

First part – opening ceremony

Good morning to everybody,

On behalf of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe I am delighted to welcome you all at the 10th Annual Working Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from South Eastern Europe here in Becici, Montenegro.

In the name of the SWG, all delegates of the SWG Assembly and our member institutions, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of the Montenegro, as well as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Montenegro on the hospitality for this meeting.

My gratitude is also extended to the colleagues from your Ministry for excellent cooperation while preparing this meeting.

Let me remind you that the SWG, as a regional organization created by your Governments, has been present in the region for more than 10 years, as an active actor devotedly working on the regional cooperation in South Eastern Europe in the field of agriculture and rural development.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The overall subject of today's meeting is to discuss common issues and pursuing more sustainable development pathway in the field of agriculture and rural development.

Back in the day when this organization was initiated, on behalf of political devotees it was more than clear at the given time that there is a need for regional cooperation in order to have a region which is stable, integrated with the European Union, and agricultural sector suitable to meet the challenges of the expanding markets and viability of rural areas. All were mindful that agriculture and rural areas in the SEE region are faced with set of goals and challenges, some unique from others and some of a common nature, but generally all directing towards the same target.

Formerly, it was strongly believed that with the establishment of the SWG as an umbrella regional platform for promotion of cooperation in the region, within ten years of its existence, its supporting role would have slowly reduced and our countries gradually would have integrated and became members of the EU with all the reforms in the field of agriculture and rural development completed. Regrettably it is 2016, and we are still battling the same encounters as we did years ago. In this respect, I would take the liberty to express the concerns on the seriousness of the support given and the actions taken from the EU and vice versa in this enlargement process for the Western Balkans. We are all very well aware of the old saying “actions speak louder than words” which is why we all need to focus more on doing rather than speaking.

When we are at actions, I would shortly refer to the achievements for the past year and what is further to be done

This year, the SWG has been successfully leading the game in the region with its multi-level approach. We have been active on regional, national and local level, involving all possible stakeholders (policy makers, academia, experts, rural society, local governments, private sectors and NGOs).

We have been able to motivate regional and national players in our countries in the creation of various policy recommendations on agriculture, rural and economic development, environment and waste management. Assessments and studies have been developed and are in a process of finalization in respect to natural resource management (water, soil and forestry) and areas with natural constrains. Technical reports have been created on waste management plans and agricultural policy instruments. All of the above mentioned initiatives have been done inline with the coordination of REAWG, which contributes to the strengthening of the evidence based policy making process in the region. The idea behind the above mentioned actions was to support the higher quality decision making, as well as streamlined policy and program development processes and increased efficiency in and effectiveness of service delivery.

Locally, grants schemes, people to people actions and networking activities have been prepared restlessly on behalf of all our offices in the region. Inspiring the rural communities on diversification of economic activities and income generation in the rural areas has been one of our major priorities. Our goal has been to encourage a wide range of economic activities in rural areas, including development of small businesses in the cross-border settlements, touristic initiatives, sustainable use of water, woods and forestry, and various cultural deeds. It will assist in identifying potential and existing local entrepreneurs, promote investment and provide employment opportunities for the rural community. Farm, agro and rural entrepreneurship represent solid potential and an effective means for promoting rural economy development and its long-term sustainability.

- Policy recommendations were developed on agriculture and rural development via the Tirana Agenda 2016, with more than 120 participants from 19 countries discussed the trending topics in respect to IPARD, Natural resource management, Area Based Development and CAP
- Policy recommendations were made in respect to integrated waste management in the coastal, river basin and rural areas in the cross-border areas in SEE
- Based on the Visegrad conclusions of the meeting of the Ministers on transboundary water management an initiative was derived for the creation of the Drina Commission
- Technical report has been published on evidence based support to the EU policy making, to monitor and evaluate the current agricultural policy instruments in the WB countries and to compare them with the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)
- A study is in a process of development on water, forestry and soil management in the SEE countries
- Assessment paper on the areas with natural constrains is in process of finalization
- Models/management plans on integrated waste management have been developed for Drina-Tara-Sava, Sharra and coastal area of Albania, Montenegro and BiH.

- 27 grants have been signed and few more awaiting signing in respect to implementation in 4 cross-border regions with approximate support of 420,000 EUR
- More than 37 people to people actions have been supported in the dedicated rural areas in the SEE countries
- Support to 3 new cross-border regions Pcinja, Neretva and Prokletije is being provided via the ABDA program, establishment of the cross-border structures, capacity building measures

The successful implementation and coordination of the regional cooperation among the stakeholders is all thanks to the increased management capacity of the region and the operating structures of the organization across the SEE region. In that respect SWG has managed to successfully maintain a portfolio of 2,2 million EUR with yearly turnover of approximately 1 million EUR.

After all, we may conclude that we altogether successfully carried out the establishment of a regional network umbrella, and opened the new chapter for sustainable development, as well as inter-cultural and people-to-people exchanges, based on common interests for EU integration and wellbeing in general.

In the past decade the SWG has been working in such complex environment and engaging in a vast range of activities based on the needs of the region, has impacted the overall regional approach and spirit of the SEE countries, but also has set a positive trend in respect to the EU approximation process for candidate and potential candidate countries.

What is nowadays situation?

With regret, we can see that there are still open issues in the political environment in our region, which are not yet been closed. These issues are still potential threat to the political and economic stability of the region which hamper regional cooperation. By way of reference to the statements above, European integration process represented and still is a challenging and strategic objective for Western Balkan countries.

As led by the Berlin process, a five-year halt on enlargement will stipulate a new impulse towards regional cooperation in order to consolidate and keep the dynamics in European Union (EU) integration process in SEE. In that sense, SWG is giving its efforts to put on agriculture and rural development subject on the agenda of this enduring Berlin Process of the upcoming Rome Summit 2017 organized under the auspices of the Italian Presidency.

In that matter, I would also address the importance of agriculture and rural development to the RCC in respect to the implementation of the SEE 2020 Strategy. Job creation, economic prosperity and development is not possible without support to the rural areas and agricultural sector. Our regional cooperation must be driven by, first of all, our interests and only our interests. Our countries are strongly dependent on this sector, as large portion of the GDP is depended on it. Furthermore, the dual rural- urban imbalance is a major obstacle to integrating socio-economic development in most SEE region. Dual rural-urban economic structure which refers to different

growth patterns in rural and urban areas leading to a wide rural urban gap is a chronic problem on overall development of the region.

Therefore, I am appealing to you, to strengthen the ties between our countries, to address the importance of agriculture and rural development more seriously and equally on all levels. The SWG, as an organization and platform created by you, and its executive Secretariat, will do up to its most, to facilitate these processes. Knowing the regional arena of various initiatives, working on regional agendas, I can assure you that cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development is one of the most advanced, with broad network and partnership ties with other international organizations, but also with Governments and Ministries of agriculture within the EU.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

The SWG, as a regional structure, will remain fully committed in supporting the SEE countries during the EU approximation aspirations, as well as implementing and developing regional activities and programs to pursue common goals through regional cooperation.

Thus, I am asking you for increased commitment, political, technical and financial, in order that the SWG can fulfill its tasks in the years ahead.

Thank you very much for your attention.