Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe
Council of European Municipalities and Regions

Roadmap to the conference:

The future of rural communities in Europe

Introduction – Why this conference

CEMR is organising this conference to discuss the future of rural communities in Europe. What future role do we see for rural communities in Europe? What are the expectations of citizens? What contribution can rural communities make to the development of a competitive and cohesive Europe? How do we contribute to a positive appreciation of rural communities that goes beyond their economic contribution and values their role in safeguarding Europe's cultural, historical and natural heritage?

As the preparations of the new structural funds and rural development operational programmes (2007-2013) are going ahead in full steam, the European Commission is already taking first steps in preparing the groundwork for the assessment of the Union's future budget framework for after 2013. In December 2005, the European Council had agreed that a comprehensive assessment of the Union's financial framework would have to be undertaken. In the coming months, the European Commission will continue its efforts, which will culminate in a formal report to the heads of government in 2008/2009. This will also include a review of the future of EU rural development policy within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy and of the regional policy.

A key step will be the presentation of the 4th Cohesion report by the European Commission in the spring of 2007 and the adoption of the 'EU Territorial Agenda'[1] under the German Presidency at the Leipzig Ministerial Meeting in May 2007.

For local and regional government, and the CEMR as their European umbrella organisation, it will be important to participate in the debate and to formulate a comprehensive policy position. This conference is a first step in this process: it will highlight the key challenges and opportunities for rural communities. It will look at what competitiveness and innovation might mean in a rural context and what future European policy framework is needed.

The present document provides a roadmap to the conference. It sets out in more detail the questions that we hope to address in each session of the conference. It is the starting point for a more comprehensive CEMR policy report that will build on the conference contributions and on the experience and expertise of CEMR's member associations and other key players involved in rural development in Europe.

[1] The EU Territorial Agenda, prepared through informal intergovernmental cooperation, seeks to align the Lisbon objectives of growth and competitiveness more closely to the EU's spatial development perspective. The six priorities are: agglomerations, urban networks and metropolitan regions in a polycentric pattern of development; strong urban-rural partnerships and a sufficient level of services of general interest for balanced territorial development; transnational clusters of competitive and innovative activities; trans-European ICT, transport and energy networks; promote trans-European risk management; strengthen trans-European ecological structures and cultural resources.

Plenary 1: What are the challenges facing rural areas in Europe today? What are the future trends that we need to respond to?

Europe's rural areas today find themselves in a rapidly and radically changing environment. Increased global trade and competition within the realm of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) increase pressures on the European Union and its agricultural, agri-environmental and rural development policies. The agricultural sector itself has gone through fundamental changes – whilst some farm enterprises have become larger and commercially successful on international markets, many farm families have adapted in other ways, often through niche specialisation and diversification.

Food safety, quality and availability continue to be of importance for the majority of Europeans. In addition, there is an increased demand on the countryside to provide conservation activities, maintenance of landscapes and biodiversity, recreational space and eco-tourism. Climate change and the related shifts in energy policy and technology have an immediate impact on rural communities. Access to high-speed digital telecommunications could potentially open up new employment opportunities and ways of working and providing services, irrespective of geographic location. The phenomenon of demographic ageing – coupled with outward migration of young people in particular – has important implications for many rural communities.

These transformations confront rural communities not only with obvious threats but also with significant opportunities. Not all are equally well placed to respond positively. Many rural communities are in danger of being left behind. This results in an ever-widening diversity between rural communities. Some benefit from their proximity to urban areas and experience economic growth, accompanied often, however, by an increasing pressure on nature and landscape. Others face difficulties in addressing structural changes or the need to invest in better infrastructure. In a number of rural areas, poor access to public services, the lack of alternative employment and an increasingly ageing, shrinking population significantly reduces their potential in economic development.

Some questions for the debate

- What are the main socio-economic trends affecting rural areas? Challenges? Unused potential? Threats and opportunities?
- What impact does EU enlargement have on the way EU policies take into account rural territories?
- What future role for rural areas in a European Union of 27 member states (competitiveness poles? Natural conservation? Agricultural providers? Residential areas? All at once?)
- Question of 'definition': what makes a community 'rural'? How do you take into account the ever-widening diversity of rural communities?
- What vision for rural development in Europe? How to reconcile the development needs of the different European territories (urban areas, industrial zones, rural areas…)?

Plenary 2: Visions for competitive rural communities of the future – what are the opportunities and critical success factors

In the current thinking on the EU regional policy, the structural and rural development funds are increasingly seen as a key tool to implement the revised Lisbon strategy with its dual objectives of boosting economic growth and creating new jobs. At the same time, with its regional policy the EU aims to reduce the disparities between the levels of developments of the various regions. The underlying model is one of balanced, polycentric development.

According to the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), up to 80% of the European territory is rural or semi-rural, providing a home to about 40% of Europe's population. Working towards competitiveness and cohesion in Europe makes it a must to ensure that the barriers to competitiveness in rural areas are lowered. This would release a huge growth potential across Europe.

