

THE CHALLENGE OF PARTNERSHIP IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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1. The aim of the panel session on 'Partnerships for sustainable rural development' was to focus upon the partnerships which will be needed in order to carry out the new generation of rural development programmes which (as we have heard) are being prepared both in the European Union and in the pre-accession countries of Central Europe, with EU support through Agenda 2000. The earlier sessions have examined the shape which these programmes are expected to have in a number of different regions or countries.

2. Rural development, as a concept and an activity, is wide, rounded and complex. The experience of the last thirty or so years has shown that programmes of rural development which are narrow in scope, or conceived only by government in a top-down way, often fail in their purpose of regenerating rural areas. There has been growing acceptance of the need for an integrated approach - by which is meant an approach which covers all main sectors of activity; which addresses social, cultural, economic and environmental issues; and which therefore involves many different actors.

3. That is why we have seen - in this field of rural development - increasing emphasis on partnership, that is on active and often formalised collaboration between different actors. The broad aim of such partnership, I suppose, to ensure that the energy and commitment of the different parties are applied to agreed purposes and in an effective way. For public-sector bodies, such as national, regional or local authorities, a particular objective of partnership with other sectors may be to ensure that public funds are effectively used, matched and multiplied. For the private and voluntary sectors, the purpose may be to gain leverage over public policy and public funds. For all partners, there can be benefits in exchanging and pooling ideas, gaining support and avoiding conflict.

4. Partnerships, related to rural development, can be very varied in scope, in pattern and in geographic extent. They may be between governments; between national or regional governments and local authorities; between public authorities and private or voluntary bodies; between different non-government bodies at European, national or regional level; between different actors at local level, as in the LEADER programme. They may be focused on action, or policy formulation, or pressure-group activity etc.

5. Partnerships are not easy to create and to sustain. They demand a spirit of co-operation, of openness, of willingness to share and to trust. They can take time to mature and to bring significant results.

6. The aim of the panel session was to open up these issues; to share the experience of creating and sustaining partnerships of different kinds; and to permit a broad debate about the role of partnerships and how they may be enriched throughout Europe, in the cause of rural development.

7. Our panel represents partnerships of different kinds, and includes a number of organisations with whom ECOVAST enjoys active partnership. We have watched with admiration and occasionally assisted the work of the European Rural Observatory, as it encourages and supports the local action groups of LEADER (which are themselves significant, innovative and varied forms of local partnership) and promotes multi-national exchange between different LEADER groups. ECOVAST has organised a training course for people involved in the programme of integrated rural community development funded by the Carpathian Foundation, which is promoting action in a partnership spirit in the Carpathian Euro-region which embraces parts of Hungary, Poland,

Romania, Slovakia and the Ukraine. We are working with Forum Synergies and other NGOs in promoting the PREPARE programme (Pre-accession Partnerships in Rural Europe), of which the aim is to help the 10 pre-accession countries of Central Europe to create strong partnerships between governments, non-government organisations and people in the process of rural development. We are a member organisation of the European Countryside Movement, alongside RED, COPA and six other European NGOs ; the aim of the Movement is to strengthen the voice of rural areas in the decision-making processes of Europe.

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