

Reflections on a Journey to Albania's Third Rural Parliament

Some eight years have passed since the establishment of the Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD), which seeks to promote the LEADER approach in Albania, focusing on supporting and building the capacities of public and private actors in rural areas, building partnerships in creating Local Action Groups (LAGs), as well as increasing the confidence of rural society to follow the path of European sustainable development policies and practices.

At one go, ANRD has also developed national advocacy for supportive and encouraging policies on the development of the LEADER approach as well as supportive financial policies and schemes for farmers and other engaged actors, to channel their confidence and motivation in this path. Supporting social capital has been and remains a priority for ANRD.

The 3rd Albanian Rural Parliament is an even more dedicated effort in empowering important social groups, and specifically builds on two important pillars for rural life and the LEADER approach, that of the Rural Youth Hub and the support of Pro-Rural Women initiative.

The rural parliament comes at a time when, due to bottom-up advocacy, the Parliament of Albania adopted the Law on Local Action Groups, thus creating a real opportunity for developing partnerships to strengthen local and rural cooperation.

Yet, the preparation of local actors, local self-government units, business, and civil society is still far from a sustainable investment to increase the confidence of actors in coming together for instigating changes. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development should place more efforts to open the processes to societal actors and boost collaboration among them. The support of farmers or rural tourist enterprises should be accompanied by raising awareness of local communities in evaluating them, say "guesthouses", as a quality instrument for strengthening the Local Action Groups of the area. This is also and contributes to sustainable development, because it is an investment in human capital.

ANRD comes to this national event more consolidated, with an increasing membership trend and an activity that crosses the borders of the country.

The network is present across the country and has established cooperation relations with all local self-government units. The goal for the future remains its consolidation as a resource center for the rural development of the country and the implementation of the LEADER approach.

I am pleased to point out that ANRD has increased its presence in many European organizations and activities. At the same time, it has been awarded several prizes, including the Green Flag from CIA Agricoltori Italiani, attesting to the great work it has done over the years in the sector of civil society empowerment and rural development in Albania. Administratively, the Network is now fully independent and leads and manages regional projects funded by the EU and other donors.

The Albanian Network for Rural Development is expanding and cooperating with public institutions in the country. In addition to the excellent cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, communication with the Parliamentary Committee for Production Activity has also increased, which we consider to be a crucial indicator on the impact of the ANRD's work.

The Agricultural University of Tirana remains our main partner not just for the physical space of its premises, that it has kindly shared over the years, but also for the continuous support to and advice in our work.

In conclusion, allow me to wholeheartedly thank all donors that have supported the Albanian Network for Rural Development over these years, our collaborators across the country, and all the participants in this important activity.

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Albanian Network for Rural Development