

## **Strengthening Participation Among Rural Citizens in Europe (SPARCE)**

# **Poverty and Social Exclusion**

## **Project Report**

## Responsible partners

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## Theme

The theme is defined within the European Rural Manifesto as: “We recognise the progress that has been made in fighting poverty and social exclusion in Europe. But millions of people are still afflicted by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds. Social and territorial cohesion are integral to our vision of Europe. We call for sustained effort to promote inclusion and full participation in society. The needs of Roma communities are of particular concern in many European countries, who are among the poorest and most excluded of all Europe’s rural people. They should be recognised as people with equal rights to suitable jobs and education for their children. All people have talents and skills to offer. The European and national networks which have led 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. We call upon governments and the European institutions to respect the independence of NGOs and their networks and to support their activities.”

## Aim

The purpose of the work with the theme “Poverty and Social Exclusion” is to strengthen the rural potential for enabling inclusive and sustainable solutions in an attempt to fight poverty and social exclusion. More specifically, the aims are:

- To identify key issues: What are the main causes of rural poverty and exclusion in rural areas and which groups are mainly affected (identified via survey, virtual debate and workshop)
- To identify possible solutions: Who are the (possible) key actors and what can they do (Identified via survey, virtual debate and workshop)
- To identify and document case studies of effective and transferable solutions to issues related to poverty and social inclusion in rural areas
- During a two-day practitioners’ workshop to exchange good practices and develop proposals for policy solutions.
- To prepare a report to disseminate the findings of the project (key issues, case studies and propositions of statements for the European Rural Parliament).

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## Summary of work

The project was carried out by the Polish Rural Forum, which invited PREPARE partners from Hungary, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Latvia, Serbia, Albania and Slovenia. In addition, individual participants were invited from cooperating organisations from Georgia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and the UK to take part in the virtual exchange and/or the practitioners' workshop in Krakow.

The project involved the following forms of exchange on rural poverty and social exclusion:

- a two-day practitioners' workshop in Krakow (25-27 June 2017) with discussion, presentation of case studies and a study visit,
- virtual debate on a specially designed discussion forum (in Polish and English),
- virtual debates in national languages (in Hungary, Latvia and Serbia),
- an internet survey available from the same website as the virtual debate.

In total the project directly involved 210 persons –

- 53 persons (26 men and 27 women) from 11 countries participated in the international workshop in Kraków;
- 35 persons (18 men and 17 women) took part in the national debate in Hungary;
- 65 persons (15 men and 50 women) were involved in a series of meetings that made up the national debate in Latvia;
- 57 users (32 men and 25 women) from ten countries wrote posts on the internet-based discussion forum, which attracted over 800 users.

The reports from the national debates as well as attendance lists are attached.

In addition, the Polish Rural Forum was organiser and co-host of the conference 'LEADER Approach in Poland', held at Ossa / Rawa Mazowiecka on 1-2 December 2016. The event, attended by representatives of central and regional government as well as of 350 LAGs allowed for discussion of issues important to rural development. The total audience exceeded 500 persons, with the workshop on LAGs that was directly organised by the Polish Rural Forum attracting 2196 persons.

## **(1) "International Workshop on Poverty and Exclusion in Rural Areas"**

(Krakow, Poland, 25-27 June 2017)

The workshop was organized by the Polish Rural Forum (PRF) and was attended by 62 people from 11 European countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina - 1 person; Georgia 2 people; Albania 2 people; Latvia 1 person; Serbia 3 people; Slovakia 1 person; Slovenia 1 person; Czech Republic 1 person; Hungary 8 people; Great Britain (Wales) 1 person; Poland 41 people.

***Social exclusion of rural inhabitants is present in most EU Member States, with significant differences in scale and scope. Rural residents face far greater distance from decision-making centres, often poorer facilities in their technical and social infrastructure, and in many Member States their quality of life in general is lower. In most European countries, it is harder to find jobs in the countryside, more difficult to set up, and more difficult to be successful in business, as the markets are often quite far away. The costs of provision of infrastructure such as roads, water supply, sewerage, telephone, meeting and recreation facilities or other basic services are much more expensive per user.***

The workshop organized in Krakow created good conditions for discussion about poverty and other causes of social exclusion of the rural population. Villagers often experience the negative effects of the periphery and the resulting restrictions on access to services, education and the labour market. Modern technologies, including communication, allow some barriers to be eliminated, others to be reduced. They create new opportunities for combating poverty and social exclusion.

