

Introduction and summary

The European Rural Parliament seeks to express the voice of rural Europe; to articulate the concerns of rural people; and to promote self-help and action by the rural people, in partnership with civil society and governments.

We are committed to protecting and promoting the well-being of over 200 million people, who live in the rural regions of Europe. We are acutely aware of the economic and political challenges which affect the whole of Europe, and the urgent need for solidarity and cooperation between governments and citizens in addressing these challenges. Rural communities throughout the continent are increasingly willing and able to take initiative in strengthening their own local economies and social structures. They can thereby contribute to the EU 2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. But they need the effective support of governments and of civil society organisations.

In the current debate on future policies in the European Union, we call for:

- Continued commitment to **Cohesion Funds**, in support of regions with fragile economies.
- Continued **regional and rural development programmes**, focused on strengthening rural economies and sustaining rural services and infrastructure.
- Increased focus on the needs of **young people in rural areas**, so that they can play their full part as drivers of rural development.
- Recognition of the key role of **small towns and smart villages**, as focal points for innovation in rural regions.
- Increased investment in measures to combat **climate change** and to mitigate its impact on rural regions, and to realise the strong contribution which rural areas can make to generate renewable energy, promote circular and eco-economies and provide long-term protection for natural resources.
- Support for **citizen-led local development** and the action of civil society organisations in all areas – rural, coastal and urban – which need development.
- A rethinking and expansion of the role of **LEADER**, as the crucial link between government support systems and citizen-led local development in rural, coastal and urban areas.
- A combined **EU Reserve Fund for Community Led Local Development**, to be earmarked for the objectives set by local development strategies defined and implemented by local action groups in rural, coastal and urban areas. We propose that this Fund should receive 15% of all EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and EMFF money in the new programme period starting in 2021 and be matched by national and regional programmes in member states on a mandatory basis.
- An accelerated process of rural development in the **countries of South East Europe**, supported by the EU, involving civil society and making formal use of LEADER.
- A wider programme of **capacity-building and exchanges** between rural stakeholders and governments in all European countries, including extension of the Erasmus+ programme.

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The European Rural Parliament is jointly initiated by three European rural networks – European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA); PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe (PREPARE); and the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) – in association with national rural movements or networks in 40 European countries – see list on back page of this Message. Its activities, under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, have been part-funded by the European Union through the Europe for Citizens programme.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

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



Evidence-based contribution to the European debate.

This message is based on extensive consultation with rural people throughout Europe and on ideas arising from initiatives by our European and national partners. These initiatives include:

- The **3rd European Rural Parliament**, held at Venhorst in the Netherlands in October 2017. This event, attended by 250 people from 40 European countries, included field visits in the host country; reports from national rural parliaments and multinational Thematic Groups; workshops on many subjects; and plenary discussion. It adopted the **Venhorst Declaration****
- Events leading up to the 3rd European Rural Parliament, including **National Rural Parliaments** in 10 countries and the **1st European Rural Youth Parliament**.
- Surveys and meetings organised in 2017 by **6 multinational Thematic Groups**, focused respectively on local and sub regional economies; rural services and infrastructure; poverty and social exclusion; youth; welcoming refugees and migrants in rural areas; and LEADER/CLLD.
- Widespread consultation on the future of LEADER organised by ELARD, culminating in the **Tartu Declaration** of November 2016.
- The **ALTER project**, a 3 year programme of capacity building among civil society organizations and rural citizens in the Western Balkans and Turkey, organised by ERP national partners in those countries and funded by the European Commission's Civil Society Facility programme.
- A one-week Traveling workshop in Georgia and Armenia, focused on '**The well-being of small farming communities in the Black Sea region**', organised by PREPARE with participants from all the Black Sea countries October 2016.
- A multinational research programme in 2015 to gather an 'upward cascade' of ideas from rural people in 36 European countries, culminating in a 100 page report '**ALL Europe Shall Live**' ** submitted to the **2nd European Rural Parliament** held in November 2015.
- The '**European Rural Manifesto**'** adopted at the 2nd European Rural Parliament.
- Traveling workshops and conferences in the Western Balkans, organised by PREPARE in cooperation with TAIXE, and the resulting report '**Empowering Rural Stakeholders in the Western Balkans**', published by the European Commission in 2014.
- Research reflected in the report '**The importance of small towns**' published by the European Council for the Village and Small Towns (ECOVAST), an ERP partner.
- Research reflected in the report '**The Rural Movements of Europe**' by Vanessa Halhead, published by PREPARE.

