



## CONFERENCE/WORKSHOP ORGANISER'S REPORT

### *“Sustainability of Rural Areas in Practice”*

*The opinions expressed and arguments employed in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the OECD or of the governments of its Member countries.*

#### **Brief Description of what the conference was about**

The main objective of the international conference was to present and discuss new approaches to development of rural areas. The following areas of scientific interest were included:

1. New approaches to revitalization of rural economy and rural communities: increasing incomes of rural population, creating jobs in rural areas, diversification of rural economy, diversification of agricultural activities, rural tourism, use of local resources, social aspects of rural community development.
2. New environmental approaches in management of rural landscape: green growth, biodiversity, soil and water issues, development and support of environmental services.
3. Agriculture, agricultural land and spatial planning: possession of agricultural land, protection of agricultural land.

As a conclusion, new challenges for policymakers and institutions (legislative support for rural development; policies at local, regional, national and international levels, their impact and financial security; competencies, position and influence of institutions; efficiency of institutional protection; legislative instruments of rural development support; and new challenges and legislation barriers for rural development) were formulated.

#### **Participation – details of total number of participants, countries they came from, backgrounds (academia, industry, etc.)**

The total number of participants was 131, of which 11 key speakers (one of them from OECD), 6 special guests and 2 members of CRP programme. Together 11 key papers, 39 papers and 22 posters were presented.

Key speakers from the University of Wageningen and the Instituut voor Agrarisch Recht, Wageningen (Netherlands); the Countryside and Community Research Institute, the University of Gloucestershire, the University of Leeds and Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom); the University of Life Sciences, Prague (Czech Republic); the Canadian Forest Service and the University of Guelph, Ontario (Canada); Cornell University (USA); OECD; and Pisa University (Italy) presented their papers.

The other participants taking part in the conference were from: Algeria, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Ukraine.

As special guests, the Head of Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, the State Secretaries of the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, and the Head of the Department of Strategic Activities of the Nitra Self-Governing Region were present.

From the Slovak University of Agriculture as hosting institution, 35 members from three faculties took part in the conference.

Most of the participants were academic and research staff. From public administration 6 members were present. Civil society was represented by 2 participants.



## **Major highlights from the presentations:**

Authors of conference papers and posters formulated several outcomes:

- In some countries deep regional disparities still persist – both in rural-urban context and between specific higher territorial units.
- At the national level diversification of activities in agriculture is on the rise, however at the regional level in some regions specialisation, mainly on crop production is still underway with serious implication for sustainability of rural areas.
- There are missing components of regional agriculture and food value chains, leading to low regional employment multiplier.
- In lagging underdeveloped regions dominant sectors are uncompetitive.
- There are many cases of overestimation of potential of tourism in the context of development of rural areas, there is a need to address the fact that tourism is both supply and demand driven industry, which heavily affects the potential of tourism as a development driver in specific regions.
- Innovation activity in rural areas is underestimated – innovations are generated in rural areas as well, they are however specific in that they usually solve specific problems and are implemented immediately with low emphasis on patenting, which excludes them from official statistics.
- Ecosystem services derived from soils are as essential as water for human existence.
- Landscape composition – perennial or annual typologies – can be strategic to meet societal objectives like water quality and biodiversity.

## **Major outcomes/conclusions in terms of policy relevance**

Conclusions with policy relevance were also discussed:

- Support of real innovation for sustainability of rural areas (build for long-term, and not just support conventional change);
- Support for activities in rural regions without copying the mechanisms of support in urban setting, and without “copy-pasting” best practices identified in other countries; special measures taking into account specific conditions of innovation process in rural areas are needed;
- More even risk-sharing in governance – offer certainty, aid, delivery (long-term staff, personal contact, transparent processes and decisions);
- Avoid audit-led policy design (bureaucratic, inflexible, inefficient);
- More emphasis on the involvement of all local stakeholders in local development planning and