

ERP Mid-Term Event 2021 - Breakout Group 4 Report

Breakout Group Name: EU Neighbouring Countries - relationships with the EU

Names of Leader, Reporter, Speaker/s

Leader: Petar Gjorgievski - Balkan Rural Development Network

Speaker: Keith Harrison - Action with Communities in Rural Kent, ACRE

Reporter: Evelina Azizaj - Albanian Network for Rural Development

Main issues and lessons identified in presentations and discussion

Participants in the group brought into attention three EU neighbour countries/regions with regard to relationship with EU, namely: UK, Western Balkan and Black Sea. Each of the region has their own countries that offer different national contexts concerning the focus of the workshop, widening the discussion taking into consideration different strategic & operational context in each. There are four countries in the UK – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; six countries in the Western Balkan – Albania, Bosnia & Hercegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia; and Black Sea countries such as Moldova, Ukraine and others.

Scotland - academic interest almost immediately (e.g. SRA & Newcastle University 10 Questions for Rural Policy in Scotland 2017) to recent work on a successor to Erasmus outside of the UK Turing programme. Good track record of LEADER cooperation, ERP etc. - and has its own Rural Parliament which gains government backing.

NI - major political and cultural sensitivities here. Hoping that negotiations on the NI protocol are successful in coming weeks, and there's appreciation of Maros Sefcovic's announcement on this. NI still in the single market for goods. People going about their business on either side of the border (remember, some businesses have their land officially on both sides!) whilst Civil Society structures for cross-border work are still working.

Wales - International Learning Exchange Programme announced in March 2021 (£65million) + commitment to creating a Young People's Twinning Fund has been made also. There is also an International & Cross Border Working Group, facilitated by the Welsh Government, exploring opportunities in current Interreg & Horizon programmes.

England. LEADER structure, which had not used cooperation measures in the 14-20 programme, closing down. LEPs - which took a portion of EAFRD equivalent to LEADER - facing an uncertain future. ACRE Network - some tradition of cooperation here, mostly using non EAFRD funds (although Cambridgeshire is a notable exception) and seeking to continue to do so on a county-by-county basis. Very piecemeal approach, may use donations, charitable trusts or seek to utilise reserves; main interest is in knowledge-transfer and inspiring community-led action that solves spatial challenges but might not be profitable in its own right. Protected landscapes sometimes propped up by EU funds; Government review on these still unresponded to.

If there is a tale here it is that there is still an appetite / need for cooperation at community and business-level. There's an understanding academically too, whilst in Scotland and Wales there is government drive. Many rural development actors in the UK are open to ideas and opportunity with rural bodies across the EU, despite current UK Government positioning, and that our hearts, ears and arms will remain open long into the future.

The issue is how to repair the damage, how to keep working to friends, within EU and outside, with whom we have a common interest. This requires to be innovative how we can resource that cooperation.

Black Sea region is a new neighbor region where actually are happening important things. It's important to stress that compare to WB counties, where there are civic initiatives, structures and cooperation spirit, Black Sea countries do not demonstrate civic cooperation spirit. The countries in this region are so different, and this is maybe a reason why we do not have a speaker in this groups who is able to present holistically the current situation. We have to highlight the necessities of civic cooperation and networking in these countries.

Some evident issues regarding rural development in Western Balkan: there is large social and economic gap between urban and rural areas; the existing resources in the rural areas are social capital that needs a significant investment in infrastructure, education, environment, etc. but also it needs investing in the capacities of local communities, in particular youth and women. WB countries are supported by EU through IPARD which is the only connection, providing support and Leader as a prerequisite for rural development. However the expected benefits that is supposed to have are not enough to revitalize rural areas. Rural Development in WB is one of major driver forces that might accelerate the EU accession process.

WB countries are stagnated in the enlargement process, and mistrust from EU side is continuing and is causing a deadlock in the accession process. Civil society sector representatives and of other institutions want to change the mistrust, as a region we have values that bring us closer than divide us. Rural areas are ready to respond to these challenges, but we need fast entry to the EU. CSOs should use the opportunity of this event and 5th ERP to urge EU to give support to government, to make necessary reform and support accession process. Balkan Rural Development Network as a civil society platform can influence this process, we need to urge to provide effective support to support CSOs sector.

Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) is a country far from IPARD, Leader and everything that is good for rural population. BiH doesn't have IPARD, LEADER. It seems that rural development in BiH is not of high interest for those countries that influence EU processes. In the 2021 Agriculture Policy Forum, stakeholders urge EU to find a way, even though BiH doesn't have IPARD, to find a way to support these processes, especially rural development, Leader, etc. We shouldn't leave BiH outside, or Kosovo as a country because it doesn't have IPARD. Rural communities do not need to suffer from politics, these policies and instrument should be available.

Any ideas and case-study examples relating to the theme (including a name and email for the person proposing if possible)

The LEADER experience in Western Balkan countries, England and Scotland

- There are many reasons why LEADER has not provided full benefit in WB: indeed, the introduction of LEADER came from CSOs, that have influenced to include such measure in the RD program, and actually in the IPARD program. One of the major reason for the slow process of LEADER implementation is the accreditation process, which takes time. On the other side is the local level. The majority of local initiatives and creation of LAGs comes from international community, which is not a sustainable process, as there is no continuation of support from the national government. Even though there are positive examples and Ministries of WB countries are aware of the situation, LEADER approach sits in their documents. BRDN and national networks in WB countries are pushing this process. LEADER can bring a lot of improvements in local communities, its transparent, involves local actors and improves the local democracy. This should be one of the key issue we have to address in recommendation of the breakout group.

LEADER approach is a program of important even for WB, even though in UK it is finishing, WB is starting. Currently WB countries are lagging behind, and LEADER approach implementation is in various

stage of application in various WB countries. Can we draw some good and positive, even bad example from UK experience in terms of LEADER implementation, local democracy and community involvement?

- In England there is a legacy or some excellent LEADER approach from previous EU program periods. 2006 LEADER program invested in local projects often in supply chain, community or businesses coming together. Individual businesses were not supported. That area there were LAGs working on special landscape area that economy was changing, so they had a cohesion to them. When the 2007-2014 program came in the Gov of England changed the approach and just make the ground fund for businesses, it was not LEADER in many ways.
Because of people dealt with hills and flood plains or military use of land that affect settlement patterns regarding transportation, access to services. At the same time these areas have a special quality for tourism, you have to keep skills, to develop new skills and the LDS of the LAGs in that area was to make those area work, but also generating new opportunities.
The first session presentations (of Mid-term event) on new opportunities (from DG AGRI, OECD etc.) presented the notion of just transition, when everyone is involved. There was a program in England, on wetland area, based on local food, nutrition and new farming technics for climate change. And in these areas where we could genuine barrier opportunity or economy form by local geography, LEADER works truly well.
In terms of participation, in recent years LAGs have not taken part in cooperation projects, before we did, taking part in many of them across Europe. Mentioning here the contribution of Michael Dower with ECOVAST. In Scotland and Wales, LEADER this still this well. So we had bad examples, however we like to see things restart again.
- While in Scotland LEADER was extremely successful. The LEADER program is not easy to access due to procedures, quite lengthy application process, however there is quite a lot of support available for community groups. This is one of the strengths, which I recommend to you to create groups that can support a community to access funds. People on the ground know what they need, but going through the official steps of applying can be a real challenge. The Gov of Scotland is keen on LEADER and provides support for the implementation. There are also programs that aim to fill the gap left by the LEADER program. There are rural development programs, available funding, etc.

Messages for the 5th ERP 2022

- 1. Many rural development actors in the UK are open to ideas and opportunity with rural bodies across the EU, despite current UK Government positioning, and that our hearts, ears and arms will remain open long into the future. There is an appetite for cooperation at community and business level, and an understanding of this in academic institutions / universities too. In this regard, it is essential to find ways to finances and adequately resource this cooperation;*
- 2. Considering the long lasting accession process of Western Balkan countries to EU, even though it may be related to political issues, rural areas should not suffer from wrong politics, they are ready to embark in the challenging but beneficial process of EU integration. This is demonstrated by the active civic spirit in the region animated by civic structures such as Balkan Rural Network Development and national networks for rural development in Balkan countries that support sustainable rural development. We, urge the EU to accelerate the reform processes in these countries;*
- 3. We share the belief that the LEADER approach is a vital instrument for sustainable development of rural communities, a booster of social and economic development and social inclusion. It's a European instrument that brings rural areas in WB region closer to EU. We ask EU to further support continuing LEADER in UK and accelerate the LEADER implementation in WB countries;*
- 4. CSOs and CSO's networks play a key role in the EU integration reform process of accession countries. There is an urgency to support the strengthening of civil society and civic spirits and initiatives to make rural areas in the Black Sea region benefit from the EU positive models and good practices in sustainable social and economic development. Structures such as rural and other networks could support in this regards.*