



Leitrim Declaration: Helping towns and villages drive rural revival in the European Union

11 February 2019

The European Alliance (EA) group at the European Committee of the Regions, at its extraordinary meeting in Mohill (Ireland), held on 11 February 2019, confirmed its commitment to actively helping towns and villages drive rural revival in the European Union and agreed on the following declaration:

1. recalls that rural areas cover more than three quarters of EU territory and host more than half the EU population and hence need special attention and support in accordance with Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the objective of achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion;
2. recognises the huge social, environmental, cultural heritage and economic potential of rural areas and regrettably notes that their level of development still remains significantly below the EU average;
3. underlines the challenges rural areas face in ensuring the provision and accessibility of public services, in particular health, education and social services;
4. recalls the need to proceed fully with the implementation of the CORK 2.0 declaration and reiterates in this respect its call for an EU Agenda for rural areas in order to provide a framework and guidelines for the development of rural territories;
5. highlights the pivotal role of the European Structural and Investment Funds and of the European Fund for Rural Development in delivering investments and cohesion in rural areas and ensuring their sustainability;
6. believes it is of utmost importance to allocate appropriate resources for rural development at the European level, as part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy; in this context, warns against the proposed budget cuts for 2020-2027 period which risk widening territorial divide between more and less developed areas as well as between urban and rural areas;
7. stresses that CAP should continue guaranteeing high quality traceable products and that the standards set at EU level must be protected in trade agreements;

8. calls for greater cooperation and partnerships between urban and rural areas as they provide complementary services and are mutually dependent;
9. highlights that border, insular and peripheral areas face specific challenges, such as natural, legal and administrative obstacles which hinder (territorial) cooperation and local development;
10. calls for a greater focus on and funding for cross-border cooperation and territorial cooperation projects;
11. highlights the crucial role of farmers in preserving the land and delivering lasting and sustainable solutions to preserve natural and rural landscape;
12. stresses that rural development policy must insist on diversification and modernisation in order to maintain economic activities, employment opportunities and public services in rural territories and avert risks of depopulation, territorial divide and brain drain;
13. underlines the importance of investing in research and innovation to ensure sustainable rural development and calls for targeted EU policies and support, beyond the CAP, to enable business innovation and job creation through the development of Smart Villages;
14. calls for greater synergies between policies at the European, national, regional and local level for successful smart specialisation strategies;
15. emphasises the need to step up investment in digitalisation in rural areas and to address the digital divide by ensuring high broadband access; in this context, highlights that the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) also play also a key role in promoting natural and cultural heritage and eco-tourism;
16. underlines that a bottom up approach and participation of local communities is key to achieve greater cohesion among EU territories;
17. underlines the importance of Community-led Local Development (CLLD) projects, such as LEADER, which help local authorities, particularly in rural, mountainous and insular areas, develop local development strategies in accordance with specific needs of those territories;
18. highlights the contribution of rural areas to environment, climate and renewable energy policy; encourages local and regional authorities to exploit their potential even further and to embrace new resource-efficient and circular economy models;
19. calls on the European Commission to implement measures to mitigate the consequences of Brexit on regions and industries most affected;
20. instructs its president to forward this declaration to the CoR president, European Commission, European Parliament and the Council, along with national and regional governments.