

## Report

### Thirty-Eight Session of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) of SEE Countries

**Date:** 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017  
**Location:** Ljubljana, Slovenia  
**Organizer:** SWG Head Office/Secretariat

**Report Prepared by:** SWG Head Office/Secretariat



April 2017

## **I. Purpose of the session:**

The 38<sup>th</sup> session of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in SEE was organized under the joint auspices of the SWG and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of Slovenia and was held in the period 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017 in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The aim of the session was to discuss the retrospective of the accomplishments in the period January - April 2017, to discuss and agree upon the execution of the operational plan, the financial framework and SWG internal operational structures.

All SWG delegates from the eight SWG member institutions, and the eight SWG observer institutions were officially invited to participate on the 38<sup>th</sup> SWG session.

Representatives from four out of eight SWG member institutions, participated on the session, discussed, gave recommendations and have taken the decisions listed below.

Representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Hungary, Ministry of Agriculture of Croatia and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of Slovenia participated on the session as observers.

Representatives from the SWG partner institutions and international organizations – German International Cooperation (GIZ), National Rural Development Networks and external experts also participated on the session.

## **II. MINUTES OF THE SESSION:**

### **SWG Delegates/ Ministry representatives present from:**

- Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations - Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mr. Dusan Neskovic, Jakob Butkovic);
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development – Kosovo\* (Mr. Bekim Hoxha, Jehona Shyti);
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy – Republic of Macedonia (Mr. Ljubo Peno);
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development – Montenegro (Mr. Darko Konjevic);

### **Ministry representatives of the SWG observer institutions present from:**

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade - Hungary (Mr. Balent Illes);
- Ministry of Agriculture – Croatia (Mr. Marin Fak);
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food – Slovenia (Ms. Brina Bitenc Korinsek, Ms. Andrea Mugerle, Matej Stepec, Tanja Strnisa, Igor Ahacevic)

### **Other representatives present at the session were:**

- German International Cooperation GIZ (Mr. Benjamin Mohr, Ms. Elena Gavriloza, Ms. Anica Palazzo, Mr. Saso Jovanovski);
- Rural Development Network of Albania (Ms. Evelina Azizaj);
- Network for Rural Development of BiH (Mr. Dusko Cvjetanovic);
- Network for Rural Development of Serbia (Mr. Slobodan Ljubojevic);
- Network for Rural Development of Montenegro (Mr. Ratko Batakovic);
- Network of Organization for Rural Development of Kosovo\* (Mr. Afrim Sharku);
- Rural Development Network of Macedonia (Mr. Aleksandra Todorovska);

- Croatian Rural Development Network (Mr. Matija Zamljacanec)

*\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*

*List of Participants from the meeting - Annex I.*

### **III. Topics discussed at the 38<sup>th</sup> SWG Session:**

The main topics of the session which were discussed are the following:

#### **I. SWG Session with participation of SWG partner institutions and organizations**

- Rural Development Program of Slovenia for the period 2014 – 2020;
- State of play of the operational structure of IPARD II programme (per beneficiary country/ territory);
- Introduction of the Rural Network in Slovenia;
- Presentation of the Rural Networks in SEE countries/ territories;
- Review of the key features and activities of Balkan Rural Development network;
- Elaboration and update on the cooperation with GIZ;
- Presentation and discussion of the draft findings of the PEV mission within the GIZ Regional Project “Rural Development through Integrated Forest and Water Resources Management in Southeast Europe (LEIWW)”.

#### **II. Internal Session of the SWG Assembly**

- Review of the realized activities within the SWG in the period January – April 2017 via SWG Operational Plan 2017;
- Preparations for the Agricultural Policy Forum 2017;
- Preparations for the 11th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from SEE;
- Elaboration and update on the cooperation with European Commission;
- Discussions and decisions regarding the future functioning of the SWG Operational structures.

*Meeting programme is presented in Annex II.*

### **DISCUSSIONS:**

Mr. Darko Konjevic, SWG President welcomed the participants and opened the 38<sup>th</sup> SWG Assembly Session.

On behalf of the host institution the State Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Ms. Tanja Strnisa welcomed the SWG Assembly and expressed the gratitude for the involvement of the Slovenian Ministry in such regional framework and congratulated on the fruitful work achieved in the past period on behalf of the SWG. Ms. Strnisa underlined the importance of agriculture and rural development and the regional cooperation for the SEE countries in the process of EU integration, including the countries from the EU. In this regard, exchange of experience and knowledge with EU member states is essential and Slovenia would support the countries via the SWG in providing the necessary information and knowledge transfer systems for the agriculture and rural development sectors.

On behalf of the Presidency of the SWG Assembly and the organization, Mr. Boban Ilic, Secretary General moderated the 38<sup>th</sup> SWG Assembly Session.

