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# Declaration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Slovenian rural parliament

### DISCUSSION PROPOSAL

#### INTRODUCTION

The participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Slovenian rural parliament come from all parts of Slovenia. We represent different interests of rural areas, deriving from organisations that are a part of the non-governmental sector, the governmental sector and the private economic sector. We joined with the intent of engaging in a balanced dialogue to discuss the issues and opportunities pertaining to rural areas and to help improve the conditions for living and working in the mentioned areas by exchanging our opinions and standpoints.

Numerous current documents determine the visions, aims, measures and activities in which we invest with the purpose of developing the rural areas. In the declaration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Slovenian rural parliament we do not repeat what had already been said and written. On the basis of previous deliberations and discussions within ten workgroups we offer our partners who care for the countryside suggestions with which we want to influence all those who have the power to change the current state for the better.

#### KNOWN PROBLEMS IN RURAL AREAS

We determined that rural areas are pestered with a whole array of issues, which we want to solve or at least diminish. A part of the problem is also the neglect of interests of rural areas in terms of different policies. It is a systematic deficiency which can only be mitigated but not eradicated by the rural parliaments. The biggest issues, as determined by the rural population and organisations with seats in rural areas are: depopulation, lack of employment opportunities, weakness of local economies, low profitability of the majority of agricultural activities, abandoning of areas with less favourable farming conditions, reduction of farming areas, exaggerated urbanisation of rural areas, exclusion of some areas and local population, ceasing of a whole array of services in rural areas, and the ever growing cases of poverty and exclusion of certain groups of population.

With the relocation of several administrative and economic functions from smaller towns to bigger urban centres and the concentration of services in city municipalities and university centres, the already weak rural areas are becoming even weaker, which contributes negatively to unfavourable migration flows. The supportive environment in rural areas fights the economic battle for existence, which makes it hard to meet the population's increasing demand for help. Smallness is becoming a larger stigma in small Slovenia than in more developed and larger European countries.

Rural areas are not able to keep up with the fast development pace of propulsive economic activities which employ the workforce. Job positions are moved from rural areas to cities, what is especially acknowledged by the migrating young population, resulting in accelerated ageing of the population structure in rural areas.

The aimless exploitation of natural resources and non-systematic land use decrease the vitality of rural areas and diminish the capabilities of the country as a whole. An excessive environmental burdening has for a long time now not only been in the domain of urban areas alone. Not enough consideration has been put into focusing the society's use of renewable sources of energy instead of fossil fuels, which can negatively impact the quality of life in rural areas, even though the process of restructuring is necessary and inevitable. The renewable sources of energy are also limited, thus their use should be well thought through.

The need to raise the level of competitiveness in all fields greatly affects also the rural areas. Especially in the field of agriculture, we have been witnessing a long-term and recently accelerated concentrating of agricultural activities on a smaller number of bigger agricultural holdings. In this process the traditional agricultural structure with a large number of smaller farms, which in the past contributed to a relatively good preservation of Slovenian rural areas, is lost. Bigger agricultural holdings employ less people per surface unit than smaller farms.

The insufficient local infrastructure is a constant, right at the top of the hierarchy of rural area issues. Local communities depend on support when setting up the local infrastructure, but have very a limited influence on the construction and maintaining of the mentioned infrastructure. The water supply and the sewer system in rural areas have still not been dealt with sufficiently, although there are some exceptions to this fact, especially on the outskirts of urban centres. Along with both, the broadband communication network and the transportation network are a domain which should connect every Slovenian village with the world as fast and safe as possible.

## **VISION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS**

The vision for the development of rural areas and the aims for realising it derive from the needs of the population and local communities. The increase in issues results in increasing needs, which grow even more complex with the fast cultural development of the civilisation. The differences between the lifestyles of people in urban and rural areas are decreasing, meaning that the rural population wants to adopt all the advantages of urban living. At the same time, a growing number of people living in cities decide to move to the countryside. The line between the urban and the rural is diminishing, while on the other hand the fast economic development of the urban part of Slovenia, Europe and the globalised world results in the countryside becoming more of a place where people spend their free time and relax. Slovenians want to live and work in the countryside, without being deprived in terms of a quality life standard.

The demands for a growing share of self-supply in the food and energy sectors significantly influence the employment opportunities in the rural areas. By directing young people towards more propulsive occupations, the structural unemployment can quickly become a great opportunity of rural areas. Adapting to new demands and opportunities is vital on both ends of the chain, among the producers as well as among the consumers. By conscious redirecting of individuals and society as a whole, we can achieve fast and big changes, regardless of the smallness of Slovenia. The need for health and a healthy living environment also offers a lot of opportunities in the rural areas, since health is usually connected with a healthy lifestyle and a healthy environment. Living close to nature and respecting its rich diversity has become a maxim of the modern world and a big opportunity for rural areas. Among other things, the need for safety is connected to greater social inclusion and preservation of welfare for the entire rural population.