The workshop was an opportunity to present examples of poverty and social exclusion in the various countries represented. Participants in the discussion highlighted the high convergence of problems in different countries. They have certain universal features and dimensions, such as:

- fragmented agriculture and insufficient incomes of small farms,
- limited labour markets and few opportunities of non-agricultural incomes,
- insufficient access to public services,
- poor education,
- migration of young people to large cities and abroad,
- the growing problem of national and ethnic minorities.

These problems were reflected in many presentations. The problems of small farmers are primarily a challenge for Central and Eastern Europe or for the Balkans. The phenomenon is also noticeable in Western Europe, but the scale is considerably different.

The workshop formula provided an open debate with the active participation of all participants, which allowed defining the main problems and discussing effective and proven ways to combat poverty and social exclusion. Through a series of consecutive sessions including a “World Café” type discussion, each of the participants in the conference had the opportunity to play an active role in the various thematic panels and general sessions. An important element of the workshop was the “reality check” of the discussed issues through a study visit to projects of prevention of social exclusion implemented by rural organizations in the vicinity of Krakow.

### *Some examples from the ground*

- Representatives of LAG Kazbegi from Georgia pointed to rural children requiring a special approach, the poverty of people related to agriculture, particularly the difficult situation of disabled people living in rural areas, and the socialization of rural youth.
- LAG Korona Północnego Krakowa (Poland) drew attention to poverty in small farms, and the excessively low incomes for many villagers.
- LAG Bielsko (Poland) added to the list of challenges of unemployment among the disabled (low level of professional activity).
- LAG Ziemia Gotyku (Poland) talks about limited access to education and health care.
- Limited access to public services and low competitiveness of the trade offer was emphasized by the representative of LAG ZASAVJE (Slovenia).
- Another local action group (Letenja, Hungary) added to the list the aging population and the increase in the number of inactive people and the Roma community issue. The latter are often discriminated, and EU support is not reaching the most in need.
- A Rural Network representative from Bosnia spoke about unemployment and depopulation of rural areas.
- Serbian delegates mentioned political corruption, centralization, lack of media freedom, but also depopulation, lack of services, and the problems of small farmers in accessing the market.
- The group from the “Third Age” university in Opole also pointed to the aging of rural communities and depopulation as a result of migration of young people to the Czech Republic and Germany. In the post-Soviet areas, many of these phenomena are very serious, particularly the phenomenon of depopulation, the inheritance of poverty, the aging of the population in the absence of care for the elderly. People of working age have very low qualifications.
- In Albania there is a clear geographical division of the country into poor and rich areas, there is a strong migration from the countryside to the capital, there is a high level of exclusion of women and children, young people abandon their education; small farms are in a very difficult situation.

- In Latvia, there are growing inequalities, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are poorer.
- There are many small farms (3-7) hectares in the LAG Mroga area (Poland), whose owners once came to work in the city of Łódź (part-time farmers).
- In the LAG Between people and lakes (Poland) there is a very high unemployment among those who did not go and stay in the countryside. Conversations, exchanges and opinions were a great introduction to the rest of the workshop.

#### *Causes of poverty in rural areas*

Small farms with insufficient income for owners and their families. Weak labour markets, to which the access is made even more difficult by the low level of education. Migration of young rural residents to urban areas and aging society. Low level and availability of public services. In some countries, challenges related to national minorities and migrants are still being tackled. The problems of village dwellers are specific and unique in every single place, but they have many common features and instruments of European Union policies that could counteract them more effectively.

#### *Social exclusion of children, adolescents and the elderly*

There are no simple and obvious ways of counteracting the social exclusion of children and young people, but there are good examples of effective coping with difficult challenges. It is helpful to educate and work with parents of children who are excluded and at risk of exclusion. More examples of how to deal with the exclusion of older people were presented. Universities of the Third Age (a form of educational activities for the elderly), senior clubs and other centres of support in many places operate effectively. A very interesting solution is the Hungarian elderly carer paid for by the public but chosen by local residents. Having a car makes life easier for older people living in the village. This is an example worth detailed analysis and dissemination in other countries.