### **III.1 SWG Session (Open Meeting)**

The 38<sup>th</sup> SWG Assembly Session begun as an open meeting.

#### **III.1.1 Rural Development Program of Slovenia for the period 2014 – 2020**

Mr. Igor Ahačevčič from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of Slovenia presented the Rural Development Program of Slovenia for the period 2014-2020. Mr. Ahačevčič presented the measures under the Slovenian RDP 2014–2020 to the SWG Assembly.

Detailed information on the Rural Development Program of Slovenia can be found in Annex III.

#### **Slovenian Agriculture Basic Characteristics and Numbers**

The representatives from the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture also presented to the participants the general overview of the agricultural structure in the country portrayed in characteristics and numbers.

Detailed information on the Slovenian Agriculture Basic Characteristics and Numbers can be found in Annex IV.

#### **III.1.2 State of play of the operational structure of IPARD II programme**

The SWG Assembly member institutions had a short session to present the state of play and developments of the operational structure of IPARD II programme in their countries. In the reporting period from last assembly session there were no major changes in the IPARD processes on the national level.

#### **III.1.3 Introduction to the Rural Network of Slovenia**

Mr. Matej Stepec from the Slovenian Rural Development Network provided an overview of the tasks and work of their Rural Network. The network's main objective is to engage stakeholders through the exchange of information, experience and know-how between all players, rural areas, administrations and organisations involved in rural development within Slovenia and the European Union. Key planned activities of the NRN in the 2014-2020 programming period include more information and communication – the NRN will be one of the main bodies facilitating information and communicating the RDP. Knowledge transfer, cooperation and innovation are three of the main challenges to be addressed by the Slovenian RDP and the NRN will provide support to stimulate greater involvement of rural partners.

For more details on the RN of Slovenia please download the following presentation: <https://prezi.com/5ad7zydzajyi/national-rural-network-western-balkan-delegation-10-4-2017/>

#### **III.1.4 Presentation of the Rural Networks in SEE countries/territories**

Representatives from the rural networks of the SEE Countries/territories had a short presentation on their work and activities on a national level. The national rural networks provide an important link at policy level between the national administrations and organisations involved in rural development. Their structure and organisation may differ from country to country although in all cases their key role is to support the implementation and evaluation of rural development policy.

Presentations of the present rural networks can be found in Annex V.

Ms. Aleksandra Todorovska on behalf of the Balkan Rural Development Network presented the update on the activities and operational framework of the organization. Ms. Todorovska presented the project of the BRDN under the We Effect program “EU alignment and empowerment of Civil Society Organizations”. The aim of the project is increased capacities of RDN of RM on its role as a leader of the BRDN to implement networking activities in the Balkan region with specific focus on rural women, and share experience and knowledge, to ensure coordination of joint actions and the activities of each member network. Details on the presentation are in Annex VI.

### **III.1.5 Elaboration and update on the cooperation with GIZ**

Mr. Ilic and Mr. Benjamin Mohr, Team Leader of the Programme for Rural Development through Integrated Forest and Water Resources Management in Southeast Europe (LEIWW) provided short update and review the progress of the Programme LEIWW.

An overview of the activities on the evidence-based policy in respect to rural development and sustainable resource management of natural resources (water, forestry and soil) was elaborated. The assessment is in the finalization stage, the country reports and contribution to the development of the regional synthesis report are to be completed. After the final approval of the national reports by the regional experts the regional synthesis report is to be published.

The report on the assessment of the areas with natural constrains was completed and published. Mr. Ilic presented some of the key regional policy recommendations from the assessment report to the SWG Assembly.

Mr. Ilic presented the activities related to the assessment of the LEADER report. In the reporting period the SWG has selected and engaged regional and national experts and established the Regional Expert Advisory Working group on LEADER. In the upcoming period the working group will focus on assessing the relevant policy frameworks; assess the recent history of LEADER-like community-led initiatives and the conclusions to be drawn regarding the social, cultural and economic preconditions for such actions; provide policy recommendations to the Western Balkan countries for improved mainstreaming of the LEADER approach and introduction of LEADER implementation and monitoring; and finally Conduct a study/regional report on the importance of the application of LEADER approach for the Western Balkan countries.

Details on the evidence-based policy papers of the LEIWW program can be found in Annex VII.

### **III.1.6 Presentation and discussion of the draft findings of the PEV mission within the GIZ Regional Project “Rural Development through Integrated Forest and Water Resources Management in Southeast Europe (LEIWW)”**

GIZ has organized a Project Evaluation Mission (PEV) for the project “Rural Development through Integrated Forest and Water Resources Management in Southeast Europe (LEIWW)”. GIZ office in Skopje has engaged three (3) individual experts to perform the mission across the SEE region, evaluating different activities, partners and stakeholders that have been involved in the process of implementing the LEIWW project.

