

“Community Spirit Wins”
- an introduction to PREPARE’s new book

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In his famous speech on the battlefield at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln paid tribute to the sacrifice of the men who had died there, saying that this had ensured that “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth”.

The activity of PREPARE has been driven by a similar thought. We believe that rural development should not be done to the people, but rather with the people and ideally by the people. That belief has been at the heart of a sustained battle in Western Europe since the Council of Europe’s Countryside Campaign of 1985-6 and the European Union’s report on ‘The future of rural society’ of 1987. Leaders in Strasbourg and Brussels recognised the importance of involving people, encouraging people to take action to improve their own well-being in rural areas. These leaders showed a top-down willingness to foster participation, involvement and partnership between government and citizens.

What our book, ‘Community Spirit Wins’, records is the counterpart to this – a bottom-up awakening of people in rural Europe to the need, the opportunity, the challenge of taking their own future into their own hands.

This awakening was spontaneous, in the 1980s, in England, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and elsewhere. It was provoked by the feeling, and the plain fact, that the rural areas were losing out as people, power and resources moved into or were concentrated on the cities.

From this emerged the pattern of national rural movements – the Swedish Popular Movements Council, the Finnish Village Action Association SYTY, the Dutch rural development network, Rural Voice in England. Each of these bodies sought to articulate the voice, the needs and the energies of rural people to help themselves and to demand attention from and offer partnership to government. The Swedish body had a strong slogan, which has now become its formal name, ‘*Hela Sverige ska Lev*’ – ‘All Sweden shall live’ (not only the cities !). We at this Gathering might wish to proclaim, in similar spirit, that ‘All Europe shall live’ !

So much for Western Europe. The story in our book is focused on the other half of this continent – Central and Eastern Europe, and more recently South East Europe where we are meeting today.

Since World War II, the countries of central and eastern Europe had been under communist, totalitarian or centralist regimes. In these countries, the government believed they knew best what the rural people need. The rural economy was largely in government hands. Farming and forestry were mainly in state or collective farms or state forests. Much of the processing and manufacturing was under state control. There was little opportunity for private enterprise. This was not fertile ground for the emergence of civil society.

Then came the great change of 1989-91 – the collapse of the Soviet Union; new-found independence for a succession of countries; collapse or transformation of many state and collective farms and of nationalised industries; a yearning for new life; and an urge to join the European Union.

As the accession process got under way, the European Parliament began to wonder how the governments and peoples in these newly independent countries could cope with the Western approach to participative rural development. The outcome of this concern was the Traveling Workshop of 1999 to Estonia and Sweden, a week-long trip by 60 people from 18 countries to see how bottom-up rural development worked in an accession country and an EU member state. A village action movement, *Kodukant*, had already emerged in Estonia, with help from *Hela Sverige ska Leva* and the Swedish government, so we were able to visit lively initiatives in both countries.

Our book records the impressions of people who took part in that traveling workshop. The experience was a complete eye-opener for them. They saw what civil groups can achieve, and how young people can be actively involved, for example the three 16-year-olds who initiated what has become the famous Rock Festival at Hulzfred in Småland. They saw the high value of exchanges between people in different countries, and of partnership between government and civil society.

This event led directly to the creation of the PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe. Our stated aim was to strengthen civil society, particularly in the accession countries, and to promote exchange in rural development. We secured funding from the C.S. Mott Foundation, and set in hand a programme of annual Gatherings with traveling workshops, focused each time on a different country in the target region. We rapidly gained contacts throughout the region, both in civil society and in governments, and gave support to people in each country.

The cumulative impact of PREPARE's work over the last 13 years is recorded in 30 interviews in our book. It included :

- widespread strengthening of civil society in rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe
- the formation or recognition of national rural movements in all the new member states of the region (of which only Estonia and Hungary had such movements prior to 2000), and recently also in Macedonia and Serbia
- the involvement of young people in the national movements and in PREPARE events, including scholarships which have enabled young people to visit other countries, funded by the *Fondation de France*
- the building of positive working relationships between civil society movements and governments
- the widespread adoption in the Central European countries of the LEADER approach
- the holding, in a growing number of these countries, of biennial 'Rural Parliaments', as platforms for the expression of the voice of rural people – a phenomenon which is described in an earlier book published by PREPARE.

As a sequel to these achievements in Central and Eastern Europe, PREPARE is now committed to a similar process in South East Europe and in other potential accession or neighbouring countries of the European Union. Our focus is on Bosnia + Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, the Ukraine and Belarus. Our work is attracting interest in the Maghreb countries on the south side of the Mediterranean. Our book records how people in many of these countries are "hungry for ideas, for exchanges, for the fresh wind of European experience in order to improve their livelihoods".

In this work, PREPARE is cooperating with others who are pursuing similar aims – the European Union's Directorate for Enlargement, UNDP, ELARD and others. We have a Memorandum of

Understanding with the Standing Working Group, whose activity was described by Boban Illic, and we look forward to closer cooperation with them. We are active members of the European Commission's Rural Development Advisory Group; of the Coordination Committee of the European Network for Rural Development and its LEADER Sub-committee; and of ARC 2020, the alliance of 150 European NGOs which has been campaigning for sustainable EU policies for agriculture and rural development.

What grew on Hannes Lorenzen and myself as we conducted the interviews and teased out the key messages for the book is that this emergence and strengthening of an active civil society in Europe represents much more than the energising of actors who can use the rural development measures offered by the European Union and member states. It is, more fundamentally, a quickening of the democratic spirit, a building of the 'can-do' determination, a new commitment to positive action. It is an answer to the uncertainties which currently face the European Union. It is a bottom-up movement which calls for an active top-down response.

PREPARE calls for the acceptance by people and governments of the first point that I made, that rural development should be conducted for, with and by the people. Rural development processes must be both top-down and bottom-up, based on partnership between governments and all actors – public, private, commercial and civil – at national, regional and local level. A key component in that partnership is LEADER, and its new wider version Community Led Local Development.

I end by quoting the words of Commissioner Dacjan Ciolos when he attended the launch of our book two months ago. He said "The commitment of rural people is vital for the process of rural development. This book, recording PREPARE's successful work since 2000, is far more than a legacy. It should be a stimulus for people to improve their own futures in the wider Europe. The EU programmes in the accession countries, and through the Neighbourhood policy in south eastern Europe and the southern Mediterranean, will include rural development. Strengthening civil society is a vital part of that work. PREPARE can help to ensure that the people themselves are active : someone has to do the work on the spot."