



European Rural Sustainability Gathering 2010

14-17 October 2010

Vouneuil sur Vienne, Poitou-Charentes, FR

Our message to the Agricultural and Rural Convention ARC2020

65 representatives of civil society organisations from 15 European countries have met in Vouneuil in order to learn from sustainable practices in the region and to gather ideas for the upcoming reform of the European agricultural and rural policies. The gathering was organized by CELAVAR, a French network of regional rural initiatives supporting sustainable development through popular education and FORUM SYNERGIES, a network linking local sustainable practices throughout Europe. The participants have shared their views on what they have seen in the region reflecting their own work in local and regional projects. The organisers have gathered individual ideas and expectations in a conference reader before and after the conference. At the end of the gathering participants have agreed upon the following common message to the Agricultural and rural convention:*

** see separate list of participants attached*

More Democracy

A democratic reform of agricultural and rural policies needs to start from values and principles, not from ambitions to redistribute public money or to invent new policies. Cooperation between local people should come before competition for market shares; solidarity and cohesion before economical growth; and people's participation in decision-making before central control.

In order to achieve active European citizenship in rural and urban regions we are ready to take responsibility for a democratic revival within civil society which encourages people to take part in an economic, environmental and social renaissance of rural life. This responsibility aims at sufficient and wholesome food for all, as well as support for democratic expression, sharing of knowledge and a decent livelihood. We see our engagement for local and European citizenship as a strengthening complement of representative democracy.

We work towards better forms of territorial dialogue and exchange of good practices between people living in rural areas, so that people are inspired by sustainable forms of innovation. We call for better sharing of access to knowledge and goods, including specific education adapted to rural needs. We want to support especially young people in entering farming and other rural activities and business. We wish to contribute to programming and decision making on rural development from the bottom-up, following the good experiences of the LEADER method as it was initially designed, and other former Community Initiatives. We feel that the current LEADER programme tends to move away from this bottom-up approach.

We want to share power and responsibilities with regional and local authorities so as to achieve better connections between people and their authorities. Citizens' initiatives must also be at the heart of closer connections between rural and urban regions so that we can establish a more balanced management of rural and urban resources and needs.

Co-producers of food

We believe that food, land and environment are first of all a common wealth and not just traded commodities. Farmers and consumers should become co-producers of common goods. There is a difference between fresh strawberries on the local market and a share in the futures market for pork. We are focused on people working on land and not on subsidies paid on hectares. By connecting farmers closer with local and regional processors and markets we can share responsibility for a more sustainable lifestyle. We must not go for cheap processed food on the cost of food quality, a healthy environment and food sovereignty.

Demographic change, women and youth

Ageing of people in rural areas becomes a problem in rural areas if young men and women do no longer see a future in farming or other rural businesses. We want to see agricultural and rural policies to improve rural infrastructure in a territorial context, bringing schools and education, as well as cultural life close to where people live. Especially women and young men leave farms and rural areas because they lose faith in their future. Rural policies must make rural life attractive, increasing connections between communities, allowing territories and regions to improve exchange of experiences and information. We want to see more support for young people's involvement with hands on knowledge; concrete experience in sustainable practice and job creation enhancing these connections. Especially for young people and women we must significantly improve access to land and natural resources. We wish to see rural areas to stay populated and attractive, where people are educated and gain knowledge on how to use local natural sources sustainable and consciously connecting their future with rural life.

Poverty

Rural poverty is increasing in rural areas and the gap between poorer and richer people is increasing. Poverty is not a problem of lack of local resources, but a lack of capacity and access to resources. We must fight poverty with skills and education, and build on local knowledge tailor-made to the rural needs of the 21st century.

We want to work towards One Europe, which is not divided into new and old, rich and poor but is based on solidarity, mutual trust and human dignity. Rural poor do not need charity or compensation for exclusion. Without a firm engagement for their inclusion through equal access to education, economic development, healthcare, culture, and opportunities for mobility, - poverty will further grow. Therefore schools and education must be available where people live. Capacity building can take place closer to good practice and on farms. Vocational training and education will then be better adapted to what poor people need.

Build trust not fear

We want European institutions to turn from management by fear (control) to management by motivation (trust).

We therefore call upon the European and national institutions to

1. Encourage a more diversified and sustainable development of rural areas:

- include small, semi-subsistence rural holdings in farming and rural development support as being part of the rural economy; gather and promote ecological and European traditional know-how
- support a broader array of activities on farms for more balanced and environmentally friendly practices;
- support more diversified rural businesses;
- support entry to farming by improving access to land and equipment
- fostering a diversity of tools for the different territories of Europe to develop the economics of their rural areas by reinforcing local resources
- develop evaluation criteria for EU policies which do not only focus on economic growth
- support fundamental and applied, on-farm research in support of community-and consumer connected farming

2. Foster democratic local decision-making processes and civil society participation:

- support partnerships and collaborative initiatives of farmers, rural households, local communities, small business and citizens;
- provide means for project preparation, especially through tools which enable territorial dialogue and citizens' participation to local decision-making processes
- enable local coordination of mechanisms for support
- adapt to civil society organisations' specificities for them to be truly able to access European funds