The PEV Mission experts were accompanied by SWG staff throughout the region for 10 days. After the mission the experts prepared a report to be presented to the SWG assembly and the BMZ for the progress made within the project, indicators fulfilled and future development for the next phase. Dr. Hans Peter Helmrich presented the findings of the PEV mission.

The findings were positive in respect to the indicators (output A) on regional inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation at the interface between agriculture, rural development and sustainable management of natural resources that contribute to the implementation of regional strategy processes in Southeast Europe (SEE). The indicators were also tangible for the output B focusing on the evidence-based policy, where various assessments and reports have been

produced, providing policy guidelines and recommendations to the decision makers during the process of EU integration. This of course is closely related to the tools and mechanisms used from the Output D, regional policy dialogue forums and platforms, which have supported the regional multi-sectoral participation approach, involving various levels of governments and stakeholders in the policy analysis and recommendations for improving the policy making of the EU candidate and potential candidate countries. The above-mentioned indicators have been evaluated as smart.

Remarks were made in respect to the output C and the income generation from the sustainable use of natural resources that is been fostered via implementation of the Area Based Development approach in selected rural regions. Observations were made regarding the grant schemes, particularly on the impact made for the economic development of the cross-border regions with the support of the local projects granted. As stated, the funding for this indicator is not considered sufficient in order to have any perceptible results or demonstrate radical improvements in the income generation/ economic growth in the rural cross-border regions. Therefore, this indicator has been evaluated as partly smart.

For the upcoming phase the experts have provided two options for continuation.

The achievement of meaningful results in rural economic development: using an ABD approach (targeting value chains in agriculture and tourism) by developing capacities of stakeholders in the 6 SEE countries is unlikely.

This leads to 2 options to be developed by the mission for GIZ.

Option 1: GIZ takes up rural economic development as the main focus and proposes a project to BMZ, following the demands of the SWG Secretariat, which is classified as a high-risk project and has soft indicators.

Option 2: GIZ proposes a project to BMZ, which does not take up rural economic development as the focus, but concentrates on organizational and financial support to the SWG only.

During the open debate, the SWG Assembly members discussed the presented findings of the experts. In general, the members disagreed on the matter of grant schemes being irrelevant to the countries and the region, regardless of the matter of support provided. The grant scheme system serves as a buffer in the current phase where EU IPA instruments should be applied. As such, the activities taken aim to foster and train local communities on joint development approach, preparing them for the next step when larger funding opportunities is available to them. It is also a tool to teach local communities on entrepreneurial development and community led actions, consequently encouraging them to invest in rural areas and decrease the migration movements.

The findings were later discussed among the Assembly members and the experts where equilibrium among the two presented options was found. The following steps from the PEV mission and the assembly session will focus preparation of a report and formulation of objectives/indicators regarding the future phase.

More details on the PEV findings are in Annex VIII.

## III.2 Closed SWG Assembly Session – for SWG Delegates only

### III.2.1 Review of the realized activities within the SWG in the period January – April 2017 via SWG Operational Plan 2017 and discussions on the SWG upcoming activities for the year 2017

The SWG Head Office/Secretariat staff presented the realized activities for the period January – April 2017 as per the SWG Operational Plan for the given year. In the four-month period of implementation of SWG core and project activities the Operational Plan has total (100%) execution of the foreseen planned actions.

The upcoming activities for the period April – September 2017 were also presented to the Assembly as well as the framework planned on implementing the set activities as per the SWG Operational Plan.

The detailed OP 2017 activities can be found in Annex IX.

### III.2.2 Preparations for the Agricultural Policy Forum 2017

Mr. Dori Pavloska-Gjorgjeska presented the preparatory process for the upcoming Agricultural Policy Forum 2017 foreseen to be held in the period 10<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> October 2017 in Montenegro.

*Overall title of the forum: Sustainable Rural Development through Evidence-Based Policy Making in Southeast Europe*

#### Plenary session

- Improving competitiveness of the rural economy with the view of the farm structure in the Western Balkans (short supply chains)
- Agricultural products trade barriers in the Western Balkans
- Management of forest, water and soil within the framework of environmental and rural development policies in the Western Balkans
- Sustainable rural development through the LEADER approach in the Western Balkans
- IPARD in function of sustainable rural development in the Western Balkans

#### Working groups

- Improving competitiveness of the rural economy with the view of the farm structure in the Western Balkans (short supply chains)
- Agricultural products trade barriers in SEE
- Sustainable rural development through the LEADER approach in the Western Balkans

The SWG Head Office/Secretariat has also prepared a sponsorship leaflet in order to attract the private sector into the regional policy dialogue platform discussions and participation. The sponsorship is divided into three packages offering different services of involvement to the interested private companies.

