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A Better Life in Rural Areas

Considerations

Having met	at Cork, Ireland from 5 th to 6 th September 2016
Building	on the 1996 Cork Declaration – "A living countryside"- developed by the participants of the European Conference on Rural Development in Cork, Ireland;
Considering	the key role of rural areas and communities in implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as well as the conclusions of the 21st annual Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC);
Aware	of the economic, environmental and social diversity that characterises Rural Europe – which is home to more than half of the EU population and covers more than three quarters of the territory – and the importance of rural areas in the preservation of Europe's manifold natural and cultural landscapes and heritage;
Persuaded	that urban centres and rural areas and their populations enjoy different but complementary assets, and that improved interrelations and partnerships among them are important preconditions for economic viability, environmental performance and social cohesion of the Union as a whole;
Convinced	of the value of rural resources capable of delivering sustainable solutions to current and future societal challenges that concern all citizens of the Union such as assuring a safe and sustainable provision of quality food, developing the circular economy, broadening the bio-economy, fostering resource efficiency, combating climate change and reducing the reliance on fossil fuels;
Expecting	that the rural economy and rural businesses will depend increasingly on digitisation as well as knowledge workers who make the most of the digital transformation and enhance rural production in a sustainable manner;
Persuaded	that economic growth and sustainability are not mutually exclusive and can be fostered by innovation to which rural entrepreneurs, farmers, and foresters must have access and which may concern technologies, practices, processes, social and organisational matters, and be research driven or based on interactive bottom-up approaches;
Concerned	about rural exodus and youth drain and the need to ensure that rural areas and communities (countryside, farms, villages, and small towns) remain attractive places to live and work by improving access to services and opportunities for rural citizens and fostering entrepreneurship in traditional rural domains as well as new sectors of the economy;
Convinced	that the agricultural and forestry sectors are still of great importance for the Union's economy, and that their associated value chains are engines of rural growth providing jobs and livelihoods to tens of millions of Europeans, in particular in rural areas and often with jobs that cannot be relocated;



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Aware	of the role of agriculture and forestry in shaping the landscapes and the importance of farmers and foresters as stewards of the countryside and principal providers of environmental public goods and services related to biodiversity, soil, water and climate action;
Mindful	of the need for a strong territorial emphasis within the Common Agricultural Policy, operating in complementarity with other EU policies and focusing on delivering relevant results for rural citizens and society as a whole;
Determined	to strengthen the integration of local initiatives and rural capacity building in mainstream EU policy making, in particular through bottom-up approaches to local development such as LEADER and Community Led Local Development;
Committed	to ensure participation of rural development actors and stakeholders in line with the European Code of Conduct on Partnership;
Considering	the opinion of the Committee of the Regions concerning innovation and modernisation of the rural economy, the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Rural Development Programmes as well as the valuable reflections by other rural stakeholder groups on the prospect for rural and agricultural development;
Confident	that a result-oriented Common Agricultural and Rural Development Policy with a strengthened strategic approach is a key instrument to deliver on EU priorities;
Dedicated	to ensure the principle of subsidiarity as well as simplification and transparency of the policy design;

Policy Orientations

We, the participants at the Cork 2.0 European Conference on Rural Development, declare that an innovative, integrated and inclusive rural and agricultural policy in the European Union should be guided by the following ten policy orientations:

Point 1: Promoting Rural Prosperity

The rural potential to deliver innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for current and future societal challenges such as economic prosperity, food security, climate change, resource management, social inclusion, and integration of migrants should be better recognised. A rural proofing mechanism should ensure this is reflected in Union policies and strategies. Rural and agricultural policies should build on the identity and dynamism of rural areas through the implementation of integrated strategies and multi-sectorial approaches. They should promote diversification and foster entrepreneurship, investment, innovation and employment. These policies should also give value to rural identity and enhance sustainability, social inclusion and local development, as well as the resilience of farms and rural communities.



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Point 2: Strengthening Rural Value Chains

Union policies should focus on integrated approaches to developing and strengthening rural value chains and local productive networks. They should reflect emerging business opportunities for agriculture, forestry and rural enterprises related to the circular, green, and fossil-free economies. The growing concerns of consumers about the quality of products and production processes as well as their demand for healthy food must also be met. Policies must promote new approaches to horizontal and vertical integration that ensure fair and transparent contractual relations within the supply chain, and legal possibilities for organizing farmers' collective actions. Farmers should be provided with effective risk management tools.

Point 3: Investing in Rural Viability and Vitality

Union support for investment in rural areas should focus on generating added value for society. Investments in business development, public and private services, essential infrastructure and capacity building should deliver towards the common EU objectives notably in relation to jobs and green and inclusive growth. They should also provide for self-sustaining initiatives that foster a competitive and diversified agriculture and rural economy. Particular attention must be given to overcome the digital divide and develop the potential offered by connectivity and digitisation of rural areas. Policies should promote rural quality of life, and meet the aspirations of rural youth for diverse and well-rewarded employment as well as facilitate generational renewal. Efforts should be made to extend the reach, scope, and leverage of funding by providing innovative financial instruments. Union support should strengthen rural-urban linkages and align the sustainable development of both rural and urban areas.

