

PREPARE Webinar 8 July 2020  
“Improving perspectives for the implementation  
of the LEADER approach in the Western Balkans”

**THROWBACK : Empowering rural stakeholders in the Western Balkans**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak. I am glad to be back among my friends in the Western Balkans and Turkey, and to be reminded of my two happy periods – 2000 to 2006 and 2014-16 – as PREPARE Coordinator.

I am asked to reflect on the remarkable series of traveling workshops and conferences held in March/April 2014, focused on ‘Empowering rural stakeholders in the Western Balkans’.

First I want to spend a minute on the previous event which led to the creation of PREPARE and which was a model for the events in 2014.

In 1999, the European Parliament was concerned about how ready the then candidate countries of Central Europe would be to pursue the kind of rural development programmes which were familiar within the EU. Through Hannes Lorenzen, they invited Forum Synergies, ECOVAST and the two rural movements in Sweden and Estonia, *Hela Sverige ska Lev* and *Kodukant*, to organise a week-long traveling workshop in Estonia and Sweden to see how rural development operated there. Attending were people from both government and civil society from all the then candidate countries – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. I was there as secretary-general of ECOVAST, the European Council for the Village and Small Town.

The traveling workshop was very successful in offering ideas, including the experience of LEADER in Sweden; and in starting the creation of a true network of friends in many countries. We decided that we must build upon this success, and we set up PREPARE - the Pre-accession Partnership for Rural Europe. I offered to be coordinator, and I raised funds from the CS Mott Foundation. We set about helping the candidate countries to create or strengthen rural movements or networks. By 2005 there was a full set of networks in those countries, and we began to look further southeast. Before I handed over to Urszula Budzich-Szukała, we had started on the ex-Yugoslav countries by helping to set up prospective networks in Slovenia and Croatia.

Urszula, followed later by Goran Šoster, built up PREPARE’s contacts in the Western Balkans. So, by the time I came again as coordinator in 2014, we had the beginnings of what is now the strong network of rural development networks in the Balkans. At that point, the European Union was in the early stages of offering, through IPARD, the kind of support that they had offered to the central European countries through the PHARE programme 15 years earlier.

Hannes Lorenzen and I, as chairman and coordinator of PREPARE, saw the situation in the Western Balkans in 2014 as parallel to that of central Europe in 1999. We floated the idea of a set of traveling workshops. As always we were focused on involving people from both governments and civil society. We asked Boban Ilic of SWG to join us in shaping the project. Hannes persuaded Dacjan Ciołoş, who was then Agriculture Commissioner, to fund the initiative. TAIEX, the Commission's technical assistance arm, provided the funds and logistics. PREPARE organised the events.

For three days - 31 March to 2 April 2014 - we mounted a simultaneous set of six different traveling workshops - two in each of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Each workshop was attended by a mixed group of 15 people drawn from the three host countries, plus Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Turkey, with equal participation from government officials and civil society. The European Commission was represented, plus EU experts chosen by PREPARE to act as rapporteurs. Turkey was included because the IPARD programme applied equally to them.

On the third day, we all attended a regional conference in Serbia; and a week later, on 8 April, we came together again for a bigger conference in Brussels, chaired by Dacjan Ciołoş and attended by many staff from the European Commission. I acted as Rapporteur General, and wrote the report which was published by the European Commission

Like the event in 1999, the Traveling Workshops offered two key benefits :

- First, they brought people together from different countries, and from government and civil society, plus EU staff and experts : this had a fine effect in building networks and forming friendships
- Second, the workshops offered a 'reality check' of being actually on the ground, meeting rural people – farmers, entrepreneurs, local authorities, civil groups – and gaining a bottom-up view.

The conference in Brussels was of high value in crystallising ideas about how the rural development process in western Balkans and Turkey could be enhanced. It was very encouraging for people from these accession countries to go to Brussels for serious debate; and it provided insights for the European officials.

I offer 8 key conclusions from the events, which I hope may help as you think about the future of LEADER in your countries.

1. Rural development is both top-down and bottom-up. The government cannot do the job alone. The people must be fully involved.
2. The challenge is to connect stakeholders and government, at all geographical levels. The issue is one of democracy, of what President Lincoln in his Gettysburg address called "government of the people by the people for the people".

3. Rural development is about much more than farming, though farmers are indeed important in the Balkans. It must embrace other economic sectors, social services, infrastructure, the building of capacity, education and training. We offered the concept – first expressed in Finland – of ‘broad’, rather than ‘narrow’, rural development. We emphasised the need for an integrated approach to rural development.
4. We found grave social and economic weakness in many rural regions in the seven countries, with continuing out-migration of young people and the further weakening of rural economies and communities. We called for specific support to marginal areas and small farming communities.
5. On the other hand, the traveling workshops revealed many “growth points” - by which I mean initiatives, small or large, which could provide the starting point for effective rural development action. Moreover, we found striking examples of leadership, for example by entrepreneurs who had chosen to come back to their childhood region.
6. There was need for clarity about the role of different levels of governance. Central governments, assisted by the EU, may set the policy framework, and provide essential funding. But local authorities play a key in understanding and meeting the needs of their communities.
7. These conclusions pointed strongly towards the need for :
  - partnership between the public, private and civil sectors
  - the production, within the framework of the national rural development plans, of local development strategies for each sub-region, focused on the particular needs of that place and supported by the local population
  - systems of support which are managed locally, and which can focus on the needs of enterprises of all kinds and of all local people, including the disadvantaged.
8. With those points in mind, we called for expansion of the LEADER approach. I end by quoting directly from the published report on the events :

“LEADER can be a powerful tool for linking different sectors at sub-regional level, and for creating active partnership between these sectors. It can harness the policies and funds of the public sector, the entrepreneurial skills and resources of the private sector, and the voluntary energy and social commitment of the civil sector. Through the local development strategies prepared by Local Action Groups, it can achieve an integrated and inclusive approach to local development. It can make the development process visible and accessible to stakeholders, and can build the capacity of stakeholders to grasp opportunities for development.”