SWG has also made a separate webpage where for the first time this year interested representatives can register online <http://apf.seerural.org/>

The SWG Assembly agreed with the proposed topics and concept for the APF 2017 and suggested to provide a list of companies from their countries that could be invited to the Forum and have an interest in becoming a sponsor.

### **III.2.3 Preparations for the 11th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from SEE**

For the Annual Meeting of the Ministers the SWG Assembly has confirmed the location and the final date. The meeting will be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo (Jahorina) in the period 15th – 17th November 2017.

Tentative topics to covered:

- EU approximation of the candidate and potential candidate countries from SEE;
- Regional Cooperation and way forward in the region;
- Results and the Agenda from the Agricultural Policy Forum 2017.

It has been agreed for the invitations to be send by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of BIH latest by June 2017 and the deadline for confirmation of attendance is October 13th, 2017.

### **III.2.4 Elaboration and update on the cooperation with European Commission**

Mr. Ilic and Ms. Spasovska presented on the projects being implemented in close cooperation with European Commission.

The developments and results of the project SWG – EC: “Fostering regional cooperation and balanced territorial development of Western Balkan countries in the process towards EU integration - Support to the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South-East Europe” can be downloaded from the following link: [http://prezi.com/cacogn39tvc-/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy&rc=ex0share](http://prezi.com/cacogn39tvc-/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share)

The updates and achievements of the project SWG – JRC IPTS: “National Policy Instruments and EU Approximation and EU approximation process: Effects on farm holdings in the Wester Balkan Countries (EUEWB)” can be found in Annex X.

Ms. Spasovska also presented the grant scheme being implemented via the LEIWW Programme but via the existing ABDA structures. In the given period two calls for grants have been completed for all four cross-border regions and the grant agreement contracts have been signed in all regions.

The contracts approved and the amount granted for the projects can be found in Annex XI.

### **III.2.5 Discussions and decisions regarding the future functioning of the SWG Operational structures**

Majority of member institutions have paid the annual membership fee. The institutions with outstanding balance are:

- Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry – Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2015 and 2016;
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2016;
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy Republic of Macedonia for 2015 and 2016.

During the meeting accreditation of SWG in SWG member countries was also discussed. The status is:

- Serbia in the Final stage – Agreement on the status and activities agreed (postponed due to political reasons);
- Bosnia and Herzegovina - Inter-entity consultations completed, expected Decision by Presidency of B&H;
- Albania, Kosovo\* and Montenegro - Information still needed, support from the Ministries essential to begin with the process.

## Field trip visit on Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Slovenia

In organization of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food of Slovenia, the SWG Assembly meeting participants attended second half of the day study visit on successful examples of LAGs nearby Ljubljana.

The SWG Assembly visited the Slovenian Local Action Group –LAG “Living together urban and rural areas” (“*Sožitje med mestom in podeželjem*”) and few of supported projects. The SWG participants had the opportunity to hear about the functional and operational structure of the LAG, financing and division of grants. The general conclusion was that the LAG was supporting local activities with small grants, mostly focusing on traditional products, cultural activities and agricultural production. It was observed that the granting scheme is very like the ABDA grant structure implemented in the SWG cross-border regions.

The challenges which the Slovenian LAGs face are also related to the administrative procedures and demanding application formulae to the applicants and the LAG administrators. The process showed to be time consuming and not cost-effective. For such occurrences, the LAG members were providing technical support and guidance during the application process for different grant scheme phases.

Via Power point presentation and on spot visits, the SWG Assembly had the opportunity to experience type of projects that have been supported and what their contribution has been to the socio-economic development of the rural areas.



## Conclusions/Decisions Made:

- The SWG activities have been well perceived and the implementation of the foreseen Operational Plan 2017 has been further encouraged;
- Agricultural Policy Forum 2017 topics and logistics have been defined and agreed upon. The SWG HQ should continue with the implementation of the initiative as per the arranged time frame;
- Agenda and venue of the Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture has been confirmed and the tentative topics have been approved. The Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of BIH should send the invitations latest by June 2017;
- PEV evaluation mission is completed with a given input from the Assembly. The PEV experts should prepare the final report;
- Member institutions with outstanding membership fee balance to address the Ministry and financial department in respect to the payments;
- Requests for Accreditation of the SWG to be send once again to the respective authorities to solve issue with the Status of the SWG and its operations in the SWG member countries;
- Details regarding the cooperation among SWG with EC, JRC, RCC, CIHEAM and GIZ were presented and discussed.

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