

Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Grenzregionen (AGEG)  
Asociación de Regiones Fronterizas Europeas (ARFE)  
Association des régions frontalières européennes (ARFE)  
Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)  
Comunità di lavoro delle regioni europee di confine (AGEG)  
Europæiske grænseregioners Arbejdsfællesskab (AGEG)  
Werkgemeinschaft van Europese grensgebieden (WVEG)  
Associação das Regiões Fronteiriças Europeias (ARFE)  
Σύνδεσμος Ευρωπαϊκών Συνοριακών Περιφερειών (ΣΕΣΠ)  
Stowarzyszenie Europejskich Regionów Granicznych (SERG)

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## **AEBR Political Forum**

### **RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND BORDER REGIONS**

- Basic Document -

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## **1. Background and political framework**

Europe's regions and local communities face some major challenges over the coming years, including:

- constantly changing conditions due to economic and political globalisation;
- accelerating EU integration;
- the effects of EU enlargement on the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU and increasing interdependence between the EU and its neighbours;
- more territorial concentration of economic activities;
- the effects of demographic change and migration on the labour market and public utilities;
- the effect of climate change, rising energy costs and the role of environmental potentials;
- new EU policies for the period 2007-2013.

## **2. Equal living conditions remain a key aim**

Despite the political discussions on the challenges posed by European integration and globalisation, the Lisbon Strategy and a reorientation of land-use and regional policy, there is no convincing reason for playing off the economic goals of growth and competitiveness against the core socio-political aim of creating **"equal living conditions"**. Equal living conditions, including in regional areas and border regions, remain a key socio-political objective:

- "Equal living conditions" do not mean "identical living conditions" in the sense of levelling down or reducing to a lowest common denominator. They are a political guideline for exploiting in the most effective way possible the different potentials and possibilities offered by all regions and their inhabitants, in all their diversity.
- It is in the political, economic and social interest of the EU and its Member States to foster the new principle of territorial cohesion, alongside that of economic and social cohesion.
- Only by preventing extreme geographical variations (at both national and European level) can EU integration be advanced, serious conflicts avoided and the legitimate interests of people in disadvantaged regions taken into account.
- If we are to survive the challenges of global competition, it is not enough - given the decline in financial resources available - to support only structurally strong national and regional centres, which are in any case showing positive

development, at the expense of structurally weak, rural, peripheral areas, many of which are located in border regions.

- Development trends show that economic growth and prosperity are not determined by degree of concentration alone; in fact, as many prosperous rural areas (cf. ESDP, Territorial Agenda) demonstrate, rurally structured and peripheral areas make significant contributions to growth and employment and hence to economic prosperity.
- Equality and sustainability are therefore not mutually exclusive where the development of rural areas and border regions are concerned.

**Hence, "equal living conditions" should be interpreted rather in terms of equality of opportunity, diversity, competition, concentration and management of shrinking processes.**

### **3. *Special nature of rural border areas***

Border regions are particularly affected by all these territorial trends and challenges.

There are a number of reasons for this, including:

- their location on the periphery of their country, sometimes also of Europe;
- their technical infrastructure, which was late in developing or has yet to develop;
- the danger that trans-European networks will simply turn these areas into transit zones, or leave them completely cut off;
- the threat to rural border areas from emigration (particularly the younger generation) and an ageing population;
- the social and societal erosion of small towns/villages;
- the lack of jobs and public utilities;
- consequently, an increasingly rapid erosion of the role of established power structures and increasing loss of local control;
- cross-border environmental and climatic effects;
- rising energy prices (in rural border areas the car is often the most important, sometimes the only, means of transport available);
- the effects of EU expansion (former external borders becoming internal borders, borders between new Member States becoming internal borders and new external borders being created).

#### **4. Development goals for rural areas, particularly those located in border regions**

"Territorial cohesion" is about more than economic and social cohesion. It concerns the whole territory of the EU, in particular **all** border regions, with the poorest areas meriting priority attention. For this reason, the Territorial Agenda is right to stress that **all endogenous potentials** (metropolitan regions, agglomerations, medium-sized towns) should be exploited and a new understanding of "territorial governance" and cooperation is needed, as is mutual consideration of local, regional, national and European policies.