#### *The exclusion of ethnic minorities and the problem of immigrants in rural areas, and the problems of other groups at risk of exclusion*

Migration has different faces. A common phenomenon is the migration of young people from rural to urban areas. On the other hand, the movement of people moving from cities to the country is getting stronger. Those who leave rarely return. New villagers do not integrate into the local community. In many countries there are tensions with ethnic minorities and the Roma community poses a particular challenge. There is a problem of refugees, especially but not exclusively in Serbia.

Institutional structures and financial instruments are needed to meet these challenges. On the one hand, migration groups need to be linked to the place where they live, but on the other

hand, one must avoid creating a constant dependency on public funds. The workshop showed an example of the use of abandoned homes for their new inhabitants who set up a social cooperative. Panellists pointed to the need to redefine "multiculturalism" and give it new meaning.

*What works for counteracting exclusion in rural areas?*

In the working group on small farms, participants wondered how the potential inherent in these holdings and the skills and capacities of those working in them could be exploited. These farms need income diversification so as to achieve it, there is a need for an expert support system, training and know-how transfer, but also access to funding sources for new initiatives. It is still important to improve the definition, measurement and remuneration of public services provided by smallholders for the general community. If we want to preserve traditional ways of farming, we need to find ways and means of financing them.

Small farms can increase their revenue by capturing the greater part of added value through higher levels of processing and control over the sales process. This requires knowledge and also farmers cooperation. For some of the farms the opportunity to increase income is the development of the offer of social services or other forms of non-agricultural economic activity.

Innovative solutions and creative use of new technologies are needed. The concept of "intelligent village" must be carefully analysed and used comprehensively. Technological but also social innovations are needed. It is necessary to break stereotypes and creatively address the challenges faced by European villages. For example, some public services, traditionally provided by the administration, can be provided by small farms. Could it be worthwhile to look for innovative ways to organize the transport operated by the owners of small farms?

An example from the Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship (Poland) was presented, where a system of formal certification of farmers' skills so far unconfirmed has been developed.

*Study visit: examples of poverty prevention projects in rural areas implemented by organizations in the vicinity of Kraków*

A visit organized by the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Krakow and the University of Agriculture in Krakow allowed participants to see two projects implemented by social organizations to counteract social exclusion in rural areas in the vicinity of Krakow.

The first meeting with the Social Cooperative in Raciechowice is a good example of a thriving social enterprise founded by the Raciechowice Commune Office and Voluntary Fire Brigade in Kwapinka village. The main activities of the cooperative include: preparing meals for children



and youth in local schools, selling meals for others, maintaining order in schools and local administration offices in Raciechowice, running a boarding house (organising and receiving study visits); the cooperative provides also catering services. Products come from local farmers, local processors and from local stores. It is also an example of promoting local products and integrating local communities and organizations. The cooperative employs 20 people, produces 400 school lunches a day and feeds 40 adults.

Another social anti-exclusion example, which was introduced by participants of the workshop, was the Social Cooperative "Kuźnia Smaku" (Forge of Taste), which has been operating since 2013. Its main purpose is to promote the rich cultural tradition of the region (traditional food made from vegetables and fruits, straight from the farmer, handicrafts). The cooperative supports local artists and handicraftsmen who offer their unique handmade items through a cooperative, and offer a wide variety of natural gifts to the land and work of their hands, such as local honey, fruits and vegetables from local farmers, or natural, real country bread, straight from the traditional bread oven. The social aspect of the cooperative is realized through cooperation with people who have no strength in the existing labour market and whose talents are not utilised enough. Through cooperatives they are involved in social and economic life.

The Odrolnika ("From the Farmer") Association is an example of innovative entrepreneurship among farmers, as part of the direct sale of organic agricultural products from small and family farms. Promotion local products both among customers and tourists, using the natural and cultural resources of the area is one objective. This has led to the creation of a network of tourist products. The purpose of the study visit was to show how poverty and exclusion can be prevented among smallholder farmers, guided by the principles of sustainable and multifunctional rural development. At the same time there is an example of the process of building mutual trust and the pitfalls that this process is exposed to. The leaders of the group play a decisive role in success.

