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Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable, equitable rural/urban development.

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Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable, equitable rural/urban development

“If you want cities to survive, you need rural areas that thrive.”

These are the words of the Vice President of the European Commission, 12/02/2020.

I am sure that we all hold Commissioner Timmermans in very high regard and that the Green Deal, with a socially- inclusive dimension, is a new pathway for timely, holistic priorities.

However, the key word for me in any holistic rural/urban development, is – **EQUITABILITY**. Unfairness ferments instability.

There have been many historical examples where cities through militarisation, industrialisation and economic and social exploitation have created a very unbalanced relationship where the engagement resources of urban far outweighed those of rural. Usually, investment resources were allocated on a population basis making sparsely populated rural, even with the EU CAP and regional policies, unable to “thrive,” let alone, interact fairly. That fear of exploitation persists and even in Commissioner Timmerman’s quotation there is an unintended bias – that rural areas exist to enable cities to survive!

Compare that quote with the motto of Sweden’s Rural Parliament-

“ALL Sweden shall live.”

There are 3 pan European Organisations, PREPARE, ERCA and ELARD, here today, who, together with others, organise the European Rural Parliament as a platform for rural voices, and who are jointly with the EESC addressing this very important topic.

I have borrowed the following words from each --

Key words --- PREPARE ALLIANCE, LEADER and a BRIDGE (the EESC).

We have travelled hesitantly from an urban, population-weighted set of economic and social policies which then were, as an afterthought, skimmed for belated use in rural areas, under a fig leaf of rural proofing, to specific, tailor-made rural policies of which 20 years of rural development (RDP) targeted rural needs. This was, at a European Commission level, highlighted in CORK 1, Cork 2 and the LEADER Programme, alongside the Regional Policy approach.

PREPARING for a more holistic approach to territorial cohesion, needed, in the first instance, for rural minnows, to be structurally strengthened. It needed the experience and innovation of LEADER and the solidarity of different rural interests, including through the supporting strength of ERCA, PREPARE, ELARD, Euromontana, Smart Villages Network, ECOVAST, and the European Cultural Centres, to forge ALLIANCES of mutual interest. The European Rural Parliament and many grass root platforms, such as the Local Action Groups, provided for a growing confidence and maturity for rural voices. Rural communities, smart villages, rural cultural organisations, farmer and forester advocates and environmental campaigners needed to learn to listen, and share learning about the inter dependencies of each other, and to accept that they were “better together.”.

This experience of joint working WITHIN rural areas between not for profit social enterprises, the private and public sectors, as well as the CLLD model, must have given confidence to rural voices that they could reverse decades of decline for rural employment and public services. There is, now, some resilience in the way small communities have learnt to adapt to the loss of public and private services through social enterprises, crowd funding, and sheer determination to harness all their entrepreneurial energies and business and cultural assets to restore the half-full glass.

However, this tender, fragile cohesion must not be lost or sacrificed.

There has to be EQUITY in the tent labelled “ holistic urban-rural ,” or it will be blown away in storms of new global challenges and an overwhelming demand for access to more rural resources, from urban citizens. The next speaker will refer to the excellent work of the ROBUST project on this issue.

And it is partly because of urgent global challenges of climate change, of declining natural resources, and the increasing understanding of farm to fork, of protecting and harnessing natural resources for health and recreational opportunities, that NOW is the time for a new understanding, for a new respect.

In England, Wales and Scotland there are Countryside Codes of conduct to help people understand how to respect rural areas. This could be upgraded into a European wide Rights and Responsibilities Charter.

This has to be the time for new partnerships, for circular, sustainable policies and investment. This is the time to build from rural proofing, from “rural – plural” to a concept of rural-urban proofing. We need policies that demonstrate how they benefit both rural and urban and how, together, equitably, they add value.

That will be a herculean challenge for silo mentalities and departmental accountabilities! It is an ongoing challenge in how we educate each generation of citizens in the interdependencies of producers and consumers, of the multi demands on limited natural resources, the practice of sustainability. It will also be a challenge for participative democracy!

Indeed, can the Commission and governments everywhere manage this wider stakeholder group of advocates, lobbyists and representative organisations, in a coherent way? There must be a key role here for the EESC to bridge-build, and I would recommend that working with the Parliament and the Committee of The Regions they should jointly produce a trilogy of OPINIONS to provide platforms and resolutions. They should encourage and listen to, the voices of young rural and urban people, of workers as well as employers, of women, who have played a leading role in rural development, and of minorities, if the Green Deal is to be inclusive.