*Publications marked ** can be found at www.europeanruralparliament.com*

Rural areas and their contribution to European goals.

The rural regions of Europe – within and beyond the European Union – have a total population of more than 200 million people, more than one-third of this continent's people. These regions vary enormously, from peri-urban to deep rural areas and peripheral or sparsely-populated regions. They contribute greatly to the material needs of all Europeans, and to amelioration of climate change, recreation, public health and social, economic and spiritual well-being. All Europeans depend on food, timber, fibre, energy, water and minerals produced in rural areas. Farmers, rural enterprises and a growing range of high-tech rural industries create a common wealth for Europe.

Quality of life. Many who live in rural Europe value highly the quality of life which is found there. However, many regions are affected by narrow economies, the lack of satisfying and fairly-paid work, the loss of population as young people move away, demographic imbalance, decline in services, poverty and social exclusion, and environmental degradation. These challenges must be addressed, for the benefit not only of the rural communities but also of the whole population of Europe. Rural communities have a right to enjoy a quality of life and standard of living equal to that of urban populations, and to full participation in political processes.

Vision. Our vision for the future of rural Europe is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities, supported by diversified rural economies and by effective stewardship of high-quality environment and cultural heritage. Rural communities, modelled on that vision, can be major long-term contributors to a prosperous, peaceful, just and equitable Europe, and to a sustainable global society.

Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The European Union has set the EU 2020 goal of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Our consultations with rural people around Europe have thrown a sharp light on what these words should mean when applied to the development of rural regions.

- **Smart** implies the relevant use of modern technology and telecommunications, plus the intelligent use of local resources and skills
- **Sustainable** implies a long-term view of the viability of rural economies and communities, and of the health of natural resources such as soil, water and ecosystems
- **Inclusive** implies respect for the well-being of all people and their involvement in development processes
- **Growth** is the goal, but in many regions it must be built on reversing the spiral of decline.

We state below how this interpretation of the EU goal plays out in key sectors of rural life.

Territorial Cohesion

Many rural regions have been adversely affected by collapse of traditional industries or of collective farming systems, by loss of population as people move to the cities, and by peripherality and sparsity of population. Using Cohesion funds, the EU has done much to help weak regions. But many regions, for example in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, are still well below the European average of per capita income. They suffer from a 'downward spiral', whereby the loss of population reduces the viability of rural services and of local economies, prompting more loss of population. These weaknesses threaten the solidarity of Europe, the quality of life of people in those regions, and the long-term resilience of Europe in the face of global competition.

We call for continued commitment by the European Union to support, through Cohesion Funds, vigorous programmes of development in regions with fragile economies. Concerted efforts are needed by all stakeholders to 'reverse the downward spiral' in these regions.

Regional and rural development programmes

Evidence gathered through the European Rural Parliament campaign points to the need for sustained investment in regional and rural development, both within and beyond the European Union. Priorities stated by our wide network of national partners relate to:

- Creating strong and diversified rural economies
- Meeting the needs of young people, to enable them to stay in or return to rural areas
- Sustaining and strengthening rural services and infrastructure
- Providing broadband and mobile communication everywhere
- Enabling small towns to play their full role as centres of rural life
- Amelioration of climate change and protection of natural resources
- Addressing poverty and social exclusion among rural populations
- Creating a positive future for small-farming communities
- Welcoming newcomers into rural communities.

We briefly explain these key dimensions below

Strong and diversified rural economies. The European Union provides, through its common multi-national market, opportunities for enterprises throughout its member states. But it also contains a multiplicity of local and sub-regional economies, with high diversity of natural resources and human skills. A central aim must be to enhance the vitality of these local and sub-regional economies throughout rural Europe, so that each rural area can flourish through its own local trade and its links to the wider European markets. The means of doing so will vary from place to place, but can embrace initiative in many sectors – agriculture, forestry, fishing, energy production, manufacturing including added-value enterprises, supply chains, tourism and service industries, social enterprises and businesses based on information technology – and a vigorous use of innovation.

