Rural Development in the Western Balkan Region and Turkey
‘Empowering Rural Stakeholders and the LEADER approach’

‘Travelling’ workshops and national conferences in Serbia, Montenegro and the former
Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 30 March – 2 April 2014
and Concluding Conference, Brussels - 8 April 2014

Background
The governments of the Western Balkan Region and of Turkey are engaged in intensive and
demanding work as they prepare for accession to the European Union. The Common
Agriculture Policy, including rural development, plays an important role in this process. Pre-
accession support programmes are being implemented in this field and will have a major
impact on rural economies and societies.

In this context, the role in and ownership of the process of drafting and implementing IPA
rural development programmes (IPARD) by all parties concerned is of the utmost
importance. In fact, no programme will be successful in contributing to improvements in
efficiency and competitiveness of agriculture and growth in rural areas, without careful
consideration of the needs, and capacities, of local actors. Besides the specific support for
farmers, the development of the wider rural economies plays a significant role in preparing
rural populations for opportunities to shape their own future. Especially, the empowerment of
rural people to participate in designing rural development policies and projects through local
action groups is vital for innovation and for integration of the various sectors and
stakeholders, without which a long-term sustainable growth in rural areas may not be
achieved.

The LEADER method has proven to be a major success story in mobilising rural stakeholders
for cooperation on a sub-regional level and in building good relations between
administrations and the key actors in rural development. National and European rural
networks, including the PREPARE Partnership, ELARD (the European LEADER
Association for Rural Development) and others have shared their experiences over many
years and are increasingly present and active in the region. They have always emphasised,
and sought to promote, mutual understanding and cooperation between governments and
stakeholders, and partnerships between public, private and civil sectors at sub-regional level.
They have also stressed, and demonstrated through their own programmes, the value of
international exchange and face-to-face contacts among all involved and the reality check
which can be provided by exchange of experiences and networking.

Traveling Workshops and Conferences
Building on the experience described above, the European Commission has offered its
support for a stimulating initiative to help those who are involved in designing and
implementing rural development programmes in the Western Balkans and Turkey.
This initiative takes the form of a two-day field visit or ‘traveling workshop’ and a one-day national conference in each of three Western Balkan countries – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – followed by a one-day Closing Conference to be held in Brussels. It is jointly initiated by the Standing Working Group for Rural Development in the Western Balkans (SWG), which represents the governments in the region, and the PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe, with the support of TAIEX. SWG and PREPARE work together in the context of a Memorandum of Agreement signed in 2009.

The aim of this event is:

a. to raise awareness among all rural development stakeholders, in particular among local action groups, of the opportunities and means for involvement and cooperation in relevant policy and decision making at a national level;

b. to draw the attention of national administrations and decision-makers to the importance of having structured means for involving stakeholders, and in particular local actors in rural areas, in designing and implementing agricultural and rural development policies.

Summary of the proposed programme

Title

“Empowering rural stakeholders and the LEADER approach: mainstreaming participation of stakeholders in the development and implementation of agriculture and rural development policies in the Western Balkans and Turkey”.

Programme

Monday/Tuesday 31 March and 1 April 2014

Traveling workshops to take place separately in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. In each country, 30 participants – divided into two groups – will visit a series of enterprises or initiatives in order to meet rural actors and to debate the approaches which enable effective participation of rural stakeholders in development processes.

The field visits will enable participants:

- to gather information and to see practical examples of stakeholder cooperation and involvement in policy and decision making;
- to provide immediate feedback to participants from the host country on the ways to improve stakeholder cooperation and involvement;
- to meet people who are involved in development work in their own or other countries, both government representatives and other stakeholders, and thus strengthen both national and international networks;
- to formulate a vision of how rural stakeholders can be involved in designing and implementing policies for agriculture and rural development in the longer term.

On the evening of the second day, the participants in the two groups in each country will return to the venue of the national conference to be held on 2 April. During the evening, each
group will prepare an illustrated report of its experience during, and its conclusions from, the traveling workshop, for presentation at the Conference.

**Wednesday 2 April 2014**

In each of the three countries, the activity will come to a climax in a national conference. The participants will be all those who attended the traveling workshops, plus others who are only able to come for the concluding day. After setting the scene, the morning session of the conference will focus on receiving and discussing reports from the traveling workshops in that country. Experience may also be offered by participants from other Balkan countries and Turkey who have taken part in those traveling workshops. This will be followed by a general debate on the challenge of partnership between governments and all rural stakeholders in drafting and implementing rural development programmes.

The afternoon session will focus on the role of stakeholders, and in particular of rural actors, in policy design, implementation and control, and on the mechanisms which can enable them to take part in that work. This will be illuminated by success stories and lessons learnt from EU Member States, especially rural networks and capacity building. The final session of the conference will provide an opportunity for the government and for representatives of leading stakeholder organisations to commit themselves in principle to the creation and strengthening of such working relationships.

**Tuesday 8 April 2014**

The Concluding Conference of the event will be held in Brussels, with the participation of Commissioners Štefan Füle (tbc) and Dacian Cioloș.

After welcoming statements from the Commissioners, the morning session of the conference will focus on receiving and discussing reports from the series of traveling workshops in all three countries, and on presentations from Turkey and each of the Western Balkan countries that did not have traveling workshops. This will be followed by a general debate on the challenge of partnership between governments and all rural stakeholders in drafting and implementing rural development programmes.

The conference will enable participants to:

- address the issue of stakeholder participation in rural development programming;
- focus on the general role of stakeholders, and in particular of rural actors, in policy design, implementation and control, and on the mechanisms which can enable them to take part in that work;
- share success stories and lessons learnt from EU Member States, especially rural networks and capacity building.

The final session of the conference will provide an opportunity for the European Commission, for governments in the IPA countries and for representatives of leading stakeholder organisations to commit themselves in principle to the creation and strengthening of such working relationships.

**Participants**

The participants in the traveling workshops will include:
• Representatives of public administrations and of leading stakeholder organisations in Turkey and in each of the IPA beneficiary countries in the Western Balkans,

• Additional participants from varied organisations in the three host countries – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia,

• Officials of the European Commission – DG AGRI and DG ENLARG,

• A few Members or officials of the European Parliament,

• Representatives from the PREPARE Partnership and the Standing Working Group for Rural Development in the Western Balkans,

• Experts from EU Member States, acting as rapporteurs or advisors to the Traveling Workshop groups.

The aim is to have a balanced representation of government and NGO participants, local hosts and visitors, in order to achieve effective exchange about good practices and cooperation between all stakeholders, administrations and political decision-makers.

The participants in each National Conference will include all those who take part in the traveling workshops in that country, plus other representatives of administrations or rural stakeholders in that country.

The participants in the Concluding Conference will include some of the participants in the Traveling workshops in the three countries, plus senior figures from the Western Balkans and Turkey, Members of the European Parliament and European Commission representatives.

Commissioner Dacian Cioloș has stated his intention to attend the Concluding Conference, subject to his availability.

**Follow up in the region**

The co initiators of this event and the European Commission believe that it will contribute to creation and strengthening of working relationships between governments, other public authorities and the broad range of stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of rural development programmes within the Western Balkans and Turkey. The experience gained through the Traveling Workshops, and the conclusions of the Conference, will be recorded in a published report of the event, and can then be followed through at national and multinational level:

a. in the process of preparing and implementing national rural development programmes

b. within the work programme of the Standing Working Group

c. within the work programme of the PREPARE partnership, which is focused upon the strengthening of civil society networks in the IPA countries

d. by active pursuit of the Memorandum of Agreement between SWG and PREPARE.