



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/390
Civil society in rural areas

Brussels, 4 December 2008

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

The need for concerted action at EU level to strengthen civil society in rural areas, with particular regard to new Member States

(Own-initiative opinion)

On 17 January 2008, the European Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 29(2) of the Rules of Procedure, to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

Civil society in rural areas: the need for concerted action at EU level to strengthen civil society in rural areas, with particular regard to new Member States.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 30 October 2008. The rapporteur was Mr Krzysztof Kamieniecki.

At its 449th plenary session of 3 and 4 December 2008 (meeting of 4 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 107 votes to 6, with 11 abstentions:

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 For a very long time, rural policy focussed exclusively on matters directly concerned with agricultural production. Only over the past twenty years has the view become more widespread that rural areas are too diverse to be able to apply uniform policy instruments drawn up at European or national level and that development goals and the objective of ensuring equal opportunities could not be effectively achieved without the commitment and involvement of the rural population itself.
- 1.2 The current debate on the Common Agricultural Policy and rural policy is crucial for the future of European villages. Aside from experts and politicians, the voice of rural communities should also be heard in this debate.
- 1.3 The Leader initiative sets a good example here, and is therefore seen by the new Member States as an opportunity to promote action and to make more effective use of development resources in rural areas. It is vital that both EU and national sources support various types of initiative to strengthen civil society in rural areas.
- 1.4 The development of civil society in the rural areas of European Member States is influenced by economic changes (growing competition on markets), social changes (rural depopulation) and environmental changes (climate change); these changes have been particularly acute over the past few decades. The current processes overlap with far-reaching historical changes

shaping economic development. Rural areas in the new Member States have experienced particularly dramatic changes.

- 1.5 One avenue for the development of civil society is the adaptation of development instruments to the capabilities and needs of specific rural areas, requiring wider use of the bottom-up "territorial" approach. Education also has a key role to play.
- 1.6 Non-governmental organisations in Eastern and Central European countries were set up as early as the late 1980s. Compared to their EU-15 counterparts, non-governmental organisations are still coming up against more barriers, due to differences in economic development, more limited access to new technologies and the various - including private - sources of funding, not to mention legal conditions and the attitude of the public authorities.
- 1.7 A greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that rural organisations have access to financing. Financing should also be stable and flexible, while enabling the actual operational costs of organisations to be covered (institutional grants).
- 1.8 Special institutional solutions are needed to boost the potential of rural organisations, not least in countries which are preparing for EU membership. Various types of instrument must also be put in place to help rural communities access information.
- 1.9 The rural population, which as a rule is not as well educated and has more limited access to information, is having major difficulties in finding its feet in this fast changing reality.
- 1.10 In the EU as a whole, the development of civil society in rural areas faces the following challenges:
 - barriers to accessing knowledge and information;
 - a lack of entrepreneurial skills;
 - demographic problems and a lack of gender equality¹;
 - lower-quality social infrastructure than in cities.
- 1.11 At the level of national policy, greater coordination is needed between decisions on rural areas taken within the framework of healthcare, education, social assistance, agricultural policy or rural policy in the narrow sense. Actions are also needed to strengthen ties between rural and urban areas.
- 1.12 There are still not enough instruments enabling rural inhabitants to find alternative sources of income. Part of the State's role is to create the conditions for dialogue between its institutions and society.

¹ The issue of women in rural areas has already been discussed by the EESC in opinion NAT/052.

- 1.13 Local authorities have a key role to play here. They should act as a catalyst for the development of rural communities and stimulate joint activities undertaken by them.
- 1.14 The problem of a lack of trust between the representatives of civil society and local authorities is particularly severe in the new Member States. Civil society organisations perceive local government as standing in the way of community initiatives, while local councillors see local community leaders as potential competitors.
- 1.15 The possible introduction of "rural proofing" on a wider scale should be considered, as a method of studying the impact of specific legal or policy solutions (e.g. relating to education systems or public procurement) on rural areas.

2. **Background**

- 2.1 The changes taking place in rural areas of the EU make it imperative to analyse trends in the development of rural communities, the extent to which they are able to take their own decisions on the future, and the degree to which policies, legislation and government institutions are supporting relations between people and emerging needs for cooperation.
- 2.2 Given that civil society plays many roles, it may be asserted that it facilitates life and fills the gap between individuals and families and the State.
- 2.3 European integration influences the dynamics of change in rural areas, and observing this process from the perspective of laying foundations for civil society is a key task for the EESC.
- 2.4 The development of civil society in the rural areas of European Member States is influenced by economic changes (growing competition on markets), social changes (rural depopulation) and environmental changes (climate change); these changes have been particularly acute over the past few decades. The current processes overlap with far-reaching, historical changes affecting economic development.
- 2.5 Rural areas in the new Member States have experienced particularly dramatic changes. These changes are affecting all areas of life simultaneously – not only the economic sphere (including the banking sector), but also the social sphere (reform of healthcare, the social protection system), and the legal sphere (the changing role of local authorities, the law on non-governmental organisations, financial and tax regulations, etc.).
- 2.6 The former workers of major production farms, where the traditional features of the rural community became distorted, represent a legacy of the earlier period.
- 2.7 The rural population, which as a rule is not as well educated and has more limited access to information, is having major difficulties in finding its feet in this fast changing reality.

