the village, Ms. Loku noticed with disappointment that few things have changed since then.

While bringing facts on the importance of developing the agricultural and rural sector to the country's economy, she noted the contrast that exists

between this importance and the support that the state provides for the sector, which ranks the lowest in the region. Ms. Loku underlined that this support and the policies that generate it are not based on consultation with common farmers in the farms; they do not represent farmers' interests, are unpredictable, and mark inconsistencies with the agricultural and rural reality. She also added that continuous onsite monitoring of farmers, networking, communication, counseling, innovation, marketing, and information have not become an integral part of rural realities. The same situation applies to lending to small and medium farmers as well as to empowering rural women who have a difficult but significant role to play in rural development. She stressed that it is urgent to create the necessary infrastructure to facilitate the life of rural family, particularly that of rural women who are important actors in the development and progress of the village.

Ms. Loku called for measures to stop the aggravation of the rural exodus by making easier the work and life of the residents who have remained in the village. Here she mentioned the need for protectionist economic policies for national products. She also assessed that the financial support and the increase of the attractiveness of living and working in the village would serve to strengthen the human capital in rural areas. While speaking up on the lack of value chain links such as markets and other facilities needed to store and process products, she did not forget to call on rural communities to be aware of their importance in policymaking and decision-making processes and of the fate of their areas in general.

“We must make the work of those who have remained in the village easier and make rural development attractive to invest in, and why not turn abandonment into a strength. This human exodus from rural areas can only be stopped by giving due importance to rural development. The real changes will come when we and you realize that we are much more important than you, that the government and the state should serve the village, the city, Albania and not the other way around.”

Referring to the global pandemic, she pointed out that the pandemic gave more life to the village but failed to revitalize it also because the state did not support rural communities to cope with its consequences with both direct measures and insurance funds to deal with natural disasters. She brought real-life examples to illustrate the immediate need confronting rural communities for support in the above areas. She also focused on the concrete problems related to the governance of the agricultural and rural development sector in Albania, highlighting the issues of lack of transparency, the presence of corruption related to the value chain and market access, etc. She also made constructive criticism to the ARDA activity

regarding IPARD funds, demanding more transparency, interaction with farmers and information. In the end, although highlighting the difficulties and challenges, Ms. Loku expressed her determination to stay and work in the village and called for more help and attention for the rural areas.

PLENARY SESSION: RURAL YOUTHS AT CROSSROAD

Debate of youth: Should they stay or should they leave the village

The youth debate is a structured debate and will be instrumental for young people to explore the reasons behind their migration from rural areas, to raise their voice and to offer a positive perspective on the concerns and perspectives of young people.

This plenary session sought to understand and explain the current situation of rural youth (needs, challenges, and priorities) as well as their aspirations, dreams, and vision for the future of rural communities. The youth debate focused on exploring the reasons for the migration of young people from rural areas as well as the problems they encounter and that make them leave rural areas. Major topics that dominated the youth debate in the second Albanian Rural Parliament included the dilemma of young people to stay or leave the village, the challenges, successful models of rural youth, choosing the best path to follow, and the elements that need to be changed and improved in rural areas in order to create an inspiring environment for the future of young people.

ANRD Rural Youth Hub	Agricultural University of Tirana
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Gent Imeraj● Esmeralda Metko● Labinot Murrja● Safete Qato● Ardit Frroku	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Armela Duka● Anxhela Morina● Fabio Hithi● Majkell Jajaj● Melisa Rrapaj

Extracts from speeches of young people in the plenary sessions

Esmeralda Metko

I am Esmeralda. I come from a village in the district of Permet. I am a graduate of the Sami Frashëri High School in Permet. Unlike the others, I have to get up early in the morning, take the bus to go to school in the town, because there is no high school in my village. When I am feeling unwell, I have to go to the town for medical treatment, because it is impossible to go to a health center where there are no beds, no medication, no heating, no hygiene... It is impossible to take steps towards a building which is called a health center but does not function like one. How many such health centers are there in all the villages of Albania and how many health centers suffer from lack of doctors and nurses?

Can we live without education and healthcare?

