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Under the auspices of
the Secretary General of
the Council of Europe,
Mr Thorbjørn Jagland




European Rural Parliament²⁰¹⁷

Venhorst

The Venhorst Declaration

21 October 2017



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We, 250 participants from 40 European countries met during the 3rd European Rural Parliament at the village of Venhorst, North Brabant Province, the Netherlands from 18 to 21 October 2017 under the auspices of the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, and with the participation of representatives of European Union institutions, of some national governments and of civil society organisations from many countries. We are grateful for the hospitality of the citizens of Venhorst, and for the major organisational effort and support of the *Vereniging Kleine Kernen Noord Brabant* (VKKNB), the public authorities and organisations of North Brabant, and the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* (LVKK) and the national government of The Netherlands. We discussed the needs of rural areas and formulated advice on how to assure the well-being of all rural communities throughout the wider Europe.

We focused on the power of rural communities to take initiatives and organised expeditions and workshops around six leading themes: creating future-proof communities, optimising community infrastructure and services, caring together and including others, developing the community's economic base, making decisions together, and welcoming new people in the community. We fully acknowledged the urgency of the current situation and the major challenges that Europe is currently facing. The challenges include the rapid spread of digitisation and automation, population movements from poor to rich regions and from rural areas to cities, the flow of refugees into Europe, continuing loss of biodiversity, climate change and its impact on many parts of Europe and the consequent stresses on the resources of the European Union and public authorities throughout the continent. Rural communities are able and willing to contribute to addressing these challenges.

Drawing further on the National Rural Parliaments and other events organised by our European and national partners over the last two years, the discussions in Venhorst resulted in a call upon citizens and policymakers to support the vitality of rural areas and to ensure that general policies and programmes are rural-proofed. Moreover we call upon citizens and policymakers to assist in the creation of sustainable rural communities in the following ways.

Infrastructure, services and connectivity

The social and economic well-being of many rural areas is threatened by weak infrastructure and loss or lack of essential services such as public transport, health and education. We call upon providers of essential services, rural communities and public authorities to sustain and extend services and modern infrastructure in rural areas; or (where this is not possible) to work with rural communities to find imaginative solutions. New business models need to be developed in order to assure the sustainability of such solutions. These models should be community based bringing benefits to the livelihood and vitality of local communities. Policymakers have an important role to play in facilitating and funding digitisation, high quality internet, renewable energy supplies and ecosystem services and the development of smart transport solutions, and by supporting the development of synergetic rural-urban relations. They should legislate to give communities the right to take care of their own facilities in the village, for instance through the right to challenge and to bid. Funding towards community enterprises is important. The ERP can play a role by gathering best practices in civic initiatives in those fields.

Tackling poverty and social exclusion

Many rural communities are marked by a spirit of mutual care. However, social inequality may be found anywhere, with people suffering from low income, lack of access to services or discrimination. Rural communities should take the lead in offering care to those in need. They should be assertive in pressing national and local authorities to ensure social inclusion and to provide resources for the elderly, infirm and other persons in need of our care.

Strengthening local economies

Vibrant communities need a sound economic base to thrive. Small and family farms are often at the heart of the local economies and should be supported. Many rural areas face the decline of traditional industries, the threat of automation or even closure and relocation of business. There are promising examples where rural communities managed to develop new 'smart' economies based on their strongpoints and most vital economic sectors. We call upon national and European policymakers to support such experiments. The aim should be to stimulate the strengthening of the regional economic structure, taking account of the important role of SME's and of cooperatives, and a shared vision of climate-resilient development. Such a programme fits the approach recently presented as EU action for smart villages.

Welcoming new people into the community

Rural communities may be well placed to welcome people who are coming to Europe as refugees or economic migrants. There are good examples of such actions in several countries. But welcoming and integrating newcomers is not easy. The European Rural Parliament network should support the exchange of practical experiences among those working in this field. Together we could develop a web-based toolbox of good practices that assist communities in the development of local initiatives.

Youth

Young people are crucial for the future of rural areas. Their rights are protected under the United Nations Convention. We place high importance on enabling young people to find a good life in the countryside. This includes sufficient services that fit their needs as well as inclusion of youth in the development of rural areas. We urge governments, public authorities and LEADER groups to ensure that young people can take part in funded programmes. We ask ERP partners to link up with rural youth initiatives and support them wherever possible, for instance by involving young people in community initiatives and by supporting international exchange between young people in different European countries, among others through gatherings like the recent first European Rural Youth Parliament.

