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## DECLARATION OF THE 1<sup>st</sup> BALKAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

Adopted at the Conclusion of the First Balkan Rural Parliament held from 26 to 28 June 2018 at Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia and attended by over 60 representatives of rural development stakeholders and interest groups from the Balkan countries and Turkey, including civil society organizations and CSO networks, local and central authorities, young people, the donor community, and media representatives.



Network for Rural Development of Serbia



Institute for Democracy and Mediation  
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim



Mreža za ruralni razvoj u Bosni i Hercegovini



HMRR  
HIGATIAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK



RRJETI I ORGANIZATAVE  
PËR ZHVILLIM RURAL TE KOSOVES



Latvian Rural forum



RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA



MREŽA ZA  
RURALNI RAZVOJ  
CRNE GORE



TÜRKİYE KALKINMA VAKFI  
Development Foundation of Turkey

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We, as representatives of the civil, public, and business sectors in the rural areas of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey, have adopted this Declaration as a statement of the aspirations, commitments and demands of rural people in those countries. The Declaration is addressed to the 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. It is also a contribution to the growing family of Rural Parliaments, and to the preparations for the Fourth European Rural Parliament to be held in 2019.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The Balkan Rural Parliament, 26 to 28 June 2018, was organised as part of the project “**ALTER – Active Local Territories for Economic development of Rural Areas**”, funded by the European Union. Taking part were over 60 representatives of rural development stakeholders and interest groups from the Balkan countries and Turkey, including civil society organisations and CSO networks, local and central authorities, young people, the donor community, and media representatives.

2. The Rural Parliament drew upon the wide experience of the partners in the ALTER project, namely the national rural development networks from the Western Balkan countries (see list below), Development Foundation of Turkey, PREPARE Aisbl and Latvian Rural Forum. Also present were rural development experts from EU member states - Czech Republic, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom - including people with direct experience of organising national Rural Parliaments elsewhere and the European Rural Parliaments of 2013, 2015 and 2017. The Balkan Rural Parliament was a contribution to the growing European family of rural parliaments; and will feed into the 4<sup>th</sup> European Rural Parliament to be held in 2019.

ALTER partners - Albanian Rural Development Network, Network for Rural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Network of Organisations for Rural Development of Kosovo\*, Network for Rural Development of Macedonia, Network for Rural Development of Montenegro, Croatian Rural Development Network) Network for Rural Development of Serbia

## **COMMON CHALLENGES**

3. The geographic focus of the Rural Parliament was the same as that of the ALTER project, namely the Western Balkan countries and territories - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro and Serbia - plus Turkey.

4. Many rural regions in these countries are affected by narrowness of rural economies, lack of opportunities for satisfying and fairly-paid work, loss of population as young people move away, consequent demographic imbalance, decline in services, poverty and social exclusion among disadvantaged people or ethnic minorities, and environmental degradation.

5. In response to these serious weaknesses, the Western Balkan countries and Turkey have been paying close attention to rural development in recent years. All these countries are in the process of preparing for accession to the European Union. For this reason, their approach to rural development tends to reflect that of the EU; and they either are, or expect in due course to be,

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

eligible for direct support from the EU through the IPARD programme. That programme includes potential for use of the LEADER approach, and many of the countries are already preparing for the application of that approach. The groundwork for rural development has been laid by governments, civil society networks, donors and others, with growing support from the European Union. This groundwork includes the creation of LEADER-type partnerships in many rural areas within the broad region, mainly on the initiative of civil society organisations.

**6.** However, rural communities and economies in the Western Balkan 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. In turn, the delays in political reform have held up the application of the IPARD programme to some of the Western Balkan countries. 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. Moreover, the institutional basis for rural development is weak in some countries. Some governments are slow in pursuing their rural development programmes and in engaging with rural communities in a transparent and accountable way. Many rural regions are not yet benefiting from the close cooperation between governments and civil society organisations which – as shown by experience in the European Union – is essential in promoting integrated local development, empowering local communities and building capacities among all rural stakeholders.

## **EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE BALKAN RURAL AREAS**

**7.** The countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey have a clear perspective of becoming equal members of the European Union, and thus contributing to the socio-economic development of Europe and its rural areas. We welcome that prospect. We will contribute to the efforts that are needed to achieve the integration of our countries into the European Union. We will promote, and contribute to, cooperation between the countries in our region, and between them and member states of the EU.

**8.** Such cooperation can embrace both the common challenges which are shared by these countries, and also the diversity of the lands and the peoples of the Western Balkans and Turkey.