What does 'competitiveness' and 'innovation' mean, though, in a rural context? Despite the prominence of these two concepts in EU policy-making, the term competitiveness is broad and fluid, open to interpretation. In a rural context it might be defined as retaining wealth and employment locally. It could refer to innovative models of delivering services in order to retain the quality of life and thus the viability of a given rural area. A positive vision for Europe's rural communities would have to go beyond the strictly economic contributions, highlighting equally their role in safeguarding Europe's cultural, historical and natural heritage.

There is a need for rural communities to explore how best to use the 'competitiveness agenda' to their advantage. The underlying question remains how to improve the relative economic performance of different localities. Which strategies can be promising for rural communities, what role can local authorities play in the process and what are the underlying success factors.

Local and regional authorities across Europe already play an active role in securing the future of their rural communities. Following this plenary, participants are invited to decide between two workshops, where the question of 'competitiveness and innovation' in rural territories will be explored through concrete case-studies and experiences of practitioners on the ground.

Some questions for the debate

- What does competitiveness and innovation mean in rural territories?
- What role do rural communities play in realising the Lisbon objectives?
- What can be done to change the image of rural areas towards a positive appreciation? Steps in building a positive agenda for rural development?
- What sectors hold key potential for rural development? What are the opportunities?
- What are the critical success factors?
- Territorial Competitiveness – in conflict with territorial cohesion and the principle of solidarity?

Workshop 1: Successful practice in diversifying rural economies and creating new employment opportunities

Some questions for the debate:

- What are the underlying factors affecting economic development in rural areas? How can you attract new companies and maintain/ create employment?
- Which sectors hold most potential for rural communities? ICT? Energy and renewable resources? Tourism? Agriculture? What could competitiveness and innovation mean in rural context concretely?
- What role do local and regional authorities play in maintaining and diversifying rural economies? How to mobilise private actors?
- Success factors? Methods? (e.g. cooperation with private sector, cooperation with neighbouring authorities, local identity, role of social capital, quality of life, etc.)

Workshop 2: New ways of delivering public services in rural communities

Some questions for the debate:

- What sustainable strategies and innovative solutions exist for improving the provision of services particularly in sparsely populated rural areas? How to balance quality, cost, choice, participation, and social inclusion?
- Would municipal cooperation and service provision in larger spatial units be a solution? What role do market towns play in terms of bundling service offerings for their rural region? Does the linkage between such central towns need to be improved?
- Are new organisational and content-related concepts of service provision in rural areas needed (e.g. mobile services, telemedicine, flexible public transport, intergenerational schools)? What good practice exists? Is it transferable to other contexts?
- What role for public authorities and local politicians?
- Would an increased cooperation between public authorities and private service providers be beneficial? How to enhance cooperation across organisational, sectoral and administrative boundaries? How to involve citizens? What role for the voluntary sector?
- What enabling conditions need to be in place? How to solve the potential conflict with EU internal market legislation?

Plenary 3: The European Policy Framework of the Future – what support structures do we need to assist rural areas?

Rural communities today face a significantly altered context: there are new challenges, new opportunities. The ever-widening diversity between rural communities requires targeted policy instruments. Yet, the money available for rural development in the EU 27 between 2007 and 2013 will be in real terms some 9% less than for the EU 25 in the current period (2000-2006).

It is of paramount importance to play an active role in the re-shaping of the European policy framework, to make sure that it is based on a polycentric development model, that it reflects the concerns of Europe's citizens and that it responds to the heterogeneous needs of Europe's rural actors.

Some questions for the debate:

- What kind of policies and investments can help release development potential of rural communities? How can governments stimulate innovation? What are the options for re-orientating rural development policies to better cope with the diverse challenges rural communities face? Is there a need to review the 'rural development toolbox'?
- In the context of the ongoing health check of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU budget review, what are the key questions that need to be addressed?
- For the period post-2013, do we need to review the balance between CAP Pillar 1 and Pillar 2? Is there a case to be made for increasing compulsory modulation?[2]
- How do we ensure consistency and coherence between the CAP and EU cohesion policy? Should rural development be integrated into the wider EU Regional Policy?
- How to combine an EU competitiveness and economic growth agenda with the objective of cohesion? What is the right balance between focussing on strengthening growth poles and assisting structurally weak regions to diminish disparities and creating comparable living conditions? What contribution can the EU Territorial Agenda make?
- How to mobilise rural actors to make sure the EU continues to work towards a polycentric development of its territory? What role for associations of local and regional authorities? How to work in exchange and partnership with other interest groups involved in the debate? How to take into account citizens' expectations?

[2] CAP support is divided into two pillars: Pillar 1 consists of direct payments to farmers, whilst Pillar 2 supports rural development measures. For 2007-2013, this includes measures to improve the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, the environment and countryside, the quality of life, the diversification of rural economies, local capacity for change. Compulsory modulation means a transfer of money from the 1st Pillar to the 2nd Pillar, thus reducing the amount available at member state level for direct payments to farmers and increasing the amount for rural development measures. Currently, there is a 5% compulsory modulation, decided in the 2003 reform, with the possibility to apply an additional voluntary modulation of up to 20%, an option used by few member states.