### *Summary and conclusion of the workshop*

Poverty is relatively more prevalent in rural areas than in large cities. In the Polish countryside, about 10% of the inhabitants live in extreme poverty, while in cities with over 500 thousand inhabitants the figure is at around 1%. A similar situation occurs in many European countries. Traditional mechanisms and ways of ensuring social security for family members and villagers have ceased to function. State support does not always work everywhere. Globalization, the magnetic force that attracts the move to large centres, forces rural areas to face the challenge of depopulation and, consequently, the restriction of services provided to the rest of the population. Village inhabitants are aging and services are rarely



adapted to the needs of this age group. To meet these challenges, knowledge and examples of good practice are needed.

It is worth remembering that poverty is not the only cause of social exclusion. Workshop participants paid a lot of attention to other factors such as age (children and the elderly), inhabitants with disabilities Ethnic minorities are particularly threatened by social exclusion (especially the Roma).

The examples of good practice presented, the study visit and the exchange of opinions allowed for a better understand of the problem and the seeking of ways to solve it. The most effective form of action is prevention – this is also true in the case of poverty and social exclusion.

The problems are serious, the cases of good practice prove that innovative solutions need to be found to deal with old and new challenges. Responses must be tailored to the specific local conditions, regardless of their universality, the proposed solutions to be effective should take into account the local context and the nuanced nature of the site. A broad, open debate on social exclusion in the countryside is needed. For the new programming period after 2020, the European Union should develop better instruments to exploit the potential of European rural areas, which through social exclusion is not tapped.

## **(2) Summary of the Discussion Forum**

The forum was set up in May 2017 and until mid-July it has attracted 57 users (25 women and 32 men) from 10 countries. The participants can open new themes and post their opinions, concerns or ideas for solutions in Polish or in English, in each case the posts are translated into the other language. Over 800 users read the posts.

Key points raised in the discussion correspond to the personal experience of the participants at the very local level, and focus very much on suggesting solutions which can help addressing the deeper causes of poverty and social inclusion, such as:

- education to change the mentality, to help deal with stereotypes which have a very negative impact on the situation of people at risk of exclusion (such as migrants or ex-convicts). The change of mentality should start early on with school education;
- education of farmers so that they can find new sources of income; potential topics include eco-education (in particular organic farming) and agri-tourism. A good example of generating local income was provided from Slovakia: Farm Dine Ticket – the employer gives meal tickets

to employees to use in a restaurant that buys raw materials from local farmers. It also contributes to better diets and improved local self-sufficiency;

- the importance of building trust and integrating the local community as a whole – such a cohesive community can better deal with exclusion. This integration involves joint decision-making, involving inhabitants for instance in taking decisions about the spending of the local (village-level) budget; community action can be very small-scale, step-by-step, starting with what is available locally (e.g. local products which can be the basis of additional income), but it can be very effective in the long term;
- the role of local leaders, people who can animate the community and encourage it to develop sustainable solutions to local problems;
- the LEADER approach and its partnership-based, bottom-up character as well as its focus on innovative solutions at the local level can be a very effective in bringing additional sources of income and getting people out of exclusion;
- a large part of the discussion was related to social economy and its potential to address poverty and exclusion in rural areas. There is a need to build the skills of people who manage social businesses which create sheltered work places for people at risk of exclusion. It is necessary to combine a good understanding of the excluded group we're trying to help with strong management and marketing skills which make it possible for the social business to operate on the market. It is also important to work with local authorities and businesses to encourage socially responsible procurement (e.g. local authorities can contract social enterprises to carry out certain types of municipal services etc.); certain legal provisions may need to be put in place to make this possible. Social enterprises should also develop skills of people at risk of exclusion, so that they can eventually have better chances of employment in the open labour market.

The discussion highlighted the importance of working with local authorities and businesses to encourage socially responsible procurement (e.g. local authorities can contract social enterprises to carry out certain types of municipal services etc.); certain legal provisions may need to be put in place to make this possible (some participants even suggested that public procurement from social enterprises should be mandatory). Social enterprises should also develop skills of people at risk of exclusion, so that they can eventually have better chances of employment in the open labour market. Good practices of well-functioning social businesses exist (for example social cooperatives) and they successfully cooperate with private sector actors; cooperation with public administration is more difficult.