We believe that the cultural and natural diversity of our countries will strengthen the contribution which they can make to the life, economy and culture of the European Union. **We therefore urge** that the processes of EU integration of candidate countries should take account of this diversity, including the formulation of rural development policies suited to the specific needs of different regions.

## **CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY**

**9.** During the Rural Parliament, we have focused particularly on four key aspects of the challenge, and the opportunity, faced by rural communities in our countries, namely

- the needs of young people and of women
- small farmers and short supply chains
- social entrepreneurship
- culture and heritage.

These issues are explored in turn below.

**10. Young people.** Rural communities across the whole of the Western 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. Young people need a variety of satisfying and fairly-paid jobs, a well-targeted education system, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities suited for young people, and support for young farmers and entrepreneurs. **We call on** governments and civil society to recognise and meet the needs of youth in rural areas, and to enable young people to actively participate in decision-making processes and rural initiatives.

**11. Women.** Women in rural areas of the Western Balkans and Turkey belong, according to every analysis, to one of the marginalised groups, although progress has been made in recent years to increase their inclusion. 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 of women; to support and 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.

**12. The needs of small farmers.** In the rural economies of the Western Balkans and Turkey, a central role is played by small farmers. They are often seriously 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, being unable to gain a decent price for his products in the regional or national market. But if many such farmers can be enabled to work and trade together, and to find ways to add value to their products, they can have more strength in the marketing processes. Strong benefit can come from the creation of cooperatives or farmers' associations; and from the achievement of linkage between the producers and other parts of the economic chain between producers and consumers.

**13. Short supply chains** can enable small farmers to gain a higher share of added value by going beyond simple primary production and engaging in distribution and/or processing. If supply chains – from primary producer to consumer – are long, with many actors on the way, a portion of a product's value is taken at each step and the farmer (as primary producer) will get only a small share. But if the chain is shorter, with fewer actors, the farmer may get more. In some such chains, the farmer may become processor or retailer himself, and even be in direct contact with the customer. However, in many rural regions, small farmers are not now familiar with – and indeed may be suspicious of – the idea of cooperatives, associations or supply chains. For that reason, **we urge that** governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) should do more to promote the idea, and assist the creation, of cooperatives, associations and short supply chains. CSOs and national CSO networks can take the lead in building the capacity of small farmers and supporting the creation of processing enterprises which are needed to form short supply chains. **We call on** governments and European institutions to work on the development of support measures for cooperatives, farmers' associations and short supply chains, within the scope of national measures and the IPARD programme.

**14. Social entrepreneurship.** In the rural areas of the Western Balkans and Turkey, growing numbers of people are afflicted by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds. Sustained effort is needed in order 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 adequately provided by the public and private sectors. Social enterprises may include the processing of local products, the continuance of traditional skills, the installation of renewable energy sources, and other activity which arises from identified local needs and which enables the employment of marginalised groups. In many parts of our countries, this is a relatively new idea: but we believe that it has significant potential. **We call on** the governments and European institutions, CSOs, and CSO networks, to actively participate in the development of social entrepreneurship, by creating support policies, developing capacities and providing professional support.

**15. Culture and heritage.** We believe that the culture and heritage of rural areas in the Western Balkans and Turkey should be seen as a major asset. They underlie the identity and solidarity of rural communities: they offer potential for strengthening of rural economies; they can be a powerful resource for the promotion of tourism. We see much potential in these countries for using this asset of culture and heritage to secure the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, beyond the basic industries of forestry and farming. This is not a simple process. It may involve the recognition and protection of heritage features, such as historic buildings, ancient monuments, wildlife sites, religious centres and fine landscapes; the nurturing or revival of traditional skills and crafts; the formal recognition of regional products such as wines or cheeses; the skilled conservation of relics and museum resources; interpretation, storytelling, festivals and traditional customs; and much else.

**16.** This complexity implies the need for deliberate programmes and projects to recognise, synthesise and add value to culture and heritage. This may involve many different interests in each rural area – the local authority, religious organisations, land and property owners, historians, CSOs and others. **We urge** governments and the European Union, in the preparation of broad development programmes – including, but going beyond, formal rural development – to recognise the value of this asset and the need for multi-sectoral cooperation in realising that value, and to provide the appropriate support.

**17.** There is great scope for local leadership in this field, but also for cooperation and exchange of ideas within each country and between the different countries in the region. **We call on** all who are interested in culture and heritage, and in diversified rural development, to join in this cooperation and exchange. In doing so they can draw upon, and contribute to, the stimulus provided by EU Cultural Heritage Year 2018 and the commitments that the Balkan and Turkish governments have made to implement Council of Europe Conventions relevant to culture and heritage, namely *the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)*, *Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (Granada Convention)*, *the European Landscape Convention and the Aarhus Convention*.

