



Partnership for Rural Europe

COMMUNITY SPIRIT WINS

How civil society sustains rural Europe



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Goran Šoster, interview with Marina Koprivnjak.

LOCAL MOBILISATION AT THE CORE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Dacian Cioloş, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development



Europe and the European construction are not exclusive matters for the circles of political decision makers or politics for which electoral legitimacy is sufficient. Building a living democracy capable to carry society's ambitions and its development requires more than that. If the European project is currently in a certain impasse, or at least at a turning point, it may be because European political decision-making has yet to find the most inclusive way to win European citizens and keep them involved in a common effort to improve democracy.

For a long while, mobilizing society on issues of rural development, territorial cohesion, and other issues of common interest, has been regarded by some as an idealistic dream. For me, the illusion is to think that we can promote long-term, effective and inclusive public policies, if they are decided in a small circle, by 'illuminated' heads, and implemented top-down, without consulting and involving people at the grassroots. At the same time, it is a false idea to think that people are not interested to participate in the process of construction and implementation of public policies.

For me, this is the most important idea that the PREPARE network has demonstrated: not only that people expect to be listened to, and rightly so, but that they are also seeking opportunities to get involved. It has also shown that the participation of active networks of civil society in public policy helps emerging a social and territorial cohesion which cannot be secured through guidelines, purchased in a tender or imposed by top-down decisions, but is crucial for the success of economic development projects. Local mobilisation is a must for economic development.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the transition to democracy and the societal transformation that came after the fall of the iron curtain coincided with the preparation of these countries for accession to the European Union. And the accession path was mostly built on new public policies, the transfer of the *acquis communautaire* and institutional capacity building. Very few European pre-accession policies had components assuming and encouraging citizens' participation, grassroots approaches, strengthening civil society and mobilising it for concrete economic development projects. The rural development programmes of the Common Agricultural Policy were among these exceptions. But experience shows that it is not enough to have these instruments. We must also find the

appropriate mechanisms and the spirit of people to get involved, to become active, and to get empowered. For me, the PREPARE network has provided such an opportunity, to facilitate the participation of people living in rural areas in the development of these areas and in their own development.

Moreover, the PREPARE network has not only facilitated the organisation of the development actors at the grassroots level, but also created opportunities for East and West to meet, to exchange ideas and experiences, to challenge deep-rooted concepts and beliefs.

This experience is not at all one belonging to the past. Now, more than ever, Europe needs experiences that bind people together, Europe needs to listen (more), to bring its institutions closer to its citizens and vice versa, and to use policy-making as a development tool, breaking down unnecessary bureaucratic burdens. The current reform of the Common Agricultural Policy shows the enormous interest and commitment citizens have shown when it comes to the development of their rural communities, their food and countryside. This would have not been possible without the mobilisation of civil society.

In rural areas, due to how the rural space is organised and works, the personal stories intertwine, connections and social interdependence are more visible than elsewhere. But also problems like demographic change, migration of many

young people to the cities and insufficient public services in villages can have severe consequences when the critical substance for economical and social well-being is under threat. The role of organised rural movements which tie together the various elements of living rural communities is therefore essential. Bringing these movements together across former insurmountable borders across Europe is the merit of the PREPARE initiative.

Looking into the future it seems that further challenges are ahead. PREPARE has moved further South East, including the South Eastern Balkan countries and Turkey and even starts first contacts in the South Mediterranean region. I appreciate this ambition as it follows the attitude of sharing experiences and encouraging civil action and organisation. It is not just the perspective of accession to the European Union, but also the idea of improving relations with our neighbours and encouraging civil society across new external borders which needs attention and support. The PREPARE experience fits this logic of active pioneering - combining consultation and involvement of stakeholders in their own development, cooperation and sharing of experience between East, West and South.

PREPARE's history, its current work and ambition for the future are proof that the European spirit exists and that there is scope and space for extension.

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Hannes Lorenzen is senior advisor in the European Parliament and its Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. He is also a leading figure in European civil society. He is co-president of Forum Synergies, and in that capacity was co-initiator and chief moderator of the travelling workshop which led to the launch of PREPARE. He chairs the PREPARE Organising Group, and plays similar moderating roles in sustainable agriculture and rural development networks like Forum Synergies and ARC2020.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT WINS

This is the story about achieving the ‘impossible’.

The European project was once seen as ‘impossible’. After the War nobody believed that a European Community would be able to agree upon principles like cohesion and solidarity and to pursue commonly decided policies. But it did agree, and it has worked for 60 years. Furthermore, the project has been attractive enough to embrace 28 member states through peaceful accession, based on unanimously adopted treaties. It is now undergoing serious tension, but that is no reason to doubt that it will survive and thrive.