The form of the internet discussion forum turned out to be limiting to potential participants, with the process (including registration, the written form of discussion, the thematic threads, as well as the language barriers) seen as overly burdensome. The forum has, however, allowed for the gathering of valuable experience.

### **(3) National debates**

#### *Hungary*

To facilitate participation in the debate on rural poverty and social inclusion to Hungarian participants who don't speak English, the Hungarian Rural Civic Network has organised a series of virtual and face-to-face discussions involving 34 organisations. The debate has identified a number of issues, including growing territorial disparities, outmigration of skilled people and the resulting concentration of Roma populations in some rural regions; moreover, the educational system tends to preserve and deepen these disparities. A number of solutions based on partnership and stronger involvement of Roma in local governance has been identified, as well as several case studies. The full report of the debate is attached.

#### *Latvia*

In the period 23-31 October the Latvian Rural Forum organised a series of debates (one virtual meeting, five face-to-face with participants). The meetings involved a total of 13 organisations. What seems to have marked the meetings is the realisation that while participants acknowledged that poverty and social exclusion are significant realities in Latvia, they are not brought up among the list of main challenges until prompted by the moderators. Local Action Groups stated the local development strategies do not focus on this issue. Participants were able to describe many actions that are being implemented locally, although they address less poverty (seen as a government responsibility), but rather on social exclusion (in particular of persons with disabilities). The discussions identified issues of mobility, access to services, education and culture, as well as other emerging challenges, such as lack of financial resources and a lack of social links within communities.

#### *Serbia*

Two virtual and one face-to-face debate with input from the Ibar Development Association and Network for Rural Development of Serbia brought together 14 organisations to bring together their views on the reasons for poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Rural areas in Serbia face an unfavourable change in the age structure of the population, the continuous decrease of the active-age population, and the resulting rise in the number of inactive citizens. The workforce in rural areas is less skilled and decreasing, the closure of factories in rural areas as part of the transformation has led to the unemployment rate in small settlements being more

than twice the national average. The limited possibilities for employment youth and women in rural areas results in migration of these groups to urban areas and foreign countries, decreasing the likelihood of a strong knowledge base in the countryside. Participants pointed for the need to increase of services, education and business support in rural areas. Research-based and participatory policy coordination is needed.

#### **(4) Workshop at the European Rural Parliament in Venhorst (NL)**

A workshop was held on the theme of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas as part of the meeting of the European Rural Parliament held in Venhorst (NL) on 20 October 2017. The participants (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; a number of good practices were identified here, including:

- 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).

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 (e.g. for meals delivered to the elderly, sourcing local instead of buying from the city), initiatives to buy local products in the shop (e.g. “fiver Friday”),
- 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.

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.

No specific changes were proposed to the Manifesto, but it was felt that the topic of poverty and social exclusion remains relevant and work on it should be continued.

## **(5) Survey on rural poverty**

A simple survey on rural poverty has been created and is available on the same website as the discussion forum. So far, 43 answers have been received. Preliminary results indicate that:

- 35 survey participants say they are aware of cases of rural poverty and social exclusion in their areas,
- key problems of their areas are: ageing (30 answers), depopulation (26 answers) and finding a job (23 answers),
- the groups at highest risk of exclusion are dysfunctional, pathological families, especially children and young people from such families (21 answers). A serious issue is exclusion of women from the labour market (17 answers) and elderly people living alone (19 answers), while religious and ethnic minorities do not seem to be a major issue.

Many respondents are not familiar with any activities in their area to address poverty and exclusion, or do not know of any organisations that are dealing with these problems.

However, several responses mention solutions already in place, such as activities of the Local Action Groups, social enterprises (e.g. special enterprises which employ people with disabilities) and labour offices (public services in charge of the unemployed).

## **(6) Case studies**

### *Albania*

Puke, Shkodra district

Association of agriculture and Environmental Iballe

The case describes research involving about 100 farmers aimed at improving the specific, autochthonous cultivars / plants / varieties of vines, plums, apples and nuts that would allow the farmers to increase their income. Autochthonous cultures are endangered, some at risk of extinction, the cultivation of traditional vineyards would lead to sustainable development of agriculture.