We call upon national and European policymakers to support the strengthening of local economies in these and other ways. Of high importance is the provision of versatile advisory, business support and credit services, plus vocational education and training, accurately geared to the existing and potential job opportunities.

Youth. We are highly concerned about the loss of young people from many rural areas. They are crucial for the future of rural economies and communities. They must be enabled to find a good life in the countryside. For this, they need competitive and sustainable employment, well-targeted systems of education, volunteering and vocational training, apprenticeships based on local needs, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities, and specific support to young farmers and entrepreneurs. We welcome the imminent streamlining of rules for support to young farmers through the Omnibus Regulation, and new proposals from the European Commission related to young farmers and generational renewal. **We call on governments and civil society to recognise young people as key drivers of rural development and to enable them to play an active part in political processes and in rural action, including funded programmes.**

Rural Services and infrastructure. The well-being of many rural communities is threatened by weak infrastructure and lack of essential services such as public transport, health and education. **We call on governments and service providers to recognise the right of rural people to adequate infrastructure and fair access to all basic services. Service providers should honour their responsibility to sustain and extend services and modern infrastructure in rural areas or to work with rural communities to find imaginative and sustainable solutions, with dedicated funding.** These solutions can draw upon the energy of rural people and upon modern technology: the potential in this field is recognised in the EU's Smart Villages initiative.

Broadband and mobile communication. Access to high-capacity telecommunications is crucial to the social, cultural and economic life of all Europeans and to the provision of vital services. Because of distance and sparse population, rural areas have particular need for effective telecommunication systems. But many rural areas are still gravely disadvantaged by lack of such systems. **We call on governments, multi-national funders and telecommunication providers to work urgently towards access to high-speed broadband and mobile services for all rural populations, with harmonised tariffs throughout Europe.** Rural communities should be enabled to take action themselves to ensure this service.

'Smart villages' and small towns. **We welcome the Smart Villages initiative launched by the Commissioners for Agriculture, Regional Policy and Mobility and Transport.** We endorse the EU's wish to "enable rural communities to build on their existing strengths and on innovation; and to strengthen the links between rural and urban areas". Within the scope of the initiative, we place particular importance upon EAFRD support for village renewal and connectivity and ERDF funding for settlements of less than 20,000 people. **Small towns**, which number thousands in Europe, have a crucial role as centres for rural communities, and as links between metropolitan and rural economies. They are centres of commerce, secondary schools, healthcare and other services; can be major assets for tourism; and contribute strongly to national economies. They have high potential for local initiative. These points are well proved in the report 'The importance of small towns' by ECOVAST, an ERP partner. **We call for a stronger focus on the role of small towns in the policies of regional and national governments and of the European Union.**

Climate change and natural resources. We welcome the growing recognition of the hard reality of climate change and its damaging impact; and the commitments made by governments at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris 2015. Europe's rural regions are increasingly impacted by climate-related events such as storms, floods, drought and fires: its coasts are highly vulnerable to sea level rise. **But rural areas and coasts can play a major role in combatting climate change and sustaining environmental resources.** They can help to meet the growing demand for renewable energy from wind, hydro, tide, solar, geothermal and wood-fuel sources, in ways which respect the environment and which bring direct benefit and employment to rural communities. Over 40 percent of the land surface of Europe is in forests, which can capture and sequester carbon and contribute massively to renewable resources of raw material and energy.

We call for widespread action to raise public awareness of climate change and of the action needed at all levels – households, communities, enterprises, public authorities – to reduce carbon emissions and to develop climate-resilient communities. Urgent actions include investment in community-owned renewable energy and promotion of circular economies. The conditions created by climate change should be taken into account in defining the disadvantaged regions which merit special public support.

