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# Declaration of the 3rd Balkan Rural Parliament and Balkan Food Summit

***“Making rural Western Balkans resilient for the future – and fit for joining the EU”***

12th - 15th June 2023, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina





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## Foreword

Inspired by a wide range of National Rural Parliaments, successively established since more than two decades across the wider Europe, the Balkan Rural Parliament has taken its place in rural movements, based on the growing strength of the Balkan Rural Development Network. We are able to inspire constructive dialogue and cooperation with governments of the region, and we are aware that rural development plays an important role in the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU. Rural Development is today, and will be in the future, one of the major driving forces that can consolidate and accelerate this process.

To make rural development a genuinely integrative force, we need to invest more in strengthening mutual trust on every level, between citizens and their regional and national institutions, as well as between governments of the Western Balkans and the European Union. Rural areas in the Western Balkans have a lot to offer to the wider Europe, from sustainable agricultural production to highly diverse traditional food production, from rural and nature tourism to the preservation and boosting of natural habitats and agro-biodiversity. In the West Balkan region there are still an important number of small family farms and related knowledge and services which shall be preserved and developed so as to boost the important diversity of farming and food systems. To preserve jobs, increase local income and strengthen a critical mass of rural economic activities, national governments and the EU should offer more specific rural measures and support. We, the representatives of civil society, public institutions and business sectors in rural areas of the Western Balkan countries, have met in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina on 12. - 15. June 2023. We herewith share our common vision and our specific demands to the general public, to all governments of the Western Balkan Countries and to the EU. We wish to be supported by a modern integrated rural development policy which transforms our rural areas into an attractive place for living and working for as many people who wish to live in a welcoming, sustainable and inclusive environment, with decent jobs within the planetary boundaries.

Our civil society carrying the rural network organizations in the Balkan Rural Development Network has become a strong factor that strives to influence the rural development policies of the future, including those of the EU. This Balkan Rural Parliament does not only urge national governments in the Western Balkans but also the European Union to further strengthen Civil Society Organizations and Networks through a dedicated budget and dedicated actions. These go beyond the EU's so-called Long Term Vision for Rural Europe and the Rural Pact. Our key demand is to establish an Integrated European Rural Development Policy which embraces our accession to the EU. This Third Balkan Rural Parliament calls for common action of rural communities and their networks, of national governments and their institutions, as well as the private sector so that all actors of the European Union can be moving in this direction.

## **A better quality of life through Integrated Rural Development**

The needs of the rural population in the Western Balkans and the wider Europe are complex and the issues to be solved are more of a social nature than purely agricultural or economical. A better quality of life in rural communities should be accessible for everybody – for the elderly, the middle aged and the young, for men and women, for the born-in and the new coming citizens. This calls for a deep change from a sectoral approach of rural development policies to an integrated and inclusive policy approach. Local and regional authorities, national governments and the EU need to establish a framework of measures and financing which achieve these goals and go beyond visions and strategies. A better quality of life in rural Europe needs a better rural infrastructure, education and capacity building which enables rural people and enterprises to make the best out of their natural and human resources where they live, without depleting or exploiting them. To stop depopulation and to create a new dynamic which attracts young people to rural areas it needs an effective welcome mechanism and in-depth consultations and coordination between all government institutions, civil society, and rural entrepreneurs. Like all rural Europe, rural Western Balkans will face major challenges and must become resilient to diverse crises ahead.

## **The Green Agenda, Climate Action, and Agro-Biodiversity**

The framework of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the Paris Agreement on Climate Action and the Biodiversity Strategy of the EU all call upon governments and civil society to make substantial efforts to limit and reverse the impact of climate change and biodiversity loss through action at all levels of the economy and of legislation. The goal of becoming a climate-neutral continent by 2050 as expressed in the Green Deal will only be reached if rural communities and farming contribute fully to this ambition. The “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans” needs to be implemented in detailed integrated strategies and action for each country in the Western Balkans, and locally adapted to the level of needs and opportunities of people. The specific potential of the Western Balkans region lies in a high level of agro- and natural biodiversity. Development of know-how in the preservation and selection of locally and regionally adapted seeds and cultivars in times of climate change can become an economic advantage of the region. Educating consumers about the benefits of organic production and locally produced food is important in creating a demand that incentivizes the farmers to adopt sustainable farming practices. Implementation of the measures for sustainable agriculture and food systems should involve both producers and consumers. Raising awareness and education is important, even though there is an urgent situation that requires to take concrete actions as soon as possible.