Rural regions occupy over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the EU's total surface area, border regions over  $\frac{1}{3}$ . Rural regions and border regions together are therefore of crucial importance to the lives of all citizens. In view of this, it is vital to preserve and further develop the wealth and diversity of rural areas, and of border areas in particular. The aims are to:

- halt the decline of these areas, stem the population loss and improve living conditions;
- counter imbalanced geographical concentration in metropolitan regions and agglomerations by means of polycentric development, in particular by strengthening medium-sized centres;
- exploit territorial potentials (including regional diversity) more effectively to foster growth and employment;
- take account of the effects of EU expansion and of relations on the EU's external borders (border areas are very often rural);
- meet the challenges posed by climate change, energy and raw material supply as well as the problems facing the labour market due to the ageing population and migration;
- combine economic, cultural, social and infrastructure potentials on both sides of borders (creating a critical mass to make measures, investments, projects, etc. worthwhile);
- avoid ruinous regional and/or local competition at national and cross-border level. Instead of this, joint cross-border models should be developed, local authority and regional plans harmonised at national and cross-border level and joint infrastructures operated;
- create sufficient job opportunities, this being one of the key prerequisites for equal living conditions in rural border areas;
- ensure adequate public utility provision with appropriate facilities, another key factor in ensuring equal living conditions. Related to this is the ability of medium-sized and smaller centres to function, something that depends very

much on sufficient population levels (demographic development) in the surrounding area of influence and on proper accessibility, particularly in thinly populated rural regions;

*Specifically related to agricultural policy:*

- pursue an overall strategy for the sustainable development of rural space, not only in the form of agricultural subsidies but also by strengthening the third pillar of the agricultural policy from 2007, namely rural development;
- move from the rather production-oriented mentality that has characterised the agricultural policy hitherto towards a process of policy and economic change, which takes into account special economic, cultural and territorial conditions and thereby helps to protect the natural space, rural traditions and natural heritage;
- move towards a multifunctional agriculture, which makes a significant contribution to environmental protection and rural development. The goals to be achieved must be set by local and regional authorities, since they are most in touch with local conditions in rural areas, particularly in border regions;
- devise a new rural development model based on cohesion, agricultural multifunctionality and competitiveness, which takes account of the diversity of regions, preserves the wealth and diversity of rural areas and exploits the regional potentials of rural spaces.

## **5. Action areas and measures**

### **5.1. Action areas**

We need to take the future into our own hands and develop active cross-border cooperation in all areas. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including:

- regional cross-border models involving real targets, practical principles, action areas and projects, in areas such as the economy, innovation and research, social infrastructure, technical infrastructure, culture and tourism (and in other fields too, depending on the regions concerned);
- cooperation between political, administrative and economic players and non-governmental organisations: such cooperation harbours great creative potential;
- municipal and regional associations, in which the strongest players bear the greatest responsibility (advantage: enables potentials to be pooled, disadvantage: risk of loss of identity);

- creating "regional clusters" in peripheral rural areas based on the regional diversity of these areas (e.g. sport/wellness/health; national parks/nature reserves and the environment; renewable resources/alternative energy generation; innovation and research centres through cross-border cooperation).

## **5.2. European and national measures**

In line with the ESDP and the Territorial Agenda, the Member States and the EU must be required to:

- develop cross-border spatial planning models and plans and factor these into national spatial development and sectoral planning processes;
- ensure regular cross-border harmonisation of all spatially-related plans and measures;
- compile joint, cross-border regional and (where useful) land-use plans, this being the most far-reaching form of cross-border spatial development policy;
- assess, during the mid-term review of the programme period 2007-2013, whether adequate resources are available to enable cross-border and transnational cooperation to be stepped up even further (as required by the Territorial Agenda);
- continue the dialogue with European regional organisations on the Territorial Agenda, which was begun at the AEBR annual conference in Pamplona on 24 November 2006: such a dialogue is key to the further development of this important document;
- take cross-border spatial development plans (which already exist in many cross-border regions) into consideration in national spatial development plans with the aim of implementing truly regional-specific cross-border planning;
- ensure that cross-border cooperation structures at regional and local level are regularly involved in these planning processes;
- transfer tasks to these cross-border cooperation structures (powers remain with the respective national bodies);
- enable cross-border environmental and risk management, e.g. joint water supply and sewage disposal, joint water management along rivers, cross-border disaster management and rescue services.