Poverty and social exclusion. Despite decades of action by the EU, millions of rural people are still afflicted by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds, caused by the decline of small-scale farming, depopulation and loss of local services, and specific problems of youth, the elderly, disabled people, minorities etc. These issues should be accurately analysed and brought into the shaping of development programmes and local strategies. They also demand skilled, sympathetic and resourceful action by local authorities, voluntary organisations and local communities. **We call for sustained effort by governments, civil society organisations and local communities to strengthen community cohesion, tackle poverty and promote social inclusion.**

Small and family farms. We are gravely concerned for the well-being of the many millions of small and family farms, within the EU and in South East Europe. These farms form the staple population of thousands of communities, give basic livelihood to millions of families, provide food to local populations, and sustain traditional ways of life on which the health of the land, landscapes, ecosystems and cultural heritage depend. But they suffer from low levels of family income, loss of young people, and an aging population. This tragedy must be addressed by creative solutions. Small-farming communities may retain viability by forming cooperatives, adding value collectively to their products, diversifying their farm incomes and gradually forming larger land units. **We urge governments, donors, civil society organisations and rural communities to recognise and support small farms and family farming as a viable European model; and to support generational shifts in farming and the entry of new and young farmers.**

Welcoming new people into rural communities. We live in a time of great migration, within and into Europe. **We call on European governments to work with others to resolve the causes of migration such as conflicts and climate-related disasters; and to support efforts to welcome and integrate refugees and migrants into local communities.** The focus should be on how migrants can contribute to our communities, rather than on migration as a problem. Rural communities, notably those with declining populations, may welcome migrants. Leadership in this can come from local authorities, and by voluntary organisations who can offer a friendly and helpful welcome.

Leadership in development of rural regions.

The sustained effort of regional and rural development, described above, must involve all relevant stakeholders – national and regional authorities, the private sector, local authorities, civil society organisations, rural citizens and the EU and other multi-national institutions. The division of work between these groups varies greatly around Europe. In some countries, for example France, small rural communities may have mayors who can initiate action. Elsewhere, as in Sweden, local authorities cover so wide an area that a typical village may be 200 kilometres from its mayor: in such places the initiative for local action may come from the village people.

Changes in the dynamic of leadership. Looking across the face of rural Europe, we perceive a changing dynamic which points towards a shift in the pattern of leadership and a growing reliance upon initiative at local level. This change is driven by two main factors. First, **the finances of public authorities at regional, national and European level are under increasing pressure** from the growth of population, the growing demands of that population and the rising issues of security, terrorism, migration and climate change. Second, there is **a growing impulse among the people of Europe to take direct action to address their own problems**, in the face of the perceived inability of governments to solve the problems of unemployment, poverty, social exclusion etc. This is shown in a growing range of local initiatives, driven by citizens' groups and civil society organisations and highly varied in focus – kindergartens, community transport, environmental clean-up, welcome to refugees, food banks and other innovations.

The new European Scenario. These changes point towards a new and promising scenario, which people and governments should embrace. This does not mean that governments can opt out of their responsibilities to maintain the framework of democracy and to sustain essential services. But it does mean that **governments and European institutions should recognise the impulse towards local action by the people**, which has huge potential to achieve true local development and to resolve the alienation between governments and peoples which is damaging to the European mission. **The opportunity is for a widespread growth of community-led action and participative democracy, alongside the continuing activity of elective authorities.**

Participative democracy. The European and national networks which lead this European Rural Parliament campaign are rooted in local action and participative democracy. Their membership includes thousands of village-level action groups, local associations, cooperatives and other structures which run essential services and promote cooperation among rural actors. They have a growing role in practical action in rural areas, in the face of changes in the profile of public-sector actors. **We call on governments and European institutions to recognise the vital contribution of NGOs and their networks; to respect their independence and support their activities; and to establish meaningful systems of consultation and collaborative decision-making, so that rural stakeholders can take part in shaping and implementing policies. This will lay the foundation for partnerships between rural stakeholders and governments.**

Building capacity. The new era of community-led action and participatory democracy will place great demands upon the energy and skills of citizens, community groups and civil society organisations; and upon the willingness and ability of public authorities and other organisations to work in partnership with the people. This calls for a sustained effort to enhance the capacity of all who are involved in local development. We welcome the support to capacity building by the EU's Civil Society Facility, which our national partners in the Balkans and Turkey are using to good effect through the ALTER project; and the help offered by the Erasmus+ programme. **But 'investment in people' through capacity building should also be part of mainstream funds.**

Community led local development.