Slovenian rural areas contribute the most to the general image of Slovenia, since the rural population in different ways helps to maintain and nurture the rich and varied cultural landscape. Since the

majority of Slovenians live in rural areas, the care for vital rural areas should become a permanent task of all policies. The responsibility for vital rural areas is equally in the hands of the public, the private and the non-governmental sectors, each of which needs to fulfil its part of the mission towards the common good. Slovenian rural areas will be vital only if the basic conditions for a quality life of families and rural local communities are ensured. The sense of belonging to a local community represents the basis on which we can build a broader community without any unnecessary segregations and exclusions due to different values, which are legitimate but not always constructive elements of state building.

Vital rural areas should become the goal of horizontally harmonised policies which need to establish the necessary conditions for new job positions in rural areas, provide significant residential capacities for young people and contribute to reviving the life in rural areas by hosting cultural events more often. When talking about taking care of rural areas, we often neglect the exceptional role of small towns which represent relatively good support with their service to the dispersed population. The vitality of small towns is of key importance in preserving the evenly populated pattern which represents a huge advantage in the ruthless battle for a higher life standard.

We cannot imagine vital rural areas without a great diversification of local economies and the diversification of farm income, since job positions are the variable which represents the basis for living in rural areas. Apart from the increase in the offer of local products, the majority of employment opportunities in rural areas are connected to redirecting extensive agricultural activities towards more intensive activities and eco-farming. The pylons of supplementary activities on farms, the most propulsive activity being tourism, face unnecessary and hindering administrative obstacles, especially when compared to more developed countries. A more diverse tourism offer in rural areas provides more employment opportunities for young people.

## **SUGGESTED MEASURES AND ACTIVITIES**

The participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Slovenian rural parliament are bound to:

- creating new job positions while increasing the level of self-supply in food and energy sectors;
- creating short supply chains, contributing to the increase in quality and higher food safety;
- preserving the intergenerational connecting in rural areas, deriving from a family as the basic cell for the upbringing and education of the young generation, while respecting and caring for the elders and the helpless;
- preserving the cultural dialogue in dividing the accessibility to private and public property, while respecting property rights and the public interest;
- sustainably preserving the values and traditions of the rural population, which have preserved the balance between mankind and nature for many centuries;
- preserving natural resources and the diversity of nature in long-term favour of the broader community;
- taking care of the lively throb of cultural life in rural areas;
- enriching the tourism offer in rural areas by encouraging new investments and innovative approaches in its creation and promotion;
- voting against excessive building on agricultural land on the one hand, and on the other contribute to preventing the over-growing of agricultural land;
- contributing to faster employment in rural areas by establishing new connections in local communities on the basis of the rich tradition of Slovenian cooperativism;

- contributing to higher competitiveness of the Slovenian society by greater inclusion in life-long education and the general increase in occupational competences;
- contributing to general welfare by creating such trademarks that will contribute to the economic welfare and the protection of natural resources.

We demand an increase in the quality of life in rural areas by:

- improving the accessibility to services in rural areas, especially by preventing the move of urgent health services to secluded urban centres;
- preserving smaller schools and kindergartens in secluded areas with dispersed and rare population by adapting the accepted standards in the selected areas;
- cancelling protectionist measures of attracting big merchant tycoons which cause the dispersed small shop-owners to stop with their activity in villages and smaller towns;
- enabling smaller organisations and individuals from the private and the non-governmental sectors to have equal access to European funds, although they are lacking in their finances and human resource department, which is burdened by administrative obstacles and demands the pre-financing of projects;
- providing an effective system of supportive organisations, from consulting services to development agencies and local action groups;
- stopping the process of abandoning farming on lands with worse conditions for farming and abandoning small farms, and slowing down the trend of concentrating agricultural activities, which is suitably accelerated by market currents;
- stopping the construction of transport connections on the most fertile lands, when it could be planned on less fertile lands;
- sustainably exploiting natural resources and lowering the carbon footprint of the country as a whole and not only as the burden of rural areas. Only by enforcing a balanced network of renewable energy resources we can enter the world of developed and environment-friendly countries.

Equal partnership between the state and the local communities is still in the early stages, since the relationship of the state towards the local communities is patronising and dualistic in the sense of a hierarchic relationship and dependence. An equal partnership is based on trust, something lacking in this day and age. Policies, based on mistrust, are unkind towards the local population and do not contribute to the quality of life. The mistrust is seen mainly in excessive and unnecessary administrative obstacles which we seemingly cannot eradicate. Blaming the European Union is not justified, since we should be able to conquer the mentioned task ourselves and let the European Union follow example of small Slovenia at least in this instance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Positive changes can be achieved only by including the rural population and those groups which affect the life and work in rural areas the most into decision-making. The inclusion of the local population and the acknowledgement of their initiative according to the bottom-top principle is key. Programmes, which comply with such initiative, e.g. the Local Development (Lokalni razvoj) programme, led by the community (CLLD), need to be followed also by others. The partner relationship of all actors included in the development of rural areas needs to become the predominant manner of decision-making about the directives and the dynamics of future

development of rural areas. The rural parliament represents a modest, yet important contribution towards building equal partnerships on the state level, thus this form of participatory democracy will be maintained by organising rural parliaments at least every second year. The organisation of rural parliaments is based on equal partner relationships of the public, private and non-governmental sectors and should sustainably encourage all the participants towards an active state building. The access to the inclusion in the partnership discussion needs to remain open for all the initiatives, organisations and individuals who are working towards the common good.

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