The crazy proposal. In the same way, the event that took place in 1999 and which prompted the launch of PREPARE was regarded as crazy and impossible. We proposed to hold a traveling workshop between East and West. The European Institutions and most governments were unable to think of ‘traveling’ and ‘workshop’ together. But we wanted to link the separate worlds of rural people and political decision-makers. We wanted them to take a fresh look at rural policies and rural realities in the EU accession process. We got their agreement, and our stubbornness has helped the emergence of a new kind of European community spirit and a new method of collective discovery and commitment in rural Europe.

Traveling workshop. The traveling workshop took place in 1999 through the rural areas of Estonia and Sweden. People, who would otherwise never have met, listened and talked to each other. Local mayors and project leaders, farmers, teachers and entrepreneurs met informally with regional civil servants, members of national parliaments and ministries, and officials from the European Parliament and the European Commission.

60 participants from 18 countries, including 10 EU ‘candidate’ countries, took part. This curious caravan was accompanied by journalists and guided by an international team of moderators. Teams of 10 participants - from old, recently joined, or candidate EU states, and with all levels of expertise - visited more than 30 local projects, farms and rural enterprises. Every evening these teams reported back on what they had seen to a gathering of all participants, plus their local hosts. They commented on the strengths and weaknesses of projects they had visited; and offered ideas on how to improve projects, procedures and management.

The impact on participants. When joining the group, many may have thought they were experts in rural development. But when they went home they carried memories and ideas going far beyond their expertise, having endured an unprecedented reality check of their concepts and beliefs. Putting their feet on the ground, tasting the food and thoughts of the locals, and looking through the eyes of their travel companions had opened new horizons of European networking.

The spirit emerging during these days was like the one we remember from school excursions – the relief of escaping from daily routines; the excitement of unknown territory; the fun, and the challenge, of being for many days close to people from all walks of life. The programme was not leisurely: it offered hard work, new moderation methods, consensus building, art work and singing, and it revealed the wide range of talents among participants.

We understood more deeply the problems arising from the abrupt political changes in the Central and Eastern European countries. We saw opportunities for new relations between people working in government and in non-government organisations. The non-government participants often found that they were better informed than their own governments about the EU's pre-accession programmes. This gave them confidence in their demand to be included in stakeholder consultation, programming or monitoring. The positive energy and encouraging new friendships were remarkable.

PREPARE. This book describes how this traveling workshop led to the creation of the PREPARE partnership and programme, building upon the method and the spirit of the 1999 event. The aim of the programme has been two-fold. First, we support the strengthening of civil society in the rural areas in the accession countries, many of which have joined the EU since we started our work, and in the neighbouring countries of the European Union. Second, we promote exchange of ideas and experience between all who are in-

involved in rural development in those countries and in other EU states, and we foster partnership between civil society and public authorities in the processes of rural development.

The book is a collective memory of common achievements and a repertoire of future opportunities. Six chapters describe the 1999 traveling workshop and the creation of PREPARE; the activities of PREPARE and the challenges we have faced; our links to the LEADER programme; the partnerships that we have formed; our outreach into a succession of countries; and something of our vision for the future. Each chapter offers a number of interviews, then a reflection on the theme by the editors.

Looking back over the remarkable experience of the last 13 years, and forward to a continuing and expanding activity, I express warm thanks to the PREPARE partners, and their representatives on the Organising Group; to our three successive coordinators Michael Dower, Urszula Budzich-Szukała and Goran Šoster; and to all our members and supporters who have made this extraordinary experience possible.

PREPARE would not exist without the generous support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which has not only provided us with continued financial support for managing the network, but also guided us to readjust and focus our activities according to new challenges and needs. We offer them our profound thanks. We are grateful also for financial and in-kind support of many other organizations.



How can we overcome borders between people? Let them travel, meet and discover what they have in common.

PREPARE, a network of rural and village movements, supports citizens from the European Union and its neighbour countries to cross physical and emotional borders. They share experiences and sustain each other's ambitions and projects.

The European Union is expanding towards the East and South East. Rural people in the neighbour countries wish to play an active part in their own development. PREPARE seeks to support them in strengthening civil society, and encouraging governments to move into partnership with civil society. It has become a widely recognised mediator in European rural policies.

Thirty interviews with pioneers, key players and supporters of PREPARE show a remarkable level of collective intelligence and compassion for a living countryside in and beyond Europe. There is reason to be optimistic. Community spirit will win.



Partnership for Rural Europe

<http://www.preparenetwork.org/>

