



# European Rural Parliament

## European Rural Manifesto

Adopted at the Conclusion of the Second European Rural Parliament  
held 4 to 6 November 2015 at Schärding, Austria  
and attended by 240 delegates from 40 European countries  
and updated at the Third European Rural Parliament  
held 18 to 21 October 2017 at Venhorst, the Netherlands  
attended by 250 people from 40 European countries

**1.** We, representatives of many people and organisations rooted in rural areas across the continent of Europe, have adopted this European Rural Manifesto as a statement of the aspirations, commitments and demands of rural people, drawing upon meetings in many countries during the European Rural Parliament campaigns 2015 to 2017.

### **2. Diversity of rural areas**

We deeply appreciate both the unity of Europe and the wide diversity of its areas and peoples, arising from the varied geomorphology, climate and biodiversity of land and sea and from the long history of human activity across the continent. We see this unity and this variety, as expressed in human culture and natural resources, as an enormous asset for the future well-being of all peoples in Europe.

### **3. Common values**

We acclaim the common values which bind the people of Europe – democracy, equality, the rule of law, recognition of human rights, the spirit of cooperation. These values are currently challenged by political forces in some parts of Europe and by global systems. We are committed to sustaining these values, in order to create a peaceful and socially just Europe

### **4. Quality of life**

Those who live in rural Europe value highly the quality of life which can be offered by the countryside, the farms, villages and small towns, the coastal margins and islands, mountains and forests with their local cultures, wildlife, landscapes, healthy environment, cultural heritage and the social strength and mutual support found in rural communities.

### **5. Concern about rural conditions**

However, we are very concerned that many regions are affected by narrowness of rural economies, the lack of opportunities for satisfying and fairly-paid work, the loss of population as young people move away, the consequent demographic imbalance, the decline in services, poverty and social exclusion among disadvantaged people or ethnic minorities and environmental degradation.

## **6. The need for action**

We believe passionately that these challenges must be addressed, for the benefit not only of the rural communities but also of the whole population of Europe. We all depend on food, timber, fibre, energy, water and minerals produced in rural areas. Farmers, enterprises and other rural actors create a common wealth for Europe. Rural areas contribute greatly to amelioration of climate change, recreation, public health and social, economic and spiritual well-being. The countryside deserves the respect of urban citizens.

## **7. Rights**

**We assert** the right of rural areas and communities to full recognition by all the people and institutions of Europe, to a quality of life and standard of living equal to that of urban populations, and to full participation in political processes.

**We ask** governments at all levels to endorse that right. In all aspects of policy and action related to rural communities, people should be afforded equal rights irrespective of age, gender, sexuality, ability or ethnicity.

## **8. Vision**

Our vision for the future of rural Europe is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities, supported by diversified rural economies and by effective stewardship of high-quality environment and cultural heritage. **We believe** that rural communities, modelled on that vision, can be major long-term contributors to a prosperous, peaceful, just and equitable Europe, and to a sustainable global society. Our ambition is to encourage action at village level throughout rural Europe, creating in due course a pan-European rural community or village movement. **We call for** a radical strengthening of rural democracy not only in terms of population but also in the size of the territory and the amount of resources that rural communities manage.

## **9. Partnership**

The pursuit of our vision demands in every country a refreshed and equitable partnership between people and governments. We, the rural people and organisations, know that we have a responsibility to give leadership and to act towards our own collective well-being. **But we also fairly demand** that governments at all levels, including the European institutions, work to make this crucial partnership effective.

## **10. Policy framework**

We warmly endorse the principles set out in the Cork 2.0 Declaration of September 2016, including the call upon policy makers of the European Union to:

- “Improve public awareness of the potential of rural areas and resources to deliver on a wide range of economic, social, and environmental challenges and opportunities benefitting all European citizens;
- “Invest in the identity of rural communities, the potential for rural growth and to make rural areas attractive for people to live and work in throughout the different stages of their lives;
- “Build on this momentum and further develop the agricultural and rural policy towards a result-oriented, simple, and flexible approach, based on partnership and reflecting Union objectives as well as the needs and aspirations on the ground;
- “Systematically review other macro and sectorial policies through a rural lens, considering potential and actual impacts and implications on rural jobs and growth and development prospects, social well-being, and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities.”;

In our view, this call applies equally to policy-makers outside the European Union.

