

13th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture and Heads of Delegations of South Eastern Europe

Introduction

At the Annual Meeting of the Ministers held in Pristina, Kosovo* in November 2019, Ministers and Heads of Delegations adopted a set competitiveness and development objectives to be achieved in line with the regional economic integration benchmarks of the European Union.

The Conclusions of the Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture and Heads of Delegations of South Eastern Europe summaries the discussions to future regional rural development in the face of changing international dynamisms that are reshaping our economies, environment and social conditions.

The Annual Meeting of the Ministers reconfirmed the importance of regional cooperation and rural development as a tool for economic growth, sustainability, and fighting rural depopulation and poverty in South Eastern Europe, most importantly, impact regional divides essential for addressing development policies taking into consideration different development paths.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ANNUAL WORKING MEETING OF MINISTERS AND HEADS OF DELEGATIONS IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE 12th November 2019

We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations from South East European countries, having met at the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Ministers in Pristina, Kosovo* from 11th – 13th November 2019, covering topics of a regional character:

discussed priority issues of a joint matter for agriculture and rural development in the SEE region.

Reaffirm our dedication towards EU membership and commitment to the EU enlargement project, which will allow SEE countries to seize their stability, democracy and economic permanence over the region. Conversely, the SEE countries are disappointed and losing patience if the process prolongs and the EU does not open formal accession proceedings with all the countries from the region.

Appel for the need of closer cooperation with European Commission and new dynamism with responsible institutions for regional cooperation, agriculture and rural development. The need to address the priorities and areas of joint reinforced cooperation, addressing the specific challenges the SEE countries face, in particular the need for fundamental reforms and aligning of policies towards the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) model and respective measures that contribute towards economic adjustments and increased competitiveness.

Remain devoted to the restructuring and setting up national institutions for proper programming, implementation and monitoring of the IPA tool for agriculture and rural development (IPARD II). We are keen on the developmental steps for IPARD III and anticipative to provide our input on indispensable changes and improvements, making the tool adoptive to the actual needs of the SEE region.

Recommend inclusion of all potential and candidate countries from SEE region for the application of the IPARD programme. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo* will support EU efforts for proper implementation of reforms and national structures on accessibility of IPARD funds and technical aid. Availability of such tool will contribute significantly to the competitiveness of farming and the food sector in these two countries.

Welcome the Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) endorsements and the Ohrid Agenda 2019, held on 9th -10th October 2019 in Ohrid, North Macedonia under the theme: "Contribution to Diversification of Economic Activities for Sustainable Rural Development".

We hereby reviewed and positively assessed the following recommendations:

1. A more progressive approach towards the IPARD program is helping the IPARD countries to improve their administrative capacities from improving management systems of processing of applications, to increasing the human capacity for know-how and helping to achieve better absorption of the IPARD funds;
2. Geographical Indications (PDO and PGI) and Traditional Specialties Guaranteed (TSG) - Quality policy is a useful tool for rural development that includes economic, social and environmental dimensions. To improve traditional production, national authorities need to establish efficient control systems and control bodies while providing flexibility and derogations on the food safety requirements, as it is foreseen by the EU regulations;
3. Timely involvement of rural communities and farmers into the planning and implementation of policies, considering territorial approach, LEADER/ Community-led Local Development (CLLD) and Area-Based Development Approach (ABDA) are strongly recommended. It is advisable to strengthen the capacities of the national and local administrations, advisory services, civil society organizations, farmers/producers and service providers in rural areas;
4. Improvement of the competitiveness of the wine sector in the Western Balkan region is needed. It was recommended to introduce common standards related to some regional traditional terms. Regional-wide cooperation focusing on joint promotion and valorisation of Balkan vine varieties is seen as one of the key priorities. A harmonized regulatory framework is seen as a fundamental precondition for increased trade and export.
5. Research, advisory services and education should achieve a higher position amongst governmental priorities. National budgets dedicated to research need to be significantly increased to improve research funding. A dialogue platform on research in the Western Balkans should be established to stimulate demand-driven research. SWG should progress this concept.

Acknowledge the report of the Secretary General on the results of the SWG work for the year of 2019 and the achievements made under its operational framework. We congratulate the fortitude of this regional body in upholding regional ownership and its efforts of introducing new paradigms for cooperation towards joint EU enlargement path. We reconfirm our dedication to regional cooperation under the SWG umbrella and continues exchange among members, observers and international organizations on innovative approaches and best practices to be executed using the SWG structures.

Congratulate the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of North Macedonia for successfully holding the Presidency of the SWG RRD Assembly during the year 2018. The SWG RRD Presidency and the duties for the year of 2020 have been handed over from the current Presidency the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of North Macedonia to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development of Kosovo*.

Appreciate the support provided by all participating Governments, members and observers of the SWG RRD. We value the positive contribution by partner organizations and institutions in their work to promote healthy, diverse and productive environment in SEE, in particularly: the line Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, the European Commission, the German Federal Government (BMZ and BMEL) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Express our gratitude for the warm hospitality provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development of Kosovo*. We reiterate our commitment to the implementation of the set objectives in this document and oblige on taking concrete steps for ensuring the above stated matters have been address in a proper manner. The results will be assessed on the next scheduled Annual working meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture in 2020.

Present representatives of institutions during the meeting

SWG MEMBERS INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Republic of Albania

Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Rural Development, Kosovo*

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Republic of North Macedonia

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Montenegro

SWG OBSERVER INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Bulgaria

Ministry of Agriculture, Republic of Croatia

Ministry of Agriculture, Hungary

Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Federal Republic of Germany

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Slovenia

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

European Commission (EC)

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ)

Teagasc, Agriculture and Food Development Authority

* *"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."*