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## Tackling poverty and social exclusion in rural areas

### Name of Facilitator

Urszula Budzich-Tabor

### Name of Rapporteur

Anna Berlina

### Vision of the theme

A high proportion of rural inhabitants face poverty or social exclusion, especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in remote rural areas with limited access to infrastructure and services. However, in many rural areas these challenges are successfully addressed, for instance through Local Action Groups and through the development of social enterprise.

It is important to identify key causes of rural poverty and social exclusions (such as decline of small-scale farming, depopulation and loss of local services, specific problems of youth, elderly, minorities and migrants etc.) and to find practical ways to reduce their impact on rural populations, adapted to the local context.

The participants stressed that definitions of poverty and exclusion, as well as the concrete financial threshold for extreme poverty etc., may vary between countries and regions. They also agreed that the discussion of this theme should not be limited to a few specific target groups (such as Roma or refugees), as they may not be relevant for all countries, while various aspects of poverty and exclusion are observed across all European rural areas.

### Main issues

The issues discussed included:

- ideas and methods of preventing people from falling into poverty or exclusion
- ideas and methods of dealing with people who are in poverty or are excluded
- the importance of community cohesion
- the role of local organisations, especially Local Action Groups.

### Suggested actions / policy – and who should implement

The participants of the EPR workshop on rural poverty and social exclusion (3 people from UK, 2 from Georgia, 2 from Poland, 1 from Ireland, Sweden, Serbia and the Netherlands) agreed that **strengthening community cohesion** is one of the key factors in addressing rural poverty and exclusion. In this respect, small steps and simple actions can be very effective.

Civil society organisations can play an important role, also as a **provider of public services** (in Serbia recently there is a possibility for NGOs and private actors to bid to carry out some community services; in other countries there is already a tradition of “co-production” of some public services involving CSOs and other community actors). Time-banks are also a way to find a win-win solution, where elderly/retired persons can provide useful services to the community. However, it would be important not to shift responsibility for the provision of public services entirely towards CSOs and voluntary work, adequate

human and financial resources need to be allocated.

Some ways to ensure that **people don't fall into poverty/exclusion** were mentioned, many of them linked with new business models and social enterprise, for example:

- diversifying the incomes of small-scale farmers/fishermen, e.g. through direct sales from the farm (farm shops, local labels), various forms of Community Supported Agriculture/Fisheries (e.g. food cooperatives),
- local food procurement (eg. for meals delivered to the elderly, sourcing local instead of buying from the city)
- repair cafés, sharing skills.

The importance of **education** to provide skills that facilitate employability in the local businesses (rather than a drive towards generalised "higher education"), as well as ensuring communication and infrastructure (public transportation, broadband to facilitate tele-working etc.) were also raised. The participants agreed that Leader/CLLD has a very strong potential of addressing or preventing poverty and social exclusion, as it can strengthen community cohesion, provide support to innovative rural business models and help find resources for the necessary infrastructural and communications investments. It would be very important to ensure sustainability and continuity of the LAG beyond a few years of donor funding (as in Georgia) or one programming period.

#### **How should ERP work in the future in this theme? What is the role of the ERP partners?**

It was felt that the topic of poverty and social exclusion remains relevant and work on it should be continued.

#### **Amendments or messages to the manifesto**

No specific changes were proposed to the Manifesto

#### **Messages to the Venhorst Declaration**

Poverty and exclusion exist in rural areas as well as in urban ones, but perhaps in rural areas they are less "visible". Commitment and interest of the whole community is needed to identify and address them, but sometimes very simple, step by step activities can be very effective. A large number of good practices already exist, but it is important to adapt them to the specificity of each area. Local NGOs and LEADER LAGs can play an important role in preventing or addressing poverty and social exclusion.

#### **Ideas and case-study examples relating to the theme**

- neighbourhood watch schemes (not so much focusing on security but knowing who might need help),
- "coffee ladies", an initiative to go from door to door to share coffee, reaching out to isolated persons,
- cooperating with the postman, usually having a good idea who may be in difficulties,
- various initiatives of inter-generational cooperation, bringing together the young and the old (e.g. around cooking or local heritage),
- time-banks which ensure every person can play a role in the community,
- initiatives to buy local products in the shop (e.g. "fiver Friday"),
- various forms of Community Supported Agriculture/Fisheries.