The study has increased the transferability of knowledge to the farmers, increasing planting with autochthonous varieties, mainly vines. While there is local production for market, there is as yet no brand for this production. There is a need for continuous support to farmers in the value chain from farm to table. The planting of vineyards with autochthonous varieties of grape led to considerable employment. Those involved are mainly elderly as they are more interested in the production stage. A continuation of support is likely to reach other actors in the value chain.

### *Bosnia and Hercegovina*

Jablanica

Citizens' Association "NEŠTO VIŠE" and the Jablanica Union of Agricultural Association

Following the destruction of war, the unemployment rate of youth and women became extremely high, and they continue to form vulnerable groups in the country. This concerns especially those from rural areas, and their families. While they have the resources (land, equipment, workforce), they do not have enough knowledge, capital to invest and links to the market to start agricultural production. The project supported i.a. by the government of the Netherlands provided trainings in agricultural production (specifically: milk production; growing fruit; growing vegetables; varied production profiles), links to the market, financial support and grouping in order to start small family businesses. This project tries to provide knowledge in agribusiness planning, agribusiness production and market access. The project further involved strengthening the local agricultural association.



The project showed that the best results can be achieved when you have inputs from the local authorities and civil society organizations from the "field". This helps ensure that your action will help to the best representatives of your target group. It was also found that most of the youth and women from rural areas need just small impulse which can help them to start commercial (market need) production. That will lead them to the serious annual production over the years, and it will help them to be financial sustainable in their local communities. The model has already been transferred to different local communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reaching and 160 unemployed young persons and women in addition to the 60 addressed by this project.

### *Hungary*

Bercel, Nógrád county

Home in Europe Association (NGO) together with WWOOF Hungary

The case (Eco Small Community in "Bercelszeg") is exceptional in that it is based on a private initiative started in 2015 to allow young families to start a new life in Nógrád county, a disadvantaged and economically poor region of Hungary rich in natural resources. The wealthy owners of a castle initiated the project, buying up abandoned houses in the surrounding countryside and donated them to young persons from cities wishing to learn how to live in the country and to teach their children this way. Three children have been born into the community since 2015.

The principal aims of the association are in environment rehabilitation of the countryside; living and promoting an environmentally conscious, alternative, traditionally sustainable lifestyle; and building a community protecting its cultural and traditional legacy, such as baking bread in a common furnace, or running community events. The association runs handicraft workshops, revives village traditions, encourages the growing of organic fruit and vegetables in back-yards, as well as communal food processing in a community kitchen. While there is still a gulf with the autochthonous population, the project is bringing young people to a rural area suffering from depopulation, and the local population is helping in the use traditional knowledge of self-sustaining through the winter months.

### *Latvia*

Ziemepe, Paviļosta

Association „Liepāja Society of the Blind"

About 5 - 10% of the total population in Latvia are persons with disabilities who have difficulty in fully exercising their right to freedom of movement, receipt of services, information, etc. When people reach their retirement age, irreversible physiological changes

occur due to their age, various illnesses, occupational diseases, mobility and functionality – they also face limits to their mobility, although most people of retirement age are not categorized as having disabilities. The project "Universal design" applies to both groups as it includes support devices for people with disabilities, where appropriate. Working in line with the community-driven local development strategy, the project aims to improve accessibility of rural infrastructure that supports improvement of quality of life – providing access to services, products and information to all, including those with functional disorders. A case study of a place organised according "Universal Design" has been carried out in a rural area, where a garden with equipment was created. This physical infrastructure is the setting for work with the target group. Opinions and suggestions on decisions affecting the target group was open to the wider population and decision makers.

### *Poland*

Małachowo Szemborowice, Witkowo district  
Światowid Association

An agricultural processing incubator has been established by this association to make use of the opportunities of considerable local production of fruit and vegetables; the proximity of two urban centres (Gniezno and Poznań); and the growing interest in healthy, locally produced food. The incubator of 114 square metres has both the function of processing fruit and vegetables, as well as providing a venue for catering. It processes five tonnes of food annually, employs five staff, and is used both by the LAG and by the Association's social cooperative specialising in processing and selling local produce. The incubator also allows for educational work with local children and youth, such as through the running of a herb garden.