## **5.3. Regional and local measures**

Rural regions, in particular thinly populated border areas with major structural problems, require completely different measures from urban or suburban areas. The

main challenge is to actively support and shape inevitable structural change in rural areas and border regions and so curb a potential downward spiral within these regions. This can be done by:

- exploiting endogenous national and cross-border potentials in a consistent way;
- strengthening a number of key centres within rural areas;
- developing new forms of public-private cooperation;
- using the decreasing financial resources available a) to bring about the necessary concentration and b) to distribute tasks sensibly between regional and local authorities.
- The key concern must be to ensure strong regions on both sides of borders (i.e. economic borders rather than administrative and national ones).
- Thinking in terms of "concentration, complementarity, competitiveness and the creation of a critical mass" is just as important as thinking in terms of "knowledge, expertise and finances" (e.g. public-private cooperation or cooperation between knowledge institutions/economic bodies, specialised training institutions and SMEs).
- Moving in this direction will lead to reciprocal strengthening across borders. Good examples of this are cross-border "research landscapes" and "life sciences regions".

The following practical measures could be taken:

- Strengthening new forms of concentration, especially in thinly populated border areas, for example by redefining centres (including cross-border) and minimum supply standards:
  - Existing population concentrations around medium-sized and small towns should be strengthened, so that these towns can serve both to encourage development and offset inevitable emigration and concentration processes, thereby countering the insidious processes of wide-scale population loss and passive restructuring.
  - Efforts must be made to preserve educational and social institutions by developing innovative and creative public utility solutions.
  - The effects of demographic change in thinly populated rural areas/border regions should be taken into account in the development of transport infrastructure (especially public transport), the housing market (older population) and tourism (declining population, older population).

- A certified status could be awarded to important urban regions (urban networks), and even to European cross-border metropolitan regions in border areas.
- There should be regional and local cooperation in the cross-border areas of influence of large centres and in border towns/cities.
- Action areas for spatial planning policy in border areas should be examined.
- Economic development and education are critical factors in the development of rural border areas and the exploitation of their endogenous potentials. Measures here include:
  - diversifying sectoral structures in good time (the effects of demographic change only manifest themselves in the medium term);
  - examining the possibilities of immigration in areas where skilled workers are lacking;
  - adapting training structures to older people;
  - gearing education network planning to future needs: likewise with cooperation between local authorities and schools (e.g. classes covering more than one school year or boarding schools as alternatives to long-distance daily school transport);
  - examining the possibilities of joint, cross-border educational establishments with regional scope (e.g. vocational colleges, regional branches of universities, specialist institutions);
  - implementing cross-border public and private service provision;
  - organising cross-border labour markets.
- Adequate and accessible services are a critical factor in preventing population loss:
  - In terms of health care, the possibilities of telemedicine in rural areas and mobile services in specialist healthcare fields should be exploited.
  - In terms of public utilities, such as food and other daily consumer goods and services (medicine, post, etc.), certain types of service should be offered at a single shop, joint ordering services set up and mobile sales possibilities created.
- Maintaining good transport links and accessibility is key to the future of rural/border regions:
  - The priority should be to maintain existing transport infrastructures rather than building new ones.
  - Non-infrastructure possibilities should be further exploited.

- Local public transport provision should be secured and adapted where necessary (e.g. taxi-buses and taxis, community buses, etc.).
- The mobility and accessibility needs of older citizens should be taken into account.
- Active management of the housing market has an increasingly important role to play in keeping people in these areas and bringing new people in. In view of this, measures must be implemented that take account of the ageing of the population and of lifestyle diversity, for example:
  - providing enough housing for singles and couples;
  - modernising housing blocks, which have a role to play in social cohesion;
  - meeting the growing demand for housing for older people;
  - building attractive mixed housing, in which young and older people can live with and side by side with one another.
- Standards in the fields of technical supply and disposal in peripheral rural areas should be examined (should all small settlements be connected to a central sewage treatment plant or are small treatment plants environmentally viable?).
- In general, it must be accepted that public utility standards in thinly populated areas will differ from those in urban areas.