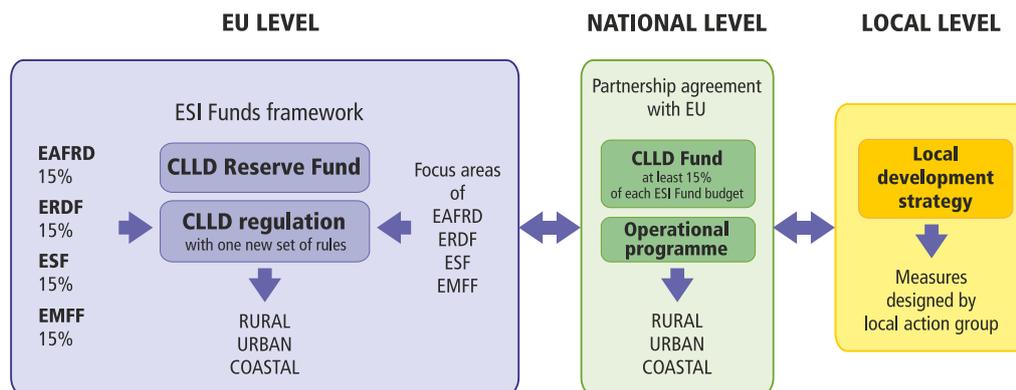
We strongly advocate a territorial, integrated and partnership-based approach to rural development, pursued in a bottom-up and place-based spirit. The approach should be 'territorial' i.e. focused on the specific character and needs of each sub-region. It should be 'Integrated' i.e. focused on all relevant aspects of economic, social, cultural and environmental change in that sub-region. It should be 'partnership-based' i.e. drawing upon the energy, skills and resources of local authorities, the private or commercial sector, civil society organisations and citizens, and upon all relevant and available public funds at European, national and regional level.

LEADER and CLLD. These principles underpin the long-established LEADER approach, and its extension into the EU's concept of Community Led Local Development (CLLD), through which the use of different EU funds – Regional, Social, Rural and Maritime – can be harmonised at national or regional level. The LEADER approach is currently applied by about 2,600 Local Action Groups and 300 Fisheries Local Action Groups. The CLLD framework is used, to varying degree, in 18 EU member states. However, many Local Action Groups are severely constrained in the range of activities that they can support, burdened with complex administration and unable to draw down funds from many relevant sources. The use of CLLD is still very limited in many countries, and there is a widespread lack of truly integrated processes.

Rethinking the role of LEADER and CLLD. In our view, **the time has come for radical re-thinking of the role of LEADER and the operation of CLLD.** They should be seen as the crucial link between (on the one hand) the policies and funds of the EU and of national or regional governments and (on the other hand) the efforts of local communities to pursue local strategies which reflect the special character and needs of their localities. LEADER should be truly enabled to be, in the words of the EU's Smart Villages initiative, "a vehicle for social innovation and capacity building, empowering rural citizens to take ownership of the area's development through the design and implementation of strategy and projects". This has clear implications for the degree of freedom and delegated authority which Local Action Groups should have in (a) the preparation of local development strategies in close consultation with local communities, (b) the application of funds drawn from a range of European, national and regional programmes, and (c) decisions about projects to be supported in their localities. **We urge the European Union and member states to move, within the present programme period, towards an increased measure of freedom and delegated authority for Local Action Groups, with simplified rules and procedures and a truly integrated approach to local development and to the use of multiple funds.**

Fund for LEADER/Community-Led Local Development. Looking ahead beyond 2021, we wish to see the emergence – both within the EU and the candidate, associate and neighbourhood countries of South East Europe – of a widespread family of Local Action Groups and other sub-regional partnerships, briefed and equipped to support local initiatives in the way described above.

We propose that these partnerships should be financed at EU level through a combined Reserve Fund for Community Led Local Development. This Fund should receive a significant proportion – we propose 15% – of all the European Structural Investment Funds. It should be supported by a **single CLLD Regulation.** **CLLD multi-fund implementation should be mandatory in all EU member states,** applying in all types of territory – rural, urban and coastal. It should be expressed, in each country, in a **Partnership Agreement with the EU** and a **CLLD Fund and Operational Programme,** drawing on all four ESI Funds. The EU Reserve Fund and National CLLD Funds should be earmarked for the objectives set by community-led Local Development 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 respond to local needs – see diagram below. Parallel arrangements should be adopted in candidate, associate and neighbourhood countries as they adopt LEADER and CLLD.