## **THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

**18.** The challenges and opportunities which we have described will call upon the resources of governments at all geographic levels and of the private and civil sectors. In the remaining part of this Declaration, we highlight the major issues which we perceive need to be addressed.

**19. Accession to the European Union.** We have stated our perception that delays in the process of accession to the EU are inhibiting the effective pursuit of rural development processes which are much needed in the rural areas of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey. We fully understand that the European Union expects candidate countries to meet the requirements of the *Acquis Communautaire* as a precursor to accession. **We urge** the governments of these countries 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 before accession, to provide effective support to rural development processes, including the use of LEADER and CLLD to create local partnerships and local development strategies. **We also urge** that candidate and accession countries, who benefit from EU assistance to their rural economies, should be enabled to take part in consultations related to existing and future EU policies, and in Transnational Cooperation with LEADER Groups and other based in the European Union.

**20. Action by governments.** We welcome the action of governments in bringing forward national programmes of rural development for their countries, and in harnessing the support of donors and of the European Union in the evolution of those programmes. As outlined below, **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.

## **LEADER AND COMMUNITY LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

**21.** At the Rural Parliament, we received presentations on two complementary reports on the future of LEADER in the Western Balkan, recently published by (i) the European Commission and (ii) the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG). These reports show the rapidly growing interest in the LEADER approach in the Western Balkan countries, and offer clear guidance on how that approach can be used to bring great benefit to rural communities in those countries.

**22. 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 European Union) in the adoption of Community Led Local Development (CLLD). We wish to see the widespread application of those principles in the Western Balkans and Turkey. **We urge** institutions and governments within these countries to accelerate the establishment of a stimulating environment and necessary processes for implementation of LEADER and CLLD, and the commitment of European and national funds to that implementation. We believe that this would have powerful benefit in promoting the involvement of all local actors in rural development, the strengthening of rural economies and the well-being of rural communities.

**23.** Until now, much of the leadership in promoting the idea of LEADER and creating LEADER-type partnerships in the Western Balkan countries has been taken by the 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.

**24. 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. Technical Assistance measures within IPARD should be used to build the capacity of both public institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in the LEADER process. CSOs are well-placed to contribute to the development of territorial partnerships through education, training, networking and the provision of quality information, and to provide professional support for Local Action Groups. They can promote excellence in the implementation of LEADER and CLLD within the Western Balkan countries through continued cooperation and networking between all who are involved in that work in these countries, and by their continuing links with PREPARE, ELARD and ENRD.

## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOs)

**25. Strengthening the capacity of CSOs.** Civil Society Organisations and their networks are already making a major contribution to the action needed to sustain the well-being of rural communities in the Western Balkans and Turkey. We believe that they have a major role in the future. However, they are – to varying degree – affected by lack of resources, governmental support and organisational capacity to expand their contribution. It was this weakness which prompted the creation of the ALTER project. This project, funded by the EU's Civil Society Facility, has provided a significant stimulus to strengthening the organisational capacity of CSOs and sharpening the processes of networking, education and training within the CSO community.

**26. Regional cooperation among CSOs.** The civil-society-based National Rural Development Networks in the Western Balkans 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. Together, the BRDN members represent several hundred local organisations, local action groups, grass-root bodies and professional organisations. This membership provides a strong platform for cooperation and dialogue with governments and other interested parties. National rural development networks, as platforms of civil society, have the task and the capacity, at both national and regional levels, to act in a way that encourages the formation of partnerships between people and governments at all levels.

**27. 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.

## INTER-SECTORAL REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE BALKAN REGION

**28.** We believe that the future well-being of the rural people, the rural economies and the rural environments in the Western Balkans will greatly depend upon effective cooperation at local, national and regional level between the public, private and civil sectors. Such cooperation is already expressed in four significant platforms:

- The Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG), which brings together the relevant government agencies of all the Balkan countries
- Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN), which brings together the civil-society-based National Rural Development Networks
- the Western Balkans Fund, and
- the Regional Youth Cooperation.

We look to the continuance and expansion of the work of these four platforms. We hope also to see the development of new initiatives based on the needs of the region, in order to enhance the well-being of rural communities, economies and environments. **We urge** government institutions at all levels, plus the European institutions, international organisations and donors to intensify cooperation with the existing platforms, and to support their strengthening.