Making the Green Agenda work in villages and on farms and in the entire rural economy can only be achieved if governments, civil society and businesses work together and if the EU supports this process with integrated rural development programmes and measures so as to achieve accession with a well-prepared Western Balkan Region.

### **Food Security and Sustainable food systems**

The existing food systems in Western Balkan are not appropriate to respond to increasing recurrence of pandemics, droughts, floods, forest fires, new pests and other external threats that discourage rural people to continue with agricultural activities and to ensure sufficient supply of affordable and healthy food for citizens. Therefore, the shift to a more sustainable food system is needed to bring environmental, health and social benefits, offer economic gains and ensure that resilience to future crises is secured and quality of life of rural people is improved. The Western Balkan Region should utilise the EU's Farm to Fork strategy providing support to inventing different approaches in food systems, promoting more fair and inclusive agriculture with more focus on organic and regenerative agriculture principles. Small-scale, part-time and subsistence farmers which are common throughout all Balkan regions should be encouraged and supported to cooperate with adapted infrastructure and training so as to ensure their sustainable livelihood. Food security issues should be dealt within the West Balkan region to achieve a certain food sovereignty. It should include precautionary measures against the above mentioned challenges and project long term resilience accordingly.

### **A new European strategy for Sustainable Food Systems**

The EU is currently preparing legislation for a new Sustainable Food System (SFS) which will possibly already pass in early 2024. As an outcome of our West Balkan Food Summit, which was part of this third Balkan Rural Parliament, we wish to contribute to this EU legislative process with a number of suggestions. We believe that the overarching objective of a sustainable food law should be to enable all actors of the system to establish climate neutral, fair and healthy food operations within planetary boundaries. It should be Initiating a just dietary transition with food- related policymaking. The EU's SFS law and subsequent national laws in the West Balkans should introduce strong and inclusive measures on public and private procurement and marketing, which are key levers of change. As many key competences relating to consumption- side policies fall under national competence, the SFS Law should also require action at national and local level through National Sustainable Food Plans.

## **Making digital tools work for rural areas**

Digital, economic and social transformation is increasing the pressure on villages and their citizens, businesses and public bodies to innovate and to adapt continuously. They cannot just sit back and wait for digital solutions to come to them. They need to become active players and leaders of their own transformation choosing the adequate digital tools and applications in each rural context. The long-term aim of choosing and using digital tools is not just to catch up with urban development or “bridge” the digital divide, but rather to strengthen the specific rural side of the equation. Fair partnerships with cities can only be reached if rural communities regain and invest the added value created in rural regions so as to strengthen investments in the rural economy. Digital tools can be very helpful in achieving this. Rural communities must become digital players and social innovators in their own right.

## **Strengthening Rural Development Networks**

Rural Development Networks in the Western Balkans will further promote LEADER type projects and will search actively to secure funds for Local Action Groups (LAGs). In this way they can develop solutions to local problems where the “one-size-fits-all” national policy cannot not be effective. Strengthening the bottom-up approach will also facilitate the alignment to the EU strategy for Community-led Local Development (CLLD), which puts people’s experiences and knowledge on the driving seat for finding local solutions. We urge governments to build upon the work of the BRDN member networks, and to enlist their continuing involvement, as the CLLD/LEADER approach is getting institutionalized in the context of National Rural Development Programmes and IPARD. Technical Assistance measures within IPARD should be used to build the capacities of public institutions (Ministries of Agriculture, Paying Agencies) and Local Action Groups (LAGs) engaged in the LEADER process.

Implementing the EU LEADER approach in Western Balkan countries is a complex task, facing hurdles such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and political instability. However, through innovative solutions like public-private partnerships, capacity-building programs, and digital technologies, combined with collaborative programs between EU institutions, Local Action Groups (LAGs), and their Western Balkan counterparts, these challenges can be surmounted to achieve community-led rural development.