- 2.8 In the EU-15 some of these changes had already taken place, over a longer period. Despite this, these countries were also unable to avoid negative consequences, which, among other things, were associated with the concentration of agricultural production.
- 2.9 Moreover, the countries of the EU 15 have a much higher appreciation of the value of rural areas than is the case for the new Member States. Both public opinion and the media in the new Member States tend to mainly focus their attention on agricultural issues.
- 2.10 The first official non-governmental organisations to support rural development in Eastern and Central European countries were set up as early as the late 1980s. Compared to their EU-15 counterparts, non-governmental organisations are still coming up against more barriers, including differences in economic development, more limited access to new technologies and the various - including private - sources of funding, not to mention legal conditions and the attitude of the public authorities, which lack experience and have little faith in cooperation with the social sector.
- 2.10.1 Official figures for e.g. the ratio of NGOs to residents point to a lower level of community involvement in rural areas. However, if we take into account informal groups, neighbourhood networks, as well as the level of involvement by the rural population in matters concerning the areas where they live or knowledge of initiatives undertaken by the local authority, it appears that social capital of this kind is often higher in rural areas than in large towns and cities.
- 2.11 Since the start of the century, the development of rural organisations in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has gained significant momentum. Furthermore, they have started to cooperate with one another and to set up structures at regional and national level. In several countries these were based on the model used in Scandinavia, where in almost every rural area there are local associations. In other countries, rural NGOs have established national agreements and "fora" to support cooperation and the exchange of experience and to represent rural communities in contacts with the authorities. Organisations of this kind in the new Member States, which enjoy the support of Scandinavian organisations, have set up PREPARE - Partnerships for Rural Europe, which helps them to support one another and to improve the way in which they work.

3. **The European Union and civil society in rural areas**

- 3.1 For a very long time, rural policy focussed exclusively on matters directly concerned with agricultural production, and was uniform throughout the EU. By contrast, policy on infrastructure investment in rural areas, for example, was generally drawn up at national level. Only in the late 1980s did the view become more widespread that rural areas are too diverse to be able to apply uniform policy instruments drawn up at European or national level and

that development goals and the objective of ensuring equal opportunities could not be effectively achieved without the commitment and involvement of the rural population itself.

- 3.2 The recently developed rural development programmes include instruments and solutions which to some extent meet the needs of rural civil society. One such instrument is the Leader programme, with a key role for NGOs in Local Action Groups (in the new programming period, the Leader approach will be applied to 40% of rural areas in the EU).
- 3.3 NGOs can also benefit from other measures under rural development programmes concerning areas such as rural services; however, it is important to devise solutions for each country enabling organisations to provide services and build public-social or public-private partnerships which are open to NGOs. There is also scope for supporting NGOs through national rural networks.
- 3.4 The approach advocated by the Leader initiatives can be adapted according to conditions and needs in individual Member States. In many countries such an approach has been applied far more widely than the Leader initiative, with national and regional resources being employed to offer effective support for local initiatives (this has happened in Ireland, Spain and Germany, for example).
- 3.5 New Member States view the Leader initiative as an opportunity to promote action and to make more effective use of development resources in rural areas. It is vital that support is provided from both EU and national sources for the various types of initiative which help to strengthen civil society in rural areas.
- 3.5.1 Support for community action to meet the shared local needs of rural inhabitants is a highly positive trend in EU policy. Efforts to create civil society, ideally on a bottom-up basis, face numerous problems, not least in view of the need to overcome administrative barriers.

4. National policies and civil society in rural areas

- 4.1 A debate is now under way on the Community's agricultural policy and its policy towards rural areas. The outcome of this debate will have an impact not only on any changes to the funds earmarked for rural areas in the current budgetary period, but also on the guidelines for the future policy for the 2013–2020 period and beyond. It is extremely important that, aside from experts and politicians, the voice of rural communities is also heard in this debate.
- 4.2 New Member States lack experience of cooperation not only between the government and civil society, but also between individual ministries and departments within the same government. There is therefore virtually no coordination between decisions on rural areas taken within the framework of healthcare, education, social assistance, agricultural policy or rural policy in the narrow sense.