## **11. Reversing the spiral of decline**

Many regions are affected by a ‘downward spiral’ in the vitality of rural communities. Loss of population (particularly of young people) leads to reduced viability of rural services and weakened local economies, which prompts more loss of population. **We call for** concerted efforts by rural stakeholders, all relevant agencies and governments to ‘reverse the spiral’ by promoting appreciation of and pride in rural ways of life, strengthening rural services, diversifying rural economies, and enabling young people to remain in or return to the rural areas.

## 12. Youth

Many young people are ready to remain in, or move into, rural areas and to take responsibility as farmers, rural entrepreneurs or citizens for the future well-being of rural economies and communities. Young people need competitive and sustainable employment, well-targeted systems of education, volunteering and vocational training, apprenticeships based on local needs, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities suited to young people, and advisors and specific support to young farmers and entrepreneurs. We recognise young people as key drivers of rural development, and warmly welcome the contribution they can make to the programme of advocacy and action based on this Manifesto. **We call on** governments and civil society to recognise and meet the needs of youth and to enable young people to participate actively in political processes and in rural action.

## 13. Refugees and economic migrants

The arrival in Europe of refugees and other desperate people from areas of conflict and disaster, and of people from poor countries seeking work, is provoking thought and action within our networks. While urging governments and other agencies to work urgently to solve the underlying causes of this crisis, **we call for** a warm-hearted response, based on solidarity between peoples. We believe that for many rural areas, and particularly those with declining populations, this offers an opportunity to integrate refugees and other newcomers. Government and civil society organisations are well placed to lead such efforts of integration.

## 14. Poverty and exclusion

We recognise the progress that has been made in fighting poverty and social exclusion in Europe. But millions of people are still afflicted by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds. Social and territorial cohesion are integral to our vision of Europe. **We call for** sustained effort to promote inclusion and full participation in society. Of particular concern are the needs of Roma communities in many European countries, who are among the poorest and most excluded of all Europe's rural people. They should be recognised as having equal rights to jobs and education for their children.

## 15. LEADER and CLLD

We strongly advocate a territorial, integrated and partnership-based approach to rural development, pursued in a bottom-up and place-based spirit. We wish to see the widespread application of the LEADER principle, and its extension into Community Led Local Development, both within and beyond the EU. We are highly concerned by the current lack, in many countries, of a truly integrated process of regional and rural development. **We urge** institutions and governments within the EU to demonstrate trust in Local Action Groups, to expand their funding, to adapt their rules and procedures to the needs of rural communities, and to ensure a truly integrated approach to local development and to the use of multiple funds. We urge all sectors in the Western Balkan and Black Sea countries to lay the groundwork of partnership between sectors for the use of LEADER and CLLD.

## 16. Rural Services and infrastructure

Basic rural services, such as shops, postal services, schools, primary health care and public transport as well as social infrastructure, are vital underpinning to the quality of life in rural areas. Adequate physical infrastructure – water supplies, sewerage systems, and electricity, energy supplies, transport systems – is also vital. But in many rural regions, rural services are already weak or being lost and infrastructure is inadequate, which can contribute to a vicious cycle of decline. **We call upon** governments and service providers to recognise the right of rural people to adequate infrastructure and reasonable access to all basic services, and to enable rural communities to make decisions and take actions to secure services and infrastructure appropriate for their needs.

## 17. Broadband and mobile communication

Access to high-capacity telecommunications is becoming crucial to the social, cultural and economic life of all Europeans and to the provision of vital services. Because of their distance and sparse population, rural areas have particular needs for effective telecommunications. However, many rural areas, particularly in central and Eastern Europe and peripheral EU regions, are still gravely disadvantaged by weakness in telecommunication systems.