A supportive climate. We call on governments to act in a spirit of trustful and open-minded partnership with local communities; and to provide a supportive climate of law, regulation, administration and finance. This should include a full commitment to democracy and the rule of law; coherence between different aspects and geographical levels of policy across the whole field of relevant government action; rural proofing of all relevant policies and programmes; simplified design, and sensitive and flexible use, of regulatory, fiscal and financial systems to encourage initiative by individuals, small and medium-sized enterprises, social enterprises, cooperatives and others; and respect for the rights of local communities in shaping international laws and treaties.

Western Balkans and South East Europe. Many rural regions in the Western Balkans and South East Europe are in great need of sustained and integrated development. The groundwork for this has been laid by governments, civil society networks (many of which are partners in the European Rural Parliament), multi-national and bilateral donors and others. This groundwork includes the creation of LEADER-type partnerships in some countries. Formal rural development programmes are evolving in the region, with EU support through the IPARD programme in Western Balkans and Turkey, and ENPARD in Eastern Partnership countries. **We urge an acceleration in this process, coordinated by national governments in close cooperation with civil society organisations and supported by the EU. We call for strengthened exchange of experience between the countries in the region; and the formal inclusion of the LEADER approach in IPARD, ENPARD and national programmes. Governments and stakeholders in these countries should be able to take part in consultations on existing and future EU policies, and in Transnational Cooperation with LEADER Groups and others based in the EU.**

International exchanges. The work to achieve sustainable local development can be greatly assisted by exchange of good practices among rural and urban stakeholders in all European countries. East and West can equally contribute to, and gain from, such exchanges. Leadership may come from the European Network for Rural Development, the National Rural Networks in all EU member states, and civil society organisations in all countries. The European Rural Parliament network will play an active part. **We call for a truly pan-European approach to exchange programmes related to sustainable local development, through cooperation between governments, NGOs, multi-national donors and others within and beyond the EU. This approach might be funded through an ambitious extension of the Erasmus+ programme.**

Partners in the European Rural Parliament campaign:

Co-initiating Partners: European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA)
PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe
European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)

European Partners: European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST)
Forum Synergies

National Partners:

Albania	Albanian Network for Rural Development ANRD and Quodev
Armenia	Development Principles NGO
Austria	LEADER-forum Austria
Belarus	International Foundation on Rural Development and Sustainable Development Centre
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Network for Rural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina
Bulgaria	Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity STEP
Croatia	Croatian Rural Development Network HMRR
Cyprus	Troodos Network of Thematic Centres
Czech Republic	National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic
Denmark	Council of Rural Districts (Landdistrikternes Fællesråd, LDF)
England (UK)	Action with Communities in Rural England
Estonia	Estonian Village Movement - Kodukant
Finland	Village Action Association of Finland (Suomen kylätoiminta ry, SYTY)
France	LEADER France (la Fédération des GAL de France)
Georgia	Civil Development Agency CiDA
Germany	Federal working group of LEADER Action Groups and Village Movement Brandenburg
Greece	Greek LEADER Network
Hungary	Rural Workshop Foundation representing Hungarian Rural Network
Iceland	Islandic Landsbyggðin Lifi
Ireland	Irish Rural Link
Kosovo	Network of Organisations for Rural Development of Kosovo
Latvia	Latvian Rural Forum (Latvijas Lauku forums)
Lithuania	Lithuanian Rural Communities Union
The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Rural Development Network of the Republic of Macedonia
Moldova	Pro Cooperare Regională NGO
Montenegro	Network for Rural Development of Montenegro
Netherlands	Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen LVKK
Northern Ireland (UK)	Rural Community Network
Poland	Polish Forum on the Animation of Rural Areas FAOW
Portugal	MINHA TERRA Network
Romania	Civitas Foundation for Civil Society
Scotland (UK)	Scottish Rural Action
Serbia	Network for Rural Development of Serbia
Slovakia	Rural Parliament in Slovakia
Slovenia	Slovenian Rural Development Network VIPA
Spain	Spanish Network for Rural Development REDR
Sweden	All Sweden shall live (Hela Sverige Ska Leva, HSSL)
Turkey	Development Foundation of Turkey
Ukraine	National Ecological Centre of Ukraine
Wales (UK)	PLANED (Pembrokeshire Local Action Network for Enterprise and Development)