Point 4: Preserving the Rural Environment

Land management has a key role in the interface between citizens and the environment. Policies must incentivise the delivery of environmental public goods, including the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural heritage. These consist of a rich diversity of habitats of flora and fauna, and landscape amenities which depend to a large degree on farming and forestry systems. Measures to reward the delivery of environmental public goods and services should reflect the variety of local circumstances. The intrinsic value of the rural environment provides benefits to local economic development, eco-tourism, healthy living, food identity and branding as well as the promotion of the countryside for recreation.

Point 5: Managing Natural Resources

Increased pressure on natural resources resulting from growing demand for food, feed, fibre and biomaterial must be met by coordinated cross-sectorial policy responses. These should ensure the sustainable management of natural resources such as water, soil, and biodiversity, being the very means of agricultural and forestry production. The loss of genetic diversity must be reversed and the maintenance and sustainable use of plant and animal genetic resources ensured through appropriate public and private action. There is a need to develop and mainstream innovative, science-based solutions that allow for producing more



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with less while ensuring that natural resources are at the disposal of future generations. Effective formats of knowledge exchange and advice should be developed and support provided for the adoption of well-designed land management schemes.

Point 6: Encouraging Climate Action

Given the critical need to address the climate challenge in rural as well as urban areas, support must be targeted to the implementation of effective mitigation and adaptation strategies. There is significant scope for carbon sequestration and storage in rural areas. Action must go beyond carbon-based solutions and should promote sound nutrient and livestock management. Farmers and foresters should be encouraged to provide climate services and to engage in adaptation efforts. The potential for rural areas to produce sustainable renewable energy as well as bio-materials should be developed through appropriate investment schemes. Priority should be given to further developing the circular economy as well as the cascading use of biomaterials.

Point 7: Boosting Knowledge and Innovation

Rural communities must participate in the knowledge economy in order to fully utilise the advances in research and development. Rural businesses, including farmers and foresters, of all types and sizes must have access to appropriate technology, state-of-the-art connectivity, as well as new management tools to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits. Stronger policy focus on social innovation, learning, education, advice and vocational training is essential for developing the skills needed. This should be accompanied by the strengthening of peer-to-peer exchange, networking and cooperation amongst farmers and rural entrepreneurs. The needs and contributions of rural areas should be clearly reflected on the research agenda in the European Union. Industry, researchers, practitioners, knowledge providers, civil society and public authorities must work closer together to better exploit and share opportunities arising from scientific and technological progress.

Point 8: Enhancing Rural Governance

The administrative capacity and effectiveness of regional and local governments and community-based groups must be enhanced, where necessary, through the provision of technical assistance, training, cooperation and networking. Building on the success of LEADER and the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture, bottom-up and locally led initiatives should be rolled out to mobilise rural potentials. The architecture of the CAP must be based on a common strategic and programming framework that provides for targeting all interventions to well-defined economic, social, and environmental objectives. This should reflect the needs and aspirations of the territories concerned and should respect the partnership principle. The reach, scope, and leverage of funding must be enhanced through an extended development and use of financial instruments. Rural and agricultural policies must interact with the wider context of national and regional strategies and work in complementarity and coherence with other policies.



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Point 9: Advancing Policy Delivery and Simplification

Flexibility and better targeting in policy design and delivery is necessary, but must not result in unnecessary complexity. Initiatives to restore and build the trust of stakeholders are a priority. It is essential to further streamline the regulatory framework of the Common Agricultural Policy and to further simplify implementation. In addition, smart administrative tools and procedures must be developed, so as to reduce the administrative burden on beneficiaries and national and regional administrations. Proportionality in requirements and sanctions is important. The introduction of e-Governance in the management of support programmes and a wide application of simplified costs options must be given high priority. It is necessary to strengthen subsidiarity and proportionality within shared management of funds and the underlying control systems.

Point 10: Improving Performance and Accountability

Policies must be accountable and fit for purpose. Public support to agriculture and rural areas must be subject to a credible monitoring and evaluation system. This should cover the benefits of actions, the efficiency of expenditure, and assess the delivery against policy objectives. Stakeholders must get a stronger role in assessing performance through peer learning and performance reviews. Citizens and taxpayers expect to be informed about the performance and achievements of the policy. This expectation must be met.

Conclusion

We, the participants of the Cork 2.0 European Conference on Rural Development, urge the policy makers of the European Union to:

- Improve public awareness of the potential of rural areas and resources to deliver on a wide range of economic, social, and environmental challenges and opportunities benefitting all European citizens;
- Invest in the identity of rural communities, the potential for rural growth and to make rural areas attractive for people to live and work in throughout the different stages of their lives;
- Build on this momentum and further develop the agricultural and rural policy towards a result-oriented, simple, and flexible approach, based on partnership and reflecting Union objectives as well as the needs and aspirations on the ground;
- Systematically review other macro and sectorial policies through a rural lens, considering potential and actual impacts and implications on rural jobs and growth and development prospects, social well-being, and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities;
- Support this 10-point programme and incorporate its vision and orientations into future policy development.