

Statement of Village Action Association of Finland

On the "Future Rural Policy within the European Union" statement of European Rural Alliance (ERA)

The European Rural Alliance is dealing with the next EU period in a well established fashion. Especially welcomed is the suggested introduction of a third pillar in the thinking, planning and implementation.

Even if the rural policy of the EU has had different implementations during its life span, there have always been attempts to develop it with other arguments other than the viability of the countryside. This is why the viability, measured on the bases of inhabitants and welfare, has not reached the level of richer areas. The relative setting of large rural areas in Europe is no wonder, because the rural policy of the EU has not even tried to find solutions and tools for reaching a balanced and fair regional development. The countryside has been approached from the needs of the farmers and point of view of the environment.

The agriculture, the environment as well as the countryside need their own tools for development to better and more efficiently answer to their needs, than what they have today. For instance the European liturgy about two pillars, one for agriculture and one for rural development, is not reality in many parts of Europe. In addition to that; the way many member states have implemented the actions, the agricultural/rural fund and the structural fund actors have been divided more than necessary: the big centers on one hand and the agriculture and the environment on the other, are taking away the recourses needed for building a sustainable countryside. The gains from spread effects and integration of themes have been smaller than expected. **Rural development deserves tools and resources of its own.**

ERA is pointing out, quite well founded, the different nature of the development tools. The new paradigm of rural development is based on the fact that there are several social and vocational groups living in the countryside, and that rural development will not be successful if it is only based on one group. Agriculture and countryside is no longer two sides of the same coin, even if this still is said for propagandistic reasons. Rural policy needs many different types of actors and civic activity to be successful. That is why the LEADER –approach is a very important method for European and even global development. The methodology is not finished, but it is the bearer of the ingredients of an effective rural development. It mobilizes actors and increases the possibilities to get private funding and voluntary work for a common development. The latter is becoming more and more evident each day and can not be replaced with subsidies.

LEADER is no longer a pilot in the European Union. In many countries it already has a good regional coverage and the volume could be larger than today, if it were not unnaturally linked to the need for support of farming. Agriculture and rural development must not compete for the same money. This methodologically primitive situation is the current reality.

ERA's third pillar suggestion consists of somewhat heterogenic elements: partly clearly substance questions, partly methodological priorities. When the role of LEADER as an implementer in the third pillar is stressed by the Village Action Association of Finland, it also means that the actors of the civil society should be more predominant than today and it underlines the broad use of governance in rural policy. The word "countryside" as a segment of the third pillar is too general. We are offering the word "living conditions" instead. But the word "competitiveness" covers nicely all activities for supporting enterprises and entrepreneurship, same goes for "competence", developing knowledge and skills. Living conditions would mainly deal with the ongoing changes of systems for delivering services and questions about housing.

So the third pillar would have three axes and, as ERA suggests, a basket of actions under each axes. The LEADER –method can be used for all of this but also for part of the second pillar, the environmental actions. The family farmers and agriculture can be active in the third pillar, but the pillar should not have tailor made actions for agriculture, witch can be found in pillar I and II. Rural development should treat different industries – agricultural included – the same way.

The many past program periods and programs of the EU, and the different way the member states are implementing them, offers a common experience and lesson: the programs used for development work should be clear, independent and flexible, taking in to account the differences between regions. ERA's "Unity and diversity" is targeting that. The proposal is raising several important questions that have not been noticed enough in the European debate.

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