Such evolving policies and commitments to deliver practically, need to be carefully piloted, and wisely developed at all levels from Brussels, to national, regional governments and importantly to local level community decision making. The European Rural Parliament movement is about participatory local democracy, is about identifying what is needed for rural resilience and advocating such needs and solutions.. The ERP also recognises rural-urban interdependency but, it, and the plethora of inter- community research organisations, including the OECD, need to deep dive into detail and adapt thinking to recognise the new world that is Covid and hopefully, post covid driven. I would hope that the ERP Organising Partners would be willing to help the European Institutions in this work alongside similar urban based civil society representative movements.

And so, how do we contextualise this desire for a holistic approach into practice at different levels of policy making? How do we create partnerships that are sustainable and equitable between the citizens of cities, towns, urban sprawl, peri urban, rural and rural remote? One size will not fit all!

Some challenge, but now is the time because the challenge is global and much of the solution is local. Linking the 2 will need the policy direction, the incentive of investment, both financial and personnel, of intermediaries and a research capacity to experiment for good practice. Learning to manage some antagonism through measures for conflict resolution should be part of any prescription.

The ground rules for any partnership must include the following –

COMMON PURPOSES.

MUTUAL RESPECT.

SHARED BENEFITS.

There would be surprise if we have no common purposes, during a global pandemic and climate challenges. There would be a lack of knowledge and understanding if there was no mutual respect and some naivety if there were no benefits to share.

This is not to halt current rural policies, but to build and evolve them and even strengthen the political case for them by including a measurement for urban as well as rural benefit. The Agri-Environment Schemes of recent years could be seen as an example, of a partnership between farming businesses and all citizens and taxpayers who understand the need for environmental conservation and the need to support those people with the skills to deliver.

If we produced food in the recent past regardless of who and where was the consumer, and were subsidised for our efforts, then now, we understand , better, the link between food and health, between producing food and managing land resources sustainably. Equity in such a partnership would ensure that there is greater fairness for the weaker links in the chain such as individual food producers, employees, small village shopkeepers and the fragile environment, itself.

If urban citizens and industrial processes need energy then that energy can be produced in rural areas on reduced carbon footprints. It is these links that should generate public finance and advisory support. There are however, elephants in the room which could, in the future even upset this delicate resource partnership. What if all our energy needs could come from safe nuclear? And what if veganism and laboratory cloning eliminated the need for pastoral, livestock farming and land management! Ouch !

There are many other less threatened, examples of rural /urban joint working.--

The 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage demonstrated how interlinked were rural and industrial, landscapes and artistry, craftsmanship and the importance of intergenerational sustainability for the wellbeing of all citizens.

The European Commission is complimented for such an initiative. The same applies to its widening of criteria for European Cities of Culture Awards to include nearby rural areas as integrated units, though even more could be done to highlight rural cultural areas.

Perhaps one of the best contributions that the Commission can make is to build on the success of the Smart Villages work which brought together 3 Directorates and was led by the ENRD. This project , and I was a member of its

Thematic Group, gathered together practitioners to seek practical priorities, to disseminate good practice and identify problems and solutions. We need a bigger cross cutting Commission initiative to look at rural /urban pilots and templates for working between individual businesses, community of interest groups and problem solving mechanisms. Widening and building on the remit of the best of CLLD is a good place to start.

Within states and regions, theatres can and are being funded on condition that they perform outreach for rural communities and this conditionality is another example of partnership, which policy and funding can support. Funding visiting artists and musicians to work with rural schools and communities is also a good example of building relationships as is farm open days and rural craft fairs and festivals.

Universities and research companies can and do operate multiple sites including in rural small towns and more should be encouraged to do likewise.

When it is safe to do so, we could reinvent twinning between settlements, step up exchange visits, increase social care farms and volunteer experience. Examples of long-term formal partnerships between towns and rural communities are in short supply. We need more.

For businesses and public bodies, employers who support employees to work from their rural home is a significant boost for maintaining a balanced rural age profile. The pandemic has accelerated this opportunity but has also accentuated the challenge of inward migration pushing up house prices beyond the capacity of local young people. This is a major issue which needs swift resolution in many areas, especially the peri-urban. One hopes that the research undertaken by the Commission into the long-term vision for rural areas has been able to assimilate the latest possible impacts of the global pandemic and the opportunities arising from the increasing access to technology. Otherwise, its recommendations will be outdated, before launch!

“If you want to walk fast, walk alone, if you want to walk far, walk with others.”

We are on a journey in the same direction and we should walk together.”

Tom Jones.