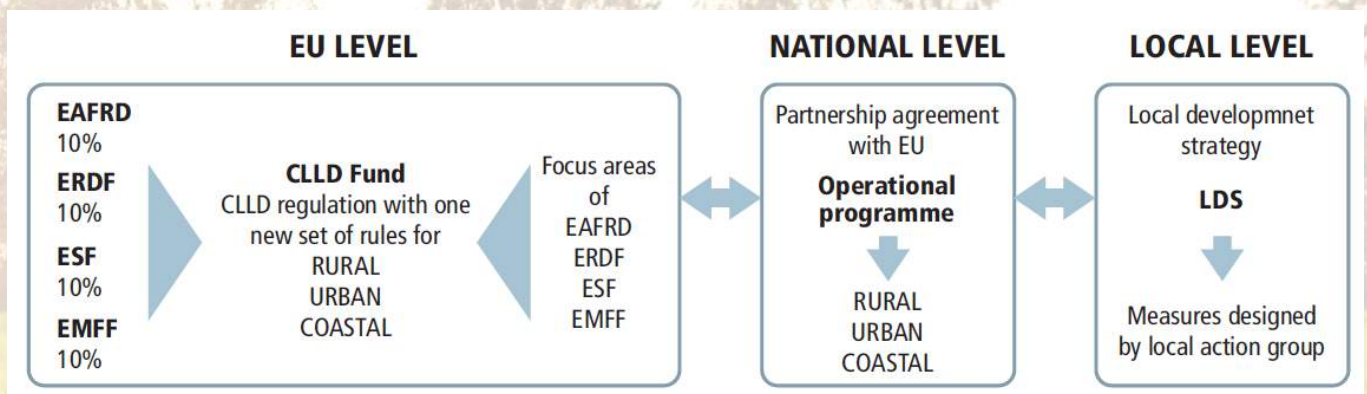
Bottom-up place-based development

The ERP meeting in Venhorst revealed the enthusiasm of rural citizens to engage for their communities and to develop multiple initiatives to strengthen the vitality of rural areas. We call on governments and European institutions to:

- recognise the importance of the local level for developing creative, open and tailor-made strategies;
- invest in capacity building and support of those citizens who are ready to engage and invest a considerable part of their free time for the community;
- reinforce multi-level partnerships of public, private and civil society actors; and equip these partnerships to provide the missing link between policies at national or regional level and grass roots initiatives at local level
- add value to local assets: priority should be given to investments which increase community knowledge and capacity and enhance the sustainable use of strategic assets such as high-quality landscapes, cultural heritage, broadband, food and waste.

Fund for LEADER/Community-Led Local Development

These purposes should be reflected through a fund for Community Led Local Development, building on the long experience of the LEADER approach. We propose that the European Union should establish a separate Fund for community-led local development, with matching national or regional programmes in member states (see Tartu declaration). This Fund should receive a significant proportion of all European Structural Investment funds. Its use should be earmarked for the objectives set by community-led strategies, with no distinction or demarcation between the different ESI funds. The funds should be deployed on a decentralised basis, through local partnerships, so that local strategies can respond to local needs and challenges, such as the diagram below explains.



Candidate, accession and neighbourhood countries, who benefit from EU systems to their rural economies should be enabled to take part in consultations related to the new EU policy.

This declaration is the result of an inspiring meeting in which representatives of rural communities across Europe exchanged best practices and lessons learnt. We call for a forceful follow-up and to continue the campaign for sustainable rural futures, keeping track of our achievements in between ERP gatherings. This Declaration will be supported, within the next month, by a supplementary paper including detailed proposals on these themes, based on the proceedings of the ERP in Venhorst.

We invite the European institutions to take this Declaration as a contribution to the discussion about the post 2020 framework in the EU. We strive for a Pact on Rural Communities and European Rural Agenda to foster our contribution and participation on the European scale, parallel to the "Pact of Amsterdam" agenda for cities. We are ready to contribute to a stronger relation between the citizens in our communities and the European goals.