**EESC Various Interests Group puts forward an action plan to support vulnerable regions and people in the EU**

**An action plan focusing on community-led local development, young people and social inclusion was at the heart of the EESC conference on supporting and integrating EU vulnerable regions and people in the EU organised in Sofia on 6 March 2018.**

The event was an opportunity for EESC Various Interests Group members to brainstorm on how to boost sustainable growth and cohesion in vulnerable regions and provided added value for the work of the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU, whose first priority is European economic growth and social cohesion.

Many non-urban regions and the people living there are socially, economically and territorially excluded. Approximately 113 million Europeans live in non-urban areas. However, rural, mountain and remote peripheral areas average out at only 70% of European GDP. Unemployment levels are high and the elderly are overrepresented, accounting for about 20% of the population. Around a quarter of the population does not have access to the Internet. In addition, non-urban areas are often characterised by limited or non-existent social services and sparse transport, communication and energy infrastructure. These shortages lead directly to depopulation and have a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, such as the elderly and disabled.

"The ultimate objective and indeed obligation for the EU is to close the opportunity gaps between urban and non-urban areas," said **Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC Various Interests Group. Mr Jahier also drew attention to an action plan made up of the following measures:

* **Community-led local development**

First and foremost, community-led local development is paramount. Local leadership, entrepreneurship, innovation and ownership are key to sustainable and inclusive recovery. Local actors must design and implement these policies following a common vision and working together with regional, national and European authorities on coordinated policies.

* **The role of young people**

Secondly, young people should have a specific role in future integrated rural development. It is essential to focus on developing attractive education and training opportunities for young people locally and on helping young farmers to settle. It is also important to encourage young entrepreneurs to diversify local production and to set up community-owned renewable energy projects as well as sustainable tourism projects.

* **Social inclusion of the most vulnerable people**

The third point relates to social inclusion and protection of the most vulnerable people. This includes groups such as the working poor, the energy poor, elderly and disabled people. The social economy, in particular cooperatives and social enterprises, has a key role to play in providing necessary services and employment.

The event was opened by the **Folk Dance Group of People with Disabilities**, who performed "Dance No Different than You". The debate consisted of sessions on:

* Investing in and stimulating vulnerable mountain regions
* Creating opportunities and protecting the rights of vulnerable people
* Promoting economic development and combating depopulation in non-urban regions

Speakers included **Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC Various Interests Group, **Hasan Ademov**, Chairman of the Labour, Social and Demography Policy Committee in the 44th National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria and **Lalko Dulevski**, Member of the EESC Various Interests Group and President of the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria. A keynote speech was delivered by the Bulgarian Minister for Labour and Social Policy, **Bisser Petkov**.

The conference took place at the Boyana conference centre, which the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU generously made available to the EESC Various Interests Group organisers.