

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF EUROPE

Recommendation 107 (2002)¹ on the problems of Europe's countryside

The Congress,

Recalling that:

1. The countryside of Europe covers 85% of the continent's land area and contains the homes of more than half its people. It is the source of most of Europe's food, and of much of its timber, minerals and other raw materials. It offers beauty, peace and recreation to all Europeans, and it is a rich reserve of wildlife and of human culture;
2. Rural areas are characterised by a unique cultural, economic and social fabric, an extraordinary variety of activities and a great diversity of landscapes (forests and farmland, unspoiled natural sites, villages and small towns, regional centres, small industries);
3. Farming has always been the foundation-stone of most rural economies: it has sustained the way of life and created the cultural landscape in most of Europe's countryside;
4. The agricultural, structural, transport, environmental and nature conservation policies of the European Union have a big impact on the countryside, both in the actual member states and increasingly in the accession countries;

Considering that:

5. Europe's countryside, and the people who live in it, are affected by major forces of change:
 - a.* continued depopulation of many peripheral, remote or sparsely populated regions in western Europe, and of rural settlements generally in much of eastern Europe. The decline of rural economies, and the loss of rural services, in many of these same areas;
 - b.* in more central regions, the rapid expansion of cities, the outward movement of people and of industrial activity, and massive growth of built development. These often occur at a pace which rural communities cannot absorb, and with a scale and style of development which submerges the rural character and culture;
 - c.* the modernisation of agriculture, which has brought great benefit to Europe by producing relatively cheap and abundant food, but at the cost of widespread change to the landscape, loss of wildlife, reduction in farming jobs, and in some areas abandonment of land;
 - d.* pollution of soil, water and air, and the devastation of many lands and forests by industrial and other development and by unwise practices of land management;

e. the growing and widespread attrition of landscape and cultural quality by ill-conceived development of recreation and tourism. In excessive numbers, tourists and their equipment swamp small towns and villages. Tourist developments may, by their scale and style, do grave damage to landscapes and to ecosystems;

f. the general trend towards centralisation of commerce, industry and government, and towards standardisation of culture. These have done much to diminish both the diversity of regional culture in rural Europe and the ability of rural people to determine or influence their own lifestyle;

6. The impact of these changes varies greatly from one rural region to another, but the results include:

- a.* weakness, and lack of diversity, in local economies, with resulting low incomes and low standards of living: in many rural regions there is widespread poverty;
- b.* inadequacy in much rural housing and in many rural services;
- c.* a loss of social and cultural vitality in many areas;
- d.* damage to landscape, wildlife and the health of soil and water systems;
- e.* loss of architectural riches and of regional and local cultures;
- f.* a reduction in the ability of local populations to express their own ideals, to influence policies which affect them and to take their own initiative;

Convinced that:

7. Concentrated effort is needed to revive and strengthen the rural economies of Europe;

8. Programmes of rural development should be conceived and pursued in ways that recognise the high diversity of concerns among the rural regions of Europe, which raise the awareness and enlist the energy of the rural people, and which give equal recognition to the interests and needs of rural men and women;

Recommends that the governments of member states:

9. Recognise the diversity of regions, the special qualities of rural areas and the needs of rural communities;

10. Reflect these qualities and needs in their policies related to agriculture, forestry, industrial development, tourism, transport, housing, services and the environment;

11. Devise their own rural development strategies, taking a dynamic approach in partnership with all sectors: a broad range of policy and action demands the involvement of many bodies, governmental and non-governmental, at local, regional, national and international levels;

12. Follow the principle of subsidiarity in rural development policy, making it as decentralised as possible and based on partnership and co-operation between all levels concerned. The emphasis must be on participation

and a “bottom up” approach, which harnesses the creativity and solidarity of rural communities;

13. Recognise the crucial role of local and regional authorities, democratically elected and based in the rural area. Rural development must be local and community-driven within a coherent European framework;