## **Boosting rural youth - better education, capacity building and entrepreneurship**

There is a worrying process of rural out-migration of young people in Western Balkans, driven by the unequal opportunities for education, careers and social life. This exodus distorts the balance in the population; reduces the workforce and the potential for economic development; and can cause a vicious cycle of falling population, loss of rural services and further weakening of rural communities. We believe that ways must be found to encourage and enable young people to stay in, or return to the countryside. Young people need a variety of satisfying and fairly-paid jobs, a well-targeted education system, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities suited for young people, and support for young farmers, new entrants and entrepreneurs. The interests of rural youth should be put at the Centre of rural development strategy and the policies should include specific measures targeted at young people. Investments are necessary in better education and vocational training to close the gap between quality of education and the needs of modern economy, sport facilities, and child care. Improvement of the quality of roads and public transport is necessary to facilitate commuting to rural towns. The provision of transport of young people to places of education and training is necessary to support their upskilling and career opportunities. We call on governments and civil society to recognize and meet the needs of youth in rural areas, and to enable young people to actively participate in decision-making processes and rural initiatives.

## **Achieving gender equality and gender mainstreaming**

We believe that women should be recognized as key drivers in rural development, and as guardians of tradition and heritage in rural areas. We call on governments and civil society to recognize the needs of women; to support and stimulate their creative role in rural life through active support programmes; and to ensure their inclusion in decision-making processes, for example within community service organisations and local action groups. Rural development policies should be gender sensitive and increase the capacity of rural women and their organizations to drive in all aspects of rural life. Municipalities should provide support to training in leadership, business entrepreneurship, IT, new technologies, which is paramount to achieve better involvement of females in economic and social development, and overcome some deeply rooted prejudices. It is necessary to use the experience of NGOs and donor communities in this process.

## **Social innovation and entrepreneurship for rural community development**

In the rural areas of the Western Balkans, growing numbers of people are affected by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds. Sustained effort is needed in order to promote their inclusion and full empowerment in our societies. Social entrepreneurship may have a key role in that process, by providing social and other services- for example care for old people, employment for handicapped people – which are not adequately provided by the public and private sectors. Social enterprises may include the processing of local products, the continuance of traditional skills, the installation of renewable energy sources, and other activity which arises from identified local needs and which enables the employment of marginalized groups. We call on the governments and European institutions, CSOs, and CSO networks, to actively participate in the development of social entrepreneurship, by sharing good practices, creating support policies, developing capacities and providing professional support.

## **Rural tourism - an opportunity for economic diversification in rural areas**

We believe that cultural heritage, nature and diversified rural economies of rural Western Balkans are together a major asset. If well integrated they nurture identity and create solidarity within rural communities and can attract people to live in rural areas or stay for holidays and recreation. We see much potential in our countries for diversification of the rural economy by establishing and promoting quality food production, offering trails for the discovery of natural habitats and biodiversity, and by integrating forestry and farming development into this strategy. Diversification of rural economies including on-farm, nature and heritage tourism will involve the recognition and protection of heritage features, such as historic buildings, wildlife sites, religious centres and landscapes, but also the nurturing and revival of traditional skills and crafts. Furthermore, specific local and regional quality products such as wines, cheese and meat products must be protected as products of specific origin and quality. The more these assets are integrated and rural communities made aware of the added value they can materialise economically, the more rural tourism can become a major source of local empowerment and fair income in rural Western Balkan.

## **Capacity building of BRDN member networks and their constituents**

The Balkan Rural Development Networks (BRDN) together with educational institutions, EU partner organizations (PREPARE, ELARD, ENRD, Forum Synergies, ARC2020), and the donor



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community, should work to increase their capacities and the capacities of their members to better communicate the needs of rural population and increase their technical expertise on issues related to integrated rural development. Strengthening of regional cooperation Regional cooperation builds understanding between neighbours, nurtures democracy and provides cross-fertilization of ideas and actions of countries in the Balkan region. BRDN will continue to support CSOs from rural areas to actively participate in the regional cooperation, play a central role in the regional initiatives, and take a lead in further cooperation and projects in the area of rural development.

### **Western Balkan's accession to the EU - a rural development success story**

This Balkan Rural Parliament wishes to contribute to a successful and accelerated EU integration process by mobilizing its human resources and experience. We are addressing the needs and situation in rural areas of the Western Balkans. We wish to increase the exchange of good practice and improve communication with the European Union. BRND wishes to facilitate advocacy of the member networks based on the achievements and interests of numerous rural stakeholders and initiatives in the Western Balkans. Such an approach will be effective only if policy and decision makers of the Western Balkans consider the rural voice and the competence and innovative action of our networks as part of a success story in the integration process.