No, we cannot live in these conditions Because I have to get better when I am sick and not to pray for salvation; because I need to be educated; because even though I who live in the countryside I want to be better educated and take the path to knowledge. Maybe one day when these two sectors have taken shape, are regulated, are taken care of, I will return to the village and live there. But in these conditions, taking into account any difficulties confronting my village, I choose to leave the village.

Gent Imeraj

On the future | Smart villages around the world

SMART Village is the new world order. The digital village-city gap, already narrowed in different parts of the world, finds Albania with territories beyond geographical isolation, located “off the radar”! As I continue to navigate the paths, I stop and think of a very unforgivable flaw, where there are areas, paths, places that do not even appear on virtual maps, out of existence, which to modern digital morality is a sin. Terrains are forgotten by technology; no GPS registration have been made, no updates to geographic information systems performed. Man cannot find his house on the map. Teleworking from home in pandemic times will probably be the new world

order. But what is the reality? The stoic man of the village does not seem to have the opportunity to choose, and thus remains unintegrated in employment due to the conditions in the village. Thus, don't our villages have the desire to be SMART? Not only desire, but they carry within them hardworking and sharp people that demonstrate iron will, because every day they are touched that do not have the conditions to be part of the digital journey. And the solution seems to be: get out of the village, educate yourself in a self-taught way around the world of what is going on out there, and then come back to start as often as you can from the scratch to resilience. I find excessive belief in the force of habit utopian, but more often than not it has been a blessing rather than a threat – that is what history teaches us.

Labinot Murrja

I come from Dibra of Mount Korab, Lura Lakes and Drin River, resident of the village of Hotesh of the county of Luznia. The dream of living in the countryside is fading every passing day forcing me to think it over of either living in a town or emigrating. And I am not the only one who thinks so. And why do I think so and not otherwise? Because, even today a large number of farmers lack the certificate of ownership of their land, dwelling units, and livestock stable, at a time when for some 30 years we are dealing with land reform and we live in the same house and use the same livestock stable for quite 100 years; because due to the territorial reform, basic services are now concentrated in the town; because one must travel from Lura to Peshkopi to slaughter a sheep; because Dibra today has no market for agricultural products; and because the 13,000 inhabitants of Maqellare have no water to drink or irrigate their lands.

Safete Qato

I have a lot of burden in me whenever I leave my village for the place where I study... youth today face many challenges, and the truth is that the rural youth, in the face of many technical, economic, and geographical problems, features those attitudes and thoughts of the community or his/her origin. While not suffocating, they make it hard for him/her to breath freely. Numerous developments have made the life of the peasant easier, but the mindset is increasingly difficult to change. A child grows up in the countryside under a clean but very conservative environment. The village is definitely the place where the most common and perhaps the most dangerous stereotypes of a society are created.

... Since at a very young age, boys grow up with the idea of a “machoman” and the favors and benefits they enjoy make rural girls very inferior to them, repressed and with almost no hope for dreams and realizations. Now let us come to the education and interaction of young people... we do not know what it is like to go out in an afternoon to have fun with friends, to get together for a chat or dance or even to meet and discuss on various topics. It seems that socialization lies miles away...

I will leave the village. Alas, this is a solution for me - a solution that will last as long as every rural youth will not be free to look beyond the “mountains and hills” that surround him/her.

Feedback and Conclusions from Representatives of Various Institution

Alban Ibraliu, Vice Rector for Public and Institutional Relations, Agricultural University of Tirana

Initially, Mr. Ibraliu considered the cooperation with German donors in opening a doctoral program between AUT and the best agricultural universities in Germany for about twenty excellent students of AUT a success story. Afterwards, Mr. Ibraliu focused on the issue of low productivity of production factors in the Albanian rural reality without forgetting to mention some success stories related to intensive production in protected premises (greenhouses), enterprises of medicinal plant, citrus, etc. The Vice Rector also mentioned as a very productive alternative in rural areas the agro-tourism farms and livestock farms, which have marked significant development recently thus identifying the increase of the labor factor as key to rural development. To increase this factor, he underlined the importance of supporting intensive and sustainable farms with consolidated market history and of high productivity.