14. Strengthen the role of small towns as integral parts of rural areas and key development factors, and promote the development of viable rural communities and renewal of villages;

15. Re-emphasise the central role which the rural people themselves should play in the evolution of policy, and the taking of action, to serve their well-being and to protect their heritage;

16. Find means to enable rural communities to express their needs and aspirations, and to apply their energies to meeting these. Effective links must be created between governments and rural communities, so that resources (national and local, public and private) can be harnessed to the task;

17. Take determined action to revive and strengthen the economies of Europe’s rural regions, enabling them to retain a greater share of the added value to the food, timber and other material that they produce;

18. Support the diversification of economic and social activity, focusing on providing the framework for self-sustaining private and community-based initiatives via investment, technical assistance, business services, education and training;

19. Make increased efforts to sustain farming throughout rural Europe. This is needed not only to produce Europe’s food, but also in order to help to sustain the way of life, the rural economy and the cultural landscape of all such areas;

20. Revive a strong industrial element in the rural economy, utilising modern information technologies which offset long-standing rural disadvantages of distance and sparsity of population, and ally them with the heritage of resources, cultures and skills;

21. Provide a modern infrastructure of roads, railways, energy and water supplies, sewerage and telecommunications in rural areas. New or modernised facilities should meet acceptable standards while not doing violence to the rural environment. They may be best provided on a decentralised basis;

22. Review the policies for transport provision, which is an essential element in sustaining healthy rural communities. The following elements are needed:

a. minimum standards of local services (e.g. shops and schools) to encourage short distance travel and viable communities;

b. a revision of external requirements from funding agencies for public transport efficiency, which can damage rural services in particular;

c. maintenance of public service obligations, and not assessment of public transport services by financial/economic criteria only;

d. minimum service standards for liberalised/privatised transport systems;

23. Promote environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development for the coming years, leading to viable rural communities with diversified economies that are environmentally sound;

24. Recognise and protect the rich environmental heritage of rural Europe, including its landscapes, historic buildings and wildlife habitats and species. This heritage should be seen as a major asset for rural development, for example as a basis for rural tourism which should be promoted in a sustainable way;

25. Place more emphasis on sustainable development awareness-raising, information exchange and education;

Calls on the European Union to:

26. Put sustainable rural development at the top of its agenda and make it the fundamental principle for a genuine European rural policy, different from and complementary to the CAP, to ensure a better territorial cohesion in the EU and to succeed with its enlargement;

27. Integrate the need to preserve and improve the quality of the rural environment into all Community policies that relate to rural development;

28. Aim at reversing rural out-migration, combating poverty, stimulating employment and equality of opportunity, and responding to growing requests for more quality, health, safety, personal development and leisure, and improving rural well-being;

29. Reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to contribute to environmentally, economically and socially sustainable rural development. Aiming at sustainable agricultural and rural development, the CAP should:

a. maintain and encourage the management of the rural areas for the benefit of people and nature, regular supplies of high quality healthy food and products for consumers;

b. help achieve a fair price for food products, in which external costs are internalised;

c. provide reasonable incomes for the rural community and prevent land abandonment;

d. support employment and contribute to the economy and culture of rural areas;

e. help farmers in the adjustment process and give them clear indicators for the future;

f. promote the sustainable use of natural resources including soil, water, air and energy;

g. promote fair trade in agricultural products;

h. respect also, via trade, the sustainability of the global environment;

i. work in synergy with other policies to meet high quality objectives for Europe's rural areas;

30. Make sure that all Community policies relating to rural development sustain the quality and amenity of Europe's

rural landscapes (natural resources, biodiversity and cultural identity), so that their use by today's generation does not prejudice the options for future generations.

1. Debated and adopted by the Standing Committee of the Congress on 21 March 2002 (see Doc. CG (8) 28, draft recommendation presented by Mr G. Pumberger and Mr E. Tobler, rapporteurs).