

## Leadership in rural development

### Name of Facilitator

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**Countries represented** – Albania, Croatia, England, Estonia, Georgia, Iceland, Moldova, Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey

### Introduction by Speaker

There is no standard pattern of leadership in rural development. The leadership will depend upon the customs and structures of a country, region or locality.

For example, in France, every commune (however small) has a Mayor, who has the power to take the lead in local action – see [case study 1 La Porcherie](#). By contrast, in Sweden many first-level local authorities cover hundreds of square kilometres : the villages do not have elected leaders : therefore the leadership lies with local individuals or groups.

The number of European countries with elected councils, mayors or leaders at truly local level has gradually fallen, because the process of local government has created larger local authorities. In response to this trend, there has been some growth in participatory democracy at village level, through which local people provide their own leadership. This is most strikingly shown by the c.5,000 village-level action groups in Sweden, which over the last 20+ years have formed associations of such groups at County level and then (at national level) the Swedish village association Hela Sverige Ska Leva (*ALL Sweden Shall Live*). A similar pattern is found in Finland (with its national association SYTY) and Estonia (with its national association Kodukant).

However many countries, cultures and political systems have no tradition of initiative by citizens. In communist countries, or those with centralist governance, the pattern of leadership at central, regional and local level tends to be set by government, with top-down directives and clear limits to the freedom of initiative by local leaders, for example the mukhtars of Turkey. Over the last 30 years, as many European countries have emerged from communist or socialist control, the process of leadership has become more democratised : but there is still, in the minds of many rural people, the expectation that the government will lead. In these countries, it will take time for people to gain the courage and the will to participate in local action and to share in the leadership.

Moreover, the need for leadership is not only at the local level of a village or a commune. Many services or initiatives – for example, a new water supply or bus service or major tourism campaign – must operate at the level of a sub-region or larger area. In such a case, the leadership may come from a district-level authority; or, in countries with small communes, from a formal grouping of such communes, as happens (for example) in the *Pays* and the *Parcs Regionaux Naturels* of France – see [case study 2 La Maison de la Poire et de la Pomme](#).

The concept of leadership at sub-regional level was a key factor in the decision by the European

Commission in 1991 to launch the Community Initiative LEADER (*Liaison Entre les Acteurs De l'Économie Rural*). This enabled the creation, in a rural sub-region, of a partnership between local authorities, commercial enterprises and citizens' groups with the task to prepare and agree a local development strategy and to implement this strategy using European funds. Out of this has grown, over the intervening 26 years, a family of c.2,300 Local Action Groups and c. 600 Fisheries Local Action Groups, each focused on a rural or coastal region. They all provide funding for local action in their area : the extent of their true role in leadership varies according to the political and social culture of the country or region.

In countries outside the European Union, notably in the Balkan and Black Sea regions, the LEADER approach is only gradually becoming valued and implemented. Moreover, it is only in quite recent years that governments have begun to focus strongly on rural development (in a wider sense than agriculture). In those countries, much of the leadership in rural development has come from multinational or national donors, for example UNDP, Oxfam, USAID and many others; and also from Non-Government Organisations. Some of these NGOs have operated simply as channels for the funding and mission of the donors : others have taken a wider view and more active role, and have focused on articulating the needs and building the capacity of the rural population. Examples of the latter approach are provided by organisations which are now partners of the European Rural Parliament, namely the Rural Development Networks in each of the Balkan countries, and specific foundations, institutes or civil associations in the Black Sea countries.

The subject of leadership in rural development is currently of crucial importance. We are now in an era of stringent financial pressure on many governments and on the European Union, which forces these public authorities to sharply prioritise their spending. Europe is also suffering from a disconnection between citizens and governments, with the resulting reaction that people in a growing number of countries wish to take action themselves to address the severe problems which face their localities. There is a growing impulse towards self-help, and a widening and highly varied array of local initiatives.

This trend is very promising for the future of leadership. But it depends upon the willingness and the capacity of local people and local organisations in all sectors to take initiative; and also upon the willingness to governments to accept and to support participatory action.

### **Discussion**

The Workshop discussion was focused upon key questions :

- Who provides leadership in local development in your village, district or region ?
- What is the focus of this leadership – for example services, jobs, housing, culture, environment?
- What are the legal or formal mechanisms for this leadership ?
- What barriers inhibit leadership ?
- What action is needed to encourage or enable leadership ?
- What should be our message to the Rural Parliament ?

Responses came from :

Netherlands – the leader of the cooperative at Elsendorp (3km from Venhorst), which manages the multipurpose centre in the village – see [case study 3 Elsendorp](#). People in the Netherlands are accustomed to participative democracy and cooperation. The government is increasingly withdrawing from local level action and concentrating on national issues and major projects; and it supports action by local communities (as was stated by the senior civil servant who spoke to the Rural Parliament).

Georgia has formal and informal leaders in each village, but they do not have great power. However the law is changing, and there may be more decentralised authority. There is need for more informal leadership.

Moldova. "We are waiting for the government to act. We have held meetings with local people, and we

gained a sense that they would like to become more active.”

Albania. People are looking for leadership. Local Government Reform has reduced the number of local authorities from 370 to 61, so that the authorities are no longer truly local and people may have to travel great distances to visit their council. There is a need to diversify civil organisations such as farmers’ unions, and to encourage leadership at grassroots level. An important role is played by entrepreneurs, including people who have worked in other countries and then come back home : they can form links with other entrepreneurs, and offer advice to those who wish to take initiative.

An example was given of a Albanian woman who worked in Italy, married an Italian and returned to her small village : she is successfully running a small farm and has attracted much media attention.