- 4.3 For the new Member States, the programming of spending of EU funds for the 2007-2013 budgetary period is only the second "exercise" of its kind, which, combined with the limited experience of officials and frequent changes of government, mean that several opportunities for rural development made possible by EU policy will not be fully exploited.
- 4.4 It should not be forgotten that one of the main conditions for ensuring economic and social cohesion in the enlarged EU is strengthening ties between rural and urban areas. Creating formal, often artificial divisions linked, for example, to requirements for preserving "demarcation lines" between resources from various EU funds (e.g. ERDF and EAFRD), and this at a time of frequently changing conditions of access and disconnect between the various decision-making procedures in these funds, can hamper complementary measures and deepen the divide between rural and urban areas.
- 4.5 Rural areas are mainly the focus of measures linked to conventional agricultural production or typically "social" instruments (unemployment benefits or support for semi-subsistence farms). Although these measures are absolutely vital (particularly in countries where poverty is concentrated principally in rural areas, such as in Romania and Poland), they also preserve the status quo and do not provide a basis for change. There are still not enough instruments enabling rural inhabitants to find alternative sources of income. Job creation in rural areas is still supported by institutions with links to agricultural development offering programmes which do not sufficiently promote non-agricultural professions.
- 4.6 The Lisbon Strategy could potentially play a significant role here, as innovation and competitiveness, in the broad sense, are also possible in rural areas. Unfortunately, these concepts are too often associated with new technologies and research centres in large towns and cities. As a result, a vast swathe of Community-based innovation, and innovation associated with heritage, environmental values and local traditions, remains untapped.
- 4.7 In many Member States, particularly the new ones, national policies are restricted to a narrow understanding of innovation and competitiveness (e.g. the conditions for EU support for businesses, with unusually high thresholds, running to several million euros, for businesses applying for support, something which all but excludes beneficiaries from rural areas and small towns).
- 4.8 Conservative and opportunistic attitudes among national politicians vis-à-vis rural communities reflect a lack of determination on the part of the authorities to put in place the conditions for their development, the lack of forward-looking policies on rural areas, and fear of civil society acquiring a role which could make political parties less important. With national authorities adopting such a policy, many rural communities look to the European Union to provide an impetus for change.
- 4.9 However, it is up to national authorities to create the conditions for dialogue between national institutions and society, while developing a culture of openness and transparency. This is all

the more important given that relatively few inhabitants of rural areas (e.g. 17% in Poland) believe that democracy has an important role to play in community life.

5. **Local authorities and civil society in rural areas**

- 5.1 In rural areas, local authorities have a key role to play in supporting initiatives by civil society and in cooperating with its representatives. They should act as a catalyst for the development of rural communities and stimulate joint activities undertaken by them.
- 5.2 Cooperation between rural organisations and local authorities is often fraught with difficulties. Relations between local authorities in rural areas and community organisations together with leaders of such organisations are difficult in all the Member States, although the extent of the problem varies. Widespread examples of best practice inspire confidence and reflect current developments and opportunities.
- 5.3 The problem of a lack of trust between the representatives of civil society and local authorities is particularly severe in the new Member States. While local government is perceived as a barrier to community initiatives, local government institutions view intensifying activity by community leaders in their territories as a form of competition which threatens their position. Civil society organisations seeking local government support or partnership for their initiatives are viewed with suspicion and resentment.
- 5.4 The barriers created by a lack of trust can be overcome through the implementation of projects and the existence of visible benefits to the municipalities (communities) in which there is close cooperation between local authorities and leaders of civil society organisations.
- 5.5 In rural areas efforts are being made – for example in the form of training – to develop positive relations and communication between local authorities and civil society organisations; however, further educational measures are needed to achieve a long-term solution to the problem.

6. **Barriers to the development of civil society in rural areas**

- 6.1 In addition to problems which are mainly characteristic of Central and Eastern European countries, many issues affect rural areas throughout the EU, such as:
- barriers to access to knowledge and the need to provide rural communities with various forms of education;
 - more limited access to information and less capacity to use it;
 - lack of entrepreneurial skills, difficulties in moving from agricultural to rural business activity;

- lack of gender equality²;
- regional demographic problems, reflected in a lack of either women or men to be partners in running rural households; in some regions, rural depopulation;
- lower-quality social infrastructure than in cities;
- bureaucratic restrictions and a lack of support from government administration.

