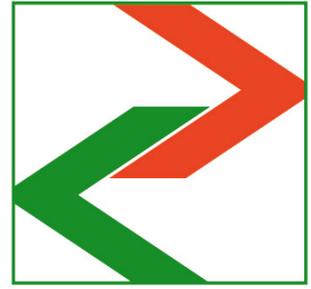


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INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS IN CROSS-BORDER RURAL AREAS

***Conclusions
of the Annual Conference of AEBR
on 13/14 September 2007 in Lappeenranta,
Region of South Karelia (Finland)***

1. **Introduction**

The reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2003 and 2004 represent a major step forward in improving the competitiveness and sustainable development of farming activity in the EU. They set the framework for future reforms and also for new actions enhancing the development of rural areas.

Moreover, the Community's Strategic Guidelines for rural development lay down that the synergy between structural, employment and rural development policies needs to be encouraged. Member states should ensure complementarity and coherence between actions.

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 of vital importance to preserve and further develop the wealth and diversity of rural areas, and of border areas in particular.

2. **Postulates towards European and national level**

2.1 The political objectives and actions should take into account:

- constantly changing conditions due to economic and political globalisation and the growing world population;
- 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 effects of climate change, growing scarcity of resources and consequently rising energy costs as well as growing utilisation of environmental potentials;
- that new EU policies for the period 2007-2013 at the internal and external borders and in consequence new policies for rural areas in the member states of the EU must meet major challenges that rural areas, in particular European border regions, are facing.

2.2. Equal living conditions, including in rural areas and border regions, remain a key socio-political objective that has to be achieved through following actions:

- It is in the political, economic and social interest of the EU and its Member States to foster the new principle of territorial cohesion.
- Extreme geographical variations (at both national and European level) must be avoided, in order to advance EU integration, avoid serious conflicts and take the legitimate interests of people in disadvantaged regions into account.
- According to the "Territorial Agenda" funding shouldn't focus solely on the structurally strong and already positively developing national / regional centres at the expense of

structurally weak rural peripheral areas, located often in border regions. Because policy promoting solely metropolitan regions is counterproductive.

- In accordance with the “Territorial Agenda” all endogenous potentials (metropolitan regions, agglomerations, medium-sized towns and rural areas) should be exploited.
- Many prosperous rural areas (cf. ESDP, Territorial Agenda), which demonstrate that economic growth and prosperity are not directly depending on the level of concentration should be used as good practices while enhancing the political framework in other parts of the European Union.
- European and national programmes should use the manifold development opportunities of rural areas, in particular in border and cross-border regions, in order to ensure a sustainable development of the European continent.

2.3 Actions for the development of rural areas must be initiated in order to:

- halt the decline of these areas, stem the population loss and brain drain as well as improve living conditions;
- counter imbalance geographical concentration of population and business in metropolitan regions and agglomerations by means of polycentric development, in particular by strengthening small and medium-sized centres (urban poles);
- exploit territorial potentials (including regional diversity) more effectively to foster growth and employment and focus in rural policy rather on “helping people to help themselves”;
- move towards a multifunctional agriculture, which makes a significant contribution to environmental protection and rural development;
- create sufficient job opportunities, this being one of the key prerequisites for equal living conditions in rural border areas;
- maintain development programmes for villages and LEADER-action groups (bottom-up-approach with enhanced methods = success story of the EU) with, if possible, innovative project approaches as network for the whole country and with competence circles for local / regional development;
- create conditions (e.g. in terms of infrastructure, taxes) enabling citizens of rural areas to work as commuters in larger centres.

3. Recommendations and solutions for the regional / local level in border areas

3.1 Generally

As regards recommendations and solutions for the regional / local level it has to be considered that:

- Rural areas are extremely manifold and differ considerably from one region to another.
- Specific statements on individual border or cross-border regions are very difficult, in particular with regard to challenges affecting generally all rural areas. Particular proposals concerning opportunities and solutions can be rather defined.
- Due to the diversity of rural areas and the difficulty as regards targeted statements on individual border regions, only general conclusions are possible that should be used as

a frame while elaborating specific cross-border solutions taking into account the individual geographical conditions of the regions.

3.2 Partnership of the regional / local level with the European and national level

In partnership with national authorities regions / border regions need to take the future into their own hands and develop active cross-border cooperation in all areas. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including following actions:

- development of an overall strategy for the sustainable development of rural areas, not only in the form of agricultural subsidies but also by strengthening the third pillar of the agricultural policy from 2007, namely rural development;
- development of integrated cross-border models at regional / local level with real targets, action areas as well as project ideas, in sectors such as the economy, innovation and research, local planning and urban development, landscaping, social infrastructure, technical infrastructure, culture and tourism;
- cross-border exploitation of the LEADER-programme;
- closer cooperation between political, administrative and economic players and non-governmental organisations (great creative potential through cross-border competence circles);
- creating "regional clusters" in peripheral rural areas with due regard for regional characteristics (e.g. for sport/wellness/health; national parks/nature reserves and the environment; renewable resources/alternative energy generation; innovation and research centres);
- 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 sparsely populated rural border regions;
- develop adequate financial instruments for services, as they can be very expensive in rural areas;
- facilitate moving from cities to rural areas (e.g. tax incentives, housing support, particular local welcome to new residents in rural areas) and transfer public jobs to rural areas (e.g. in scientific, service and energy sector);
- area-wide broadband connection in rural border regions;
- internet training at different age levels („the digital school“);
- priority “children culture in the countryside” (Culture Kids).

3.3 Specific political action fields of the regional and local level

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;

- closer cooperation between municipal and regional associations, new innovative partnerships between centres of different levels with the surrounding rural area, in which the strongest players (larger centres) bear the greatest responsibility (advantage: enables potentials to be pooled, disadvantage: risk of loss of identity);
- using the decreasing financial resources available a) to bring about the necessary concentration and b) to distribute tasks sensibly between regional and local authorities;
- combine potentials of rural areas on both sides of borders (economic, cultural, social and infrastructure), as solely in this way the necessary capacity (critical mass) for worthwhile measures, investments and projects can be created (universities, hospitals, services, joint education institutes etc.), e.g. cross-border research clusters or “life science” regions;
- fostering the creation of new businesses, the foundation and expansion of SME, stimulating investments, strengthening existing facilities inclusively training (management, marketing, application of new technologies, information technology);

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 divided border towns/cities.
- 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;

- training policy and adult education for regional / local development (country and town planning, social development, environment, project development, self-help groups e.g. in health) with artists as multipliers;
- adapting training structures to older people;
- learning the language of the neighbour at all school levels;
- 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);
- providing cross-border public and private services;
- 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.
 - 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 (e.g. hospitals, specific medical centres).
- 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 (e.g. new exploitation possibilities for farming land);
 - 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 technical supply and disposal in peripheral rural areas, which differ from those in urban areas, should be examined (should all small settlements be connected to a central sewage treatment plant or are small treatment plants environmentally viable?).