When referring to the connection of AUT with agricultural and rural development and the preparation of new specialists to its service, Mr. Ibraliu underlined the declined interest in traditional branches of study

at this university. In this context, he drew the attention of young people (especially high school graduates awaiting the selection of and admission to university branches) on the fact that professions related to agricultural and rural development will never go out of fashion. To this end, it is important to consider them from a new perspective. Citing the example of Agricultural Know-How Transfer Center and their technical staffing, Mr. Ibraliu noted the lack of applicants from rural areas in the recruitment process due to their non-participation in the second and third cycle of university studies in the traditional branches mentioned above. The same problem is related to the agricultural extension service as well as agricultural and rural businesses and their needs for specialists, which will have to be met.

“In the last few years, the interest of young people in traditional professions and branches at AUT has declined. I am talking about agronomy, zootechnics, forest science. I want to invite young people to have a new approach to these professions that, although traditional, are and will remain part of the present and future of agricultural and rural development in our country and elsewhere.”

In addition, Mr. Ibraliu highlighted the need for better support policies regarding the increase of access of rural youth to traditional university branches that supply the market and line institutions with specialists in agricultural and rural development, highlighting the supporting role of foreign donors with specific programs and projects.

Kleina Kasanai, General Director, National Youth Agency

While underlining the lack of complete information and knowledge on rural reality, Ms. Kasanai acknowledged the existence of problems identified during the debate of rural youth, finding it appropriate to mention achievements and improvements in various areas of life in Albania's villages. Here, the Director of the Agency listed the positive changes in physical infrastructure, the work of agricultural sites, oil refund schemes for farmers, investment support in rural areas through the IPARD Programme, renovation of healthcare infrastructure in rural areas, drafting a law on startups, donors' growing support to innovative ideas of young people, etc.

“I see the young people here on the panel are well prepared and I want to remain hopeful that there are other trained young people out there. I am convinced that there are young people who have received a good education and can do very good research. With this in mind, I want to say that it is important that you, as prepared and visionary young people, not only raise issues but also contribute with your ideas about how we can improve the current situation.”

Focusing on the draft law on startups under finalization, Ms. Kasanai appreciated the opportunities that this law offers for young people who have innovative ideas and want to enter the world of entrepreneurship by providing support from an agency where these ideas will be supported by various donors expressing interest in this area.

Concluding her remarks, Ms. Kasanai praised the rural youth for their skills and capacities to gain achievements in the field of research and development, calling on them to raise their voice on problems that concern them by also offering participatory solutions for them.

Sofjola Kotelli, Advisor, SRD Project, German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

Ms. Kotelli deemed the youth engagement in agriculture to be crucial to rural development, calling on central government actors, civil society, and academia to embrace this approach. Referring to the figures, she noted that more than half of young people in rural areas think of leaving the country. Likewise, only 14.2% of young people graduating from vocational agricultural schools prefer to stay in the village. The data show that only 10% of the students from the Agricultural University of Tirana have chosen the subject of agriculture and rural development as their first preference of study, which is an indication of the low interest of young people to engage in these fields.

In the meantime, according to ARDA sources, youth entrepreneurship in the field of agriculture has increased by over 40%, especially by young people aged 18-40, which clearly shows that agriculture offers great potentials to engage them. Referring to the youth debate, Ms. Kotelli supported the idea of changing the mindset about the village. She focused on the recent SRD/GIZ project initiatives related to rural development where she mentioned the Agricool campaign. This campaign bears this name to show all young people across the country that the agricultural and rural development sector is as cool (attractive and modern) as all other sectors and there are many opportunities for their involvement in this sector. She explained the two major lines of the campaign: the promotional line of agriculture as an attractive and beneficial activity for young people and the line of concrete projects to support agricultural activities. In this context, the GIZ advisor informed the participants about the package of concrete projects, mentioning the training of about 350 rural youth from all over Albania during 2019-2020 with a focus on creating a perspective regarding their engagement in agricultural activities. Ms. Kotelli also informed about the preparation of a new on-the-job training package for young people, based

on business needs assessments. The trainings are expected to be launched during 2021.

“I was very impressed by the idea thrown by one of the debaters during the Parliament session: - To change the reality means to change the mentality! - this is what GIZ is initiating through the Agricoool campaign. The goal of this campaign is for young people to understand that agriculture is as cool (fashionable) as all other branches of the economy; it is worth it and is productive for young people to engage in it!”

