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Balkan Rural Parliament Declaration summary version

Summary version of the DECLARATION OF THE 1st BALKAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

Purpose. This Declaration was adopted at the First Balkan Rural Parliament held from 26 to 28 June 2018 at Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia and attended by over 60 representatives of rural interest groups from the Balkan countries and Turkey. It is addressed to governments and inter-governmental institutions of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey, and to all stakeholders who can contribute to the well-being of rural communities in these countries.

The challenge. Many rural regions in the Balkan countries and Turkey are affected by narrow rural economies, lack of opportunities for varied and well-paid work, loss of population as young people move away, demographic imbalance, decline in services, poverty and social exclusion, and environmental degradation.

Response to the challenge. In recent years, governments in the region have focused on rural development. Their countries are preparing for accession to the European Union. So, their approach to rural development tends to reflect that of the EU; and they have, or may soon have, EU support through the IPARD programme, including the LEADER measure. Civil society organisations have already helped to lay the groundwork for that measure.

Institutional weakness. However, the process of strengthening rural development processes is held up by delay in political reform and in accession to the EU. This means that EU funding is not yet flowing effectively into rural development in many of the countries, and the full application of the LEADER process is stalled. Rural regions are not yet fully benefiting from the close cooperation between governments and civil society organisations which is essential to promote integrated local development and empower local communities.

Accession to the EU. We urge governments to press forward the reforms which are needed, in order to accelerate the process of accession. **We urge** the European Union to give active support to governments in the making of those reforms; and, in the interim period, to provide effective support to rural development processes, including the use of LEADER and CLLD to create local partnerships and local development strategies.

Strengthening rural communities. The Rural Parliament focused on key elements of rural development which can strengthen rural communities, namely support for young people, women and small farmers; social entrepreneurship; and added value to culture and heritage.

Young people. Rural communities in the Balkans and Turkey are affected by the continuing departure of young people. This exodus distorts the balance in the population; reduces the workforce and the potential for economic development; and can cause a vicious cycle of falling population, loss of rural services and further weakening of rural communities. We believe that ways must be found to encourage and enable young people to stay in or return to the countryside. **We call on** governments to help young people with a variety of satisfying and fairly-paid jobs, a well-targeted education system, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities, and support for young farmers and entrepreneurs.

Women. Women in rural areas of these countries are often marginalised and excluded from active processes of rural life. Their capacity for leadership and enterprise is not being used. We believe that women should be recognised as key drivers in rural development, and as guardians of tradition and heritage in rural areas. **We call on** governments and civil society to recognise the needs, and the capacity, of women; to stimulate their creative role in rural life through active support programmes; and to ensure their inclusion in decision-making processes, for example within community service organisations and local action groups.

Small farmers. In the rural economies of the Balkans and Turkey, a central role is played by small farmers. They are often severely disadvantaged by low levels of education, lack of capital and

equipment, and (crucially) lack of access to markets for their produce. A single farmer is at grave disadvantage in the economic process. But if many such farmers can be enabled to work and trade together, and to add value to their products, they can gain strength in the marketing processes. **We call on** governments to support the creation of cooperatives and farmers' associations; and also of short supply chains, which can enable small farmers and other local enterprises to gain a higher share of added value by going beyond simple primary production and engaging in distribution and/or processing.

Social entrepreneurship. In rural areas, growing numbers of people are afflicted by poverty and social exclusion. Sustained effort is needed to promote their inclusion and full participation in society. Social entrepreneurship may have a key role in that process, by providing social and other services – for example care for old people, employment for handicapped people – which are not fully provided by the public and private sectors. **We call on** governments, the EU and CSO networks, to promote social entrepreneurship by developing capacities and providing professional and financial support.

Culture and heritage. The culture and heritage of rural areas in these countries should be seen as major assets. They underlie the identity and solidarity of rural communities: they offer potential for diversifying rural economies : they can be a powerful resource for the promotion of tourism. Adding value to culture and heritage may involve many different interests in each rural area – local authorities, religious organisations, land and property owners, historians, CSOs and others. **We urge** governments and the EU to recognise the value of these assets and to support this multi-sectoral cooperation.

Partnership in rural development. **We strongly advocate** a territorial, integrated and partnership-based approach to rural development, pursued by bottom-up and territorial partnerships, as expressed in the LEADER principles and (within the EU) in the adoption of Community Led Local Development (CLLD). **We urge** that governments perceive the process of rural development is one of broad and open partnership between public, private and civil sectors; that they use that partnership to enlist the energies and resources of rural communities in the process of their own development; and that they give high priority to making the LEADER approach operational under IPARD and national programmes.

Civil society Networks. The last decade has seen the emergence in the Balkan countries of increasingly strong civil-society-based National rural development networks. These have drawn upon their links to European networks – notably PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe, the European Leader Association for Rural Development (ELARD) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) – and have developed significant expertise in the creation of and support for multi-sectoral partnerships following LEADER principles. **We urge** governments to build upon the work of these networks, and to enlist their continuing involvement, as the LEADER and CLLD approaches become more formalised in the context of National Rural Development Programmes and IPARD.

Regional cooperation between public and civil sectors. The nation civil-society networks described above have developed a strong basis for cooperation through the Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN). This cooperation strengthens their ability to play a leading role in participatory democracy, and in advocating the best interests of rural communities. BRDN works closely with the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG), which brings together the relevant government agencies of all the Balkan countries. This cooperation between public and civil sectors can greatly assist the future well-being of rural people and rural economies in the region.

We ask governments at all levels and the European institutions to recognise the role, and the capacity, of CSOs and their networks, and to provide a climate of government which supports their independent functioning and further development. **We urge** that, during the process of European integration, these networks are enabled to ensure that the voice of the rural communities is heard, and that rural citizens and communities are fully and progressively informed about the process of European integration and its implications for the future of rural communities.