7. **Prospects for the development of civil society in rural areas**

- 7.1 Civil society activity can be increased in rural areas by improving decision-making methods in the area of governance both at national level (by involving civil society in the joint formulation of rural policies, instead of simply consulting civil society on ready-made solutions devised by civil servants), and at local and regional level (by involving communities in decisions on the allocation of development funds to specific projects).
- 7.2 The adaptation of development instruments to the capabilities and needs of specific rural areas requires an ever wider use of a bottom-up approach. This means that this approach should not only be used with regard to specific actions under the rural area development programme, but also as part of structural funding and national policy.
- 7.3 A solution to the key problems facing rural areas is possible, thanks to partnership between public, private (business) and non-governmental sectors. Enabling a community operating as a local partnership to decide or, at the very least, to participate in decision-making on how funds are used in order to create jobs, mobilise the unemployed or prevent exclusion can lead to an increase in local residents' sense of responsibility for the situation in their area and in their readiness to get involved for the good of their local community.
- 7.4 More attention should be given to building ties between the research sector and rural organisations. It would also be worth identifying and promoting best practices which have been developed in this area by numerous countries.
- 7.5 Education has an enormous influence on the development of civil society in rural areas. Changes to educational systems in rural areas should provide for the facilitation of initiatives by rural inhabitants who decide to organise local schools as an expression of concern for the education of future generations and as a particular form of community action which requires cooperation by authorities. Another type of best practice in some EU countries which should become more widespread concerns adult education (e.g. "folk" universities).
- 7.6 The mere fact of doing something for the common good is enough to strengthen the community. Findings from recent years show that those communities which have managed -

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The issue of women in rural areas has already been discussed by the EESC in opinion NAT/052.

through community involvement - to overcome their paralysis and conquer their inertia are willing to share their experiences with other less resourceful communities³.

- 7.7 Equally, a greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that rural organisations have access to financing. In theory, these types of opportunities are provided by both EU and national or international funding. However, recent research indicates that small NGOs (and it is primarily these types of organisations which operate in rural areas) make only very limited use of the currently available sources of financing.
- 7.8 Conditions should therefore be created to make it easier to provide NGOs with stable, flexible financing, including funding to finance their operations (institutional grants - as opposed to "project-based" financing) and to identify mechanisms which can provide organisations in rural areas with easier access to funding - e.g. through the creation of "regranting" mechanisms by intermediary organisations (as is the case in the LEADER approach, albeit on a wider scale).
- 7.9 These types of solutions will also make it possible to shorten the fund allocation decision-making process, which is a key issue in the case of small, locally focused projects.
- 7.10 Making civil society more active in rural areas can lead to the improved coordination of various types of "sectoral" policies (education, health, social, environmental protection etc.) - if only because, unlike public sector agencies, NGOs have a tradition of setting up cooperation networks and are more experienced in this area.
- 7.11 Nonetheless, the possible introduction of "rural proofing" on a wider scale should be considered, as has been applied in certain Member States. This mechanism would involve analysis of how particular legal solutions (not directly connected with rural areas, in fields such as education or public procurement) affect the situation in rural areas. It is also vital to ensure that such assessments are carried out with the involvement of civil society organisations.
- 7.12 Consideration should also be given to institutional solutions which can help strengthen the potential of rural areas. There can be little doubt that such solutions (institutional support, assistance in organisational capacity building and promoting the concept of the public-social partnership) would be useful in those countries currently preparing for EU membership.
- 7.13 It is important to put in place various instruments to ensure improved access to information for rural communities – such instruments should take the specific situation of each country

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This can be seen not only within individual countries (e.g. in Poland where, as part of the Krajowa Sieć Grup Partnerskich [National Network of Partner Groups], more developed groups supervise and support less experienced groups), but also between countries (e.g. the assistance given by Polish rural organisations to Ukraine, by Slovak organisations to Serbia, or by Hungarian organisations to Albania). These types of activities, however, require institutional support and wider promotion as "best practices."

into account (e.g. involving the media and local administration, setting up information points), taking into account the extent of Internet access. Schools, agricultural organisations and trade unions could play a key role in this process of disseminating information, alongside NGOs.

- 7.14 At the same time, steps should also be taken to make the transfer of experiences between the new Member States and candidate countries easier.
- 7.15 It would also be useful to identify mechanisms which can encourage closer cooperation between urban and rural organisations – including through the appropriate development of rules for the use of EU funds. This would, however, mean overcoming "sector-based" thinking and limiting the tendency to establish strict boundaries between various funds.
- 7.16 The current debate on the future of rural areas can provide an opportunity to raise awareness of rural issues among urban inhabitants as well. A number of interesting experimental projects have been carried out in recent years (e.g. as part of the European Citizens' Panel)⁴; these projects have managed to introduce the debate to a wider group of people who were not previously interested in such issues. Rural and urban organisations could get involved together in projects aimed at raising awareness.

Brussels, 4 December 2008.

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