**We call** on governments, multi-national funders and telecommunication providers to work urgently towards access to high-speed broadband and mobile services for all rural populations, including remote areas, with harmonised tariffs throughout Europe. Rural communities should be enabled to take action themselves to ensure this service. Open data about different aspects of rural areas should be widely available, as an increasingly powerful tool to assist rural enterprises and other stakeholders.

### **18. Local and sub-regional economies**

The rural regions of Europe embrace thousands of local and sub-regional economies, rich in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the lifeblood of communities and contribute greatly to the broader economies of European nations. **We assert** the high importance of enhancing the vitality and viability of these local and sub-regional economies throughout rural Europe. The means of doing so will vary from place to place, but can embrace initiative in many different sectors – agriculture, forestry, fishing, energy production, manufacturing including added-value enterprises, supply chains, tourism and service industries, and businesses based on information technology. There is high scope for social enterprises. Of high importance is the provision of versatile advisory, business support and credit services, plus vocational education and training, accurately geared to the existing and potential job opportunities.

### **19. Small and family farms**

We recognise the major contribution that commercial farms make to the European economy. However, we are gravely concerned for the well-being of the many millions of small and family farms, within the EU and in South East Europe and the Black Sea Region, especially in remote areas, mountains and islands. These farms give livelihood to millions of families, provide food to local markets, form the staple population of thousands of communities, and sustain traditional ways of life on which the health of the land, landscapes, ecosystems and cultural heritage depend. They may retain viability by forming cooperatives and social farming enterprises, adding value collectively to their products, diversifying their farm incomes and local economies and gradually forming larger land units. **We urge** governments, donors, civil society organisations and rural communities to recognise and support small farms and family farming as a viable and respected European model; and to support generation shifts in farming and the entry of new and young farmers.

### **20. Small towns**

Small towns, which number thousands in Europe, have crucial importance as social, economic and cultural centres for rural communities. They are the centres of commerce, public and social services, secondary schools and healthcare; offer major opportunities for tourism; and collectively make a major contribution to regional and national economies. However, they are not recognised as a major target of national or European policies and programmes, often being perceived as neither rural nor urban. **We advocate** a mainstream European Union policy focused on small towns, recognising all the important contributions they make in the social and economic structures of rural regions and their vitality; and for greater focus on the needs of small towns in national policies.

We welcome the growing interest, in both rural and urban areas, in community-led local development. **We call for** increased cooperation between communities, organisations and authorities in rural and urban areas in order to gain the full benefit of social, cultural and economic links which such cooperation can bring; and for vigorous exchange of ideas and good practise between those involved in rural and urban areas.

### **21. Climate change and natural resources**

We note with high concern the growing evidence of the very serious direct and indirect impact of climate change. Against that background, **we support** the multi-national commitments made at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, and **urge** all European governments and all stakeholders to act urgently on the basis of those commitments. **We assert** the major role which the rural areas of Europe can play in combatting climate change and sustaining environmental resources; and also recognise the need to assist rural areas to adapt to climate change.

Over 40 percent of the land surface of Europe is in forests, which can capture and sequester carbon and which contribute massively to renewable resources of raw material and energy. Rural or coastal areas are well placed to meet the growing demand for renewable energy from wind, hydro, tide, solar, geothermal and wood-fuel sources, in ways which respect untouched nature and the environment of land and water, and which bring direct benefit and employment to rural communities. **We call for** increased use of agro-forestry, agro-ecology and bio-economy approaches. **We also urge** that the conditions created by climate change should be taken into account in the definition of disadvantaged regions when assessing the allocation of financial support.

## 22. Western Balkans and South East Europe

Rural communities and economies in the Western Balkans and South East Europe countries are deeply affected by the political instability in the region. Delays in the process of accession to the European Union have slowed up the process of political reform. Rural development has been seen by governments as a low priority. **We urge** the EU to speed up the accession process in this region, including much more effective support to rural development processes.