Another component of this package includes the cooperation with six vocational schools and strengthening youths’ linkages with the farmers of the area through the practice of the acquired know-how and the updates of the science and techniques of agriculture. This package also envisaged an adaptation of the curricula of agricultural schools to the needs of the market as well as the introduction of elements of digitalization and advanced agricultural technologies. In terms of higher education, it is envisaged to institute a doctorate program between AUT and Germany’s top agricultural universities for excellent students who have graduated from AUT.

Ms. Kotelli also elaborated on the agricultural and rural entrepreneurship promotion package. She presented the dedicated support that GIZ is providing through the IDEA Program and the one for Innovation and CoSolve for entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture and rural development, especially encouraging initiatives for the digitalization of agriculture.

Alberto Sartori, Manager of Rural-You. Rural Albanian Youth Project, RTM Volontari nel Mondo (World Volunteers)

Mr. Sartori presented the Rural-You. Rural Albanian Youth 32-month EU-funded Project being implemented in the areas of Shkodra, Kukës and Dibra (11 municipalities) by a consortium of six organizations under the leadership of Volontari Nel Mondo RTM. Partner organizations include: Partnership for Development Foundation – PFD, Agropuka, Associazione Giovani Imprenditori Agricoli (AGIA) of Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori (CIA) and Albanian Network for Rural Development.

He underlined that the Rural-You. Rural Albanian Youth Project aims to promote the interest, representation, and contribution of rural youth in the implementation of the agenda of Albania’s EU membership in the sector of agriculture and rural development. More specifically, the project seeks to improve the participation of young people in the social, economic, and political life of remote rural communities in northeastern Albania, respectively in the regions of Shkodra, Kukes and Dibra.

“The project is an invitation to see the rural world from the perspective of young people, enabling rural youth to be aware of the opportunities of the sector, to actively participate in the sustainable growth of their areas and to be active in policymaking.”

Mr. Sartori went on to explain that the intervention aims to strengthen the capacity of local youth, activists, and CSOs to monitor, analyze, and take concrete action through an integral approach, providing target groups with capacity building and advocacy experience so as to contribute to the development of the sector through involvement in rural policies.

The intervention strategy is based on three major groups of activities reflected in the main outputs of the project: awareness on the role of youth in agricultural and rural reform in Albania, youth activism in the sustainable development of rural areas, and networking through the consolidation of the Rural Youth Resource Center (Rural Youth Hub) as a pilot experience to engage young people living in remote areas in networking activities related to policy dialogue.

Amadeo Kola, teacher, Ndre Mjeda Vocational High School.

This vocational high school teacher pointed out the role the higher education in the area of agriculture and rural development can play in improving the young people’s contribution to the sector of agricultural and rural development. This is substantiated by the fact that agriculture is and will remain a priority sector for Albania --regardless that the number of students enrolled in agriculture and rural development is still low-- and will prioritize the youth to practice their profession by contributing to the revitalization of the agriculture and rural development sector.

Mr. Kola shared the concern that institutions providing vocational education and training cannot fully answer the very basic questions: how much, where, and how. More specifically, some of the most essential questions he asked include the following:

- Are young people able to acquire the skills needed for the job market in line with their lifelong learning interests, to keep up with the technological innovations they will be introduced to at their workplace?
- What about the general and diverse knowledge, vocational skills and habits that make employment feasible?
- Can young people guarantee economic wellbeing for themselves and their families through integration into the labor market?
- Can young people face current and future global challenges?

Among others, Mr. Kola gave recommendations intended mainly for his colleagues and the entire pedagogical staff.

“To add value to the result of our work, we must focus on promoting some important elements, such as the interest of young people in the wellbeing, culture, tourism, agriculture, and food safety. Another important element is the support of the government and the promotion of vocational education by influencing the development of personality of young people to live by adapting to the conditions surrounding them. Promoting youth and subsidizing agricultural businesses by facilitating grant procedures are factors that have a significant impact on the revitalization of the sector,” concluded his intervention Mr. Kola.

CLOSING SESSION – READING OUT THE DECLARATION OF THE SECOND ALBANIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT 2021

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 Support Schemes for Agriculture and Rural Development

The 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 strengthening of Agriculture Cooperative Associations 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 cooperative associations 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 socioeconomic 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.

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. 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.