While the incubator can be used by local farmers directly, it is also used by a social cooperative established by the Association – Domowe Przysmaki (Home Delicacies). The cooperative is one of three set up by the LAG and by its members (the other two run a primary school and provide social care services respectively), and together they employ 18 persons. The incubator aims to increase the area's social capital and support disadvantaged inhabitants, identified as being young persons up to the age of 35, women, and inhabitants over 50 years old. The incubator assists local farmers through the professionalisation of their processing and sales skills; develops the local economy based on the region's food processing potential; builds consumer know-how in terms of the qualitative advantages of local produce; provides farmers, agri-tourism and rural women's societies with a place to process foods; provides a proving ground where entrepreneurs can test their ideas; and provides a place where social economy businesses can be established.

### *Serbia*

Leskovac

Initiative for Social Empowerment (ISE) LLC, Educational Centre (EDC)

ISE LLC has been set up to create a protected environment attractive for start-ups that offers a wide range of services from virtual or physical business incubation to assistance to sale or institutional connection or mediation. The initiative aims to provide counselling and support tailored specifically to a business idea. The project is implemented with the Technological & Food processing Park – Leskovac and is EDC's its first self-funded project. One of the businesses receiving support is Chrono, which involves socially vulnerable persons, local suppliers, and the supply chain. The product is ten types of ready-made mixtures for preparing healthy, unleavened bread.

Chrono's production process is designed to largely consist of manual labour so as to engage people belonging to the marginalized group and enable them a certain autonomy through earning a profit. Through cooperation with the local organization „Association of Dystrophy" from Leskovac, we hired a person to make bread bags, as well as 2 people working on the package itself. In addition, we have enabled the employment of 2 persons aged 50+ years, and of the total number of employees 90% are women.

*Slovenia*

Nationwide project

Slovenian association of friends of youth Ljubljana Moste-Polje

In 2010 in Slovenia, of the 366,000 persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 15.2% were children. In order to tackle this problem, the Sponsorship (Botrstvo) project concentrates on providing financial help to children and youth from socially disadvantaged families from all over Slovenia to cover the costs of adequate nutrition, school or extracurricular activities, transport to school, medical equipment, healthy development and other expenses. The funds are raised in two different ways, with monthly support in sum of at least 30 euros by "godparents" and through one-off donations by individuals and companies or with the help of different events such as public auctions of items previously owned by famous athletes.

To date the project has generated donation of over nine million euro. The project has established itself as a trustworthy intermediary that allows individuals to provide assistance to specific individuals in need.

## **(7) Concluding reflections**

The issue of poverty and social exclusion is key to the reality lived by inhabitants of rural areas throughout Europe. The national discussions, the internet forum as well as the international workshop held on 25-27 June in Krakow, Poland, clearly demonstrate the similarities of the issues facing the disadvantaged in Europe's rural areas. While there are certain differences related to the greater or smaller proportion of minority groups (such as the Roma) in different regions, the themes recurring through the discussions and descriptions indicate that poverty and social exclusion are linked to:

- small-scale farms with little or no economic future;
- discriminated population groups (minorities);
- certain population groups more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion (the elderly, young persons and women);
- depopulation and the outmigration of the better educated and more entrepreneurial, especially young people.

With the exception of participants from Serbia, the discussions on the theme of poverty and social exclusion rarely included mention of the theme of refugees and migrants – this is not an issue perceived in rural areas of the countries involved in the project.

While the majority of the cases presented involve public funding, and many of the cases are based around the growing, processing and distribution of agricultural produce and products, the case in Hungary (Bercel) is worth highlighting, both in its ambition to repopulate a deprived rural area with young families, and as a privately funded approach. The reversal of the decline in rural areas very often relies on private initiative, the risk-taking of local entrepreneurs, as well as the existence of a community.

Tom Jones, Vice-President of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and Member of the European Economic and Social Committee – where he is rapporteur for the report *Villages and small towns as catalysts for rural development, challenges and opportunities* – attended the Krakow workshop. He emphasised the importance of communities, of the inhabitants of small towns and villages and of intermediaries – those with the skill sets necessary to spur economic development – in addressing the poverty of rural areas and to counter the disappearance of services in rural areas, an element of social exclusion. He further emphasised the need to have a partnership between urban and rural areas, to bridge the divide that clearly exists between them.