Moldova. Examples were offered of leadership by a group of teachers in repairing the school, and farmers who joined the teachers to organise a festival.

Spain. Leadership at local level can come from entrepreneurs, including people returning from work in other countries; and at ‘territorial’ level from LEADER groups. Local mayors may also offer leadership, but this is often ‘political’ i.e. biased towards certain interests rather than in the real interests of the whole community.

England. “In many villages, leadership is provided by individuals, including newcomers or those who have retired from full-time work, who perceive a need, offer a solution and motivate other people to help.”

Netherlands (a student). “In the cities, young people may perceive a need but be frustrated because they do not have the skill to take initiative. There is need for training in social entrepreneurship, so that new projects can be confidently started which will lead to a knock-on benefit by provoking further action.”

Estonia. Local government reform has reduced the number of local authorities, with adverse impact on local initiatives by those authorities. However, many villages have village elders (headmen) who are elected by the villagers and can take initiative. A major challenge in rural areas is how to attract and retain young people.

Slovenia has many civil associations in the villages, such as farmer’s clubs, women’s groups, firemen’s associations, who can take action and contribute to high quality of local life. These associations can secure some funding from municipalities, ministries or LEADER groups.

Scotland. The government has passed legislation which gives local communities the right to buy abandoned or neglected land; and also the right to bid to buy significant estates when they come on the market. An example of this is the island of Eigg, see [case study 4](#). The main barriers which can impede initiatives of this kind are a lack of skill and knowledge among the volunteers, and unhelpful administration at local or national level. Public authority staff tend to focus on investments in infrastructure, rather than assisting action by rural communities. By contrast, non-government organisations can help farmers and enterprises to produce business plans; and can be resourceful in finding finance for local initiatives through crowd-funding and other sources.

Iceland. A number of village associations have been created, with encouragement from ALL Sweden Shall Live; and some of them remain active. A more recent initiative is focused on work with young people.

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

There is clear scope for exchange of ideas in this field, particularly related to the skills and mechanisms which can assist collective initiative by village communities, including social entrepreneurship. ERP partners could gather and publish case studies of leadership by local authorities, civil associations, entrepreneurs and others. There may be scope for a system of scholarships or internships whereby individuals or groups who are proposing to take local initiatives can spend time in a community organisation which has already developed a successful project in the same field. ERP could also identify and publicise measures taken by governments or others to promote and facilitate local initiatives, for example the “right to buy” provision which made possible the initiative on the island of Eigg in Scotland –

see [Case study 4](#).

### **Amendments or messages to the Manifesto**

Strengthen the references to leadership and initiative by local communities; to partnership between sectors at sub-regional level; and to action by governments to encourage and enable local initiative and sub regional partnership.

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

Include a commitment by the ERP partners to the promotion of exchange between all who are involved in local initiatives and leadership.

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

#### *Case Studies*

*1. La Porcherie, France – saving a village school.* In about 1990, the village of La Porcherie in the Haute Vienne region of southern France was losing population, to the point that the village school was threatened with closure because there were too few children. The Mayor decided to take direct action to save the school. The head teacher's house was vacant. The Mayor advertised in national newspapers for a family with a large number of children to move to La Porcheie and to live in the vacant house. Out of 70 applicants, he chose an unemployed lorry driver from Lille in northern France. The family arrived in a great lorry – husband, wife, dog, cat, furniture and ten children ! The father re-trained as the village carpenter, and the school was saved !

*2. House of the Pear and the Apple, France.* The Regional Parc of Normandie-Maine is one of the Regional Natural Parks in France, each of which is set up by a group of local authorities for the double purpose of protecting the natural and cultural heritage and promoting the social and economic well-being of the local population. At Barenton, in the centre of a region of orchard farms, the Regional Park authority converted a group of traditional farm buildings into *La Maison de la Poire et de la Pomme* (the House of the Pear and the Apple). This is both a trading and advisory centre for local farmers, and a visitor centre for tourists to the region. Adjoining the centre are two orchards, one with 80 varieties of pear trees, the other with 80 varieties of apple trees. Visitors to the centre can learn about the techniques of producing pears and apples and the traditional drinks – cider, calvados and *poirée* – which are made from them. They can then follow car-borne trails (*itinéraires*) through the region, seeing the orchard landscape, visiting the farms, and tasting and buying the fruit and drinks. This significant initiative helps to sustain the local economy, adding value to local products; to protect the characteristic landscape of the Park; and to promote social contact among the farmers, and between them and the visitors.

*3. Elsendorp village cooperative, Netherlands.* The Elsendorp initiative started 10 years ago, in reaction to the departure of young people and fears that the village school might close. A local entrepreneur wanted to reverse the decline in population. He travelled round the Netherlands to see experience elsewhere. He and three other entrepreneurs then set up a cooperative, with the aim to make Elsendorp an attractive village with a strong economic and social structure. They began with collective buying of energy, which reduced the cost for householders. They then set up a system for care of old people by volunteers within the community. Then came the big project to build a multi-purpose village centre, including a village hall, sports hall, primary school, library and day centre for old people. Creation and management of this centre depends upon the integrated use of funding from different sources. The result is more young people stay in the village, and Elsendorp is now one of only three villages in North Brabant whose population is growing.

*4. The Eigg Trust, Scotland.* The island of Eigg, off the west coast of Scotland, was in private ownership and became neglected, so that housing and infrastructure were in poor condition, the services were declining and the population was falling. When the island came up for sale, the local community exercised their

'right to buy' under national legislation. They raised the necessary money, bought the land, and set up the Eigg Trust, which is a charitable company with volunteer directors. The economy has been diversified, including a shop and café, local generation of electricity, and improvement of housing; and the population is now growing.