## 23. Leadership in rural development

We acknowledge the important role of leadership at all levels and between levels. We recognize that a prime responsibility for identifying needs and delivering solutions rests with us, the rural actors. However, leadership in rural development involves collective action from local, regional, national and European levels and is characterized by commitment, communication, cooperation and building trust. **We call upon** civil society, governments and the private sector to work in partnership to offer capacity building, resources and support to foster an environment which encourages innovative, sustainable and accountable leadership, inspiring and engaging future leaders.

## 24. Civil Society Networks

The European and national networks which have led this European Rural Parliament campaign are rooted in local action and participative democracy. Their membership includes thousands of village-level action groups, local associations, cooperatives and other structures which run essential services and promote cooperation among rural actors. They have a growing role in practical action in rural areas, in the face of changes in the profile of public-sector actors. **We call upon** governments and the European institutions to recognise the vital contribution of NGOs and their networks, to respect their independence and to support their activities.

## 25. Partnership between civil society and governments

We believe that effective rural development demands an open-minded and innovative partnership between people and governments, side by side as equals. **We call upon** rural stakeholders to work positively with governments; and upon governments, international institutions and appropriate agencies to establish meaningful systems of consultation and collaborative decision making, in order to enable rural stakeholders to participate in shaping and implementing policies and to lay a strong foundation for fruitful partnership between rural stakeholders and governments at all levels.

## 26. A supportive climate

**We call on** governments to act in a spirit of trustful and open-minded partnership with rural communities, recognising their right to self-determination; and to provide a supportive climate of law, regulation, administration and finance. This supportive climate should include a full commitment to democracy and the rule of law; coherence between different aspects and geographical levels of policy across the whole field of government action related to rural areas; rural proofing of all relevant policies and programmes; simplified design, and sensitive and flexible use, of regulatory, fiscal and financial systems to encourage initiative by individuals, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, social enterprises, cooperatives and others; and respect for the rights of rural communities in forging international laws and treaties.

## 27. Education

In a changing world, people everywhere need constantly to enhance their ability to adapt and innovate in social and economic activity. For this reason, education and lifelong learning – starting in early childhood – have a crucial place in enabling rural communities to thrive, with the necessary cooperation and networking, and to participate fully in developmental processes.

They have particular importance in enabling young people to understand the opportunities for a rich and viable life in the countryside, to attain and constantly renew the skills which are needed, and to participate as citizens. **We urge** educational authorities to ensure effective access for rural communities to education services, including primary schools at village level, secondary and adult education, distance learning, volunteering and vocational training suited to the realities of rural life.

## 28. International exchanges

We believe that the work to achieve sustainable rural development throughout the wider Europe can be greatly assisted and accelerated by exchange of good practices among rural stakeholders and governments in all European countries and further afield. East and West can equally contribute to, and gain from, such exchanges. **We call for** a truly pan-European approach to exchange programmes, through cooperation between governments, NGOs, multi-national donors and others within and beyond the EU. Young farmers, professionals and other youth must be included as equal partners in these exchanges. A leading contribution to this process should be made by the European Network for Rural Development and the EU-funded National Rural Networks in all EU member states.

## 29. Advocacy and action

**We ask** the European NGO networks which co-initiated the Second and Third European Rural Parliament to lead a programme of advocacy and action based on this Manifesto, working closely with their national members and all willing partners.

## 30. Our pledge

**We pledge** our own continued commitment to the pursuit of the vision and actions outlined in this Manifesto. We believe that the rural communities, the governments and the multi-national institutions, working together, can achieve a renaissance of the rural regions of Europe.

With that conviction, we declare that:



ALL  
Europe  
shall live!

### **Explanatory note**

*The European Rural Parliament campaign 2015 to 2017 was co-initiated by three pan-European NGOs – European Rural Community Alliance, PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe, and European LEADER Association for Rural Development. It included national campaigns to gather ideas from rural communities in 36 European countries; national conferences or Rural Parliaments in many countries; and two three-day European Rural Parliaments, attended by rural stakeholders from 40 countries and from governments and international institutions. The Manifesto will form the basis for continued campaigning by the three co-initiating bodies and their European and national partners.*