

Planting seeds for rural futures - building a policy that can deliver our ambitions.

The European Conference on Rural Development,

Having met in Salzburg on 12 to 14 November 2003 to assess the implementation of EU rural development policy since Agenda 2000 and to look ahead to future needs;

Representing a wide range of stakeholders with an active interest in ensuring that the economic, environmental and social development of Europe's rural areas is sustainable;

Believing that, in an enlarged Union of 27 Member States, the future of rural areas, which will represent most of its territory and will be home to much of its population, is of vital concern to all European citizens;

Recognising the diversity of Europe's rural areas as regards their natural landscapes, their agricultural production systems, their capacity to retain and attract population, and the role of agriculture and diversification in the local economy;

Concerned that in a number of rural areas poor access to public services, the lack of alternative employment and the age structure significantly reduce the development potential, particularly as regards opportunities for women and young people;

Noting the increasing importance European citizens attach to the safety and quality of their food, to the welfare of farm animals, and to the preservation and enhancement of the rural environment;

Persuaded that agriculture and forestry continue to play an essential role in shaping the rural landscape and in maintaining viable rural communities;

Conscious of the ongoing Common Agricultural Policy reform process and changing patterns of world trade and the need to help European farmers take up their multifunctional role as custodians of the countryside and market oriented producers in all of the EU, including disadvantaged areas and remote regions;

Recognising that the development of rural areas can no longer be based on agriculture alone, and that diversification both within and beyond the agricultural sector is indispensable in order to promote viable and sustainable rural communities;

Welcoming the strengthening of EU rural development policy under Agenda 2000 and the widening of its scope and the reinforcement of its financing agreed more recently under the 2003 CAP reform;

Recalling that EU rural development policy already makes an important contribution to economic and social cohesion and that this must be reinforced in an enlarged EU;

Convinced that there is strong justification for public support for EU rural development policy to facilitate the on-going process of agricultural restructuring, the sustainable development of rural areas and a balanced relationship between the countryside and urban areas;

Concerned at the complexity of the current delivery system for EU rural development policy, with different funding sources and procedures according to whether an intervention is implemented within or outside Objective 1 regions;

Considers that the following principles must guide the future of rural development policy:

1. **A living countryside** is not only in the interests of the rural society but also of society as a whole. Investment in the broader rural economy and rural communities is vital to increase the attractiveness of rural areas, promote sustainable growth and generate new employment opportunities, particularly for young people and women. This must be based on the specific needs of different areas and build upon the full range of potential of local rural areas and communities. A living countryside is essential for farming, as agricultural activity is essential for **a living countryside**.
2. **Preserving the diversity of Europe's countryside** and encouraging the services provided by multifunctional agriculture is of ever growing importance. Managing the farmed environment and forests will serve to preserve and enhance the natural landscape and Europe's diverse cultural heritage, particularly in more remote rural areas with their sites of high nature value.
3. The **competitiveness of the farming sector** must be a key aim, taking into account the diversity of agricultural potential in different rural areas. This is of particular importance for the new Member States, given the significant further agricultural restructuring expected in these countries. In all Member States sustainable economic growth of the agricultural sector must come increasingly through the diversification, innovation and value added products that consumers demand.
4. **Rural development policy must apply in all rural areas of the enlarged EU** in order that farmers and other rural actors can meet the challenges of on-going restructuring of the agricultural sector, the effects of CAP reform and changing patterns of agricultural trade.
5. **Rural development policy must serve the needs of broader society in rural areas** and contribute to cohesion. Strengthening the wider rural community will promote the sustainable development of rural areas sought by all rural stakeholders.
6. **Rural development policy should be implemented in partnership between public and private organisations and civil society in line with the principle of subsidiarity.** To respond effectively to local and regional needs, a full dialogue between rural stakeholders in the drawing up and subsequent implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes is needed. Future policy must mainstream EU support for rural areas through **bottom-up local partnerships** by building on the lessons learnt from the LEADER approach. Scope must be left for exploring new and innovative approaches at local level.
7. **More responsibility must be given to programme partnerships** to define and deliver comprehensive strategies based on clearly defined objectives and outcomes. These will require increased transparency and accountability through monitoring and evaluation. In this respect, capacity building is essential. Moreover, partnerships must have greater possibilities to learn from each other through networking and exchange of best practices.
8. **A significant simplification of EU rural development policy** is both necessary and urgent. Delivery must be based on one programming, financing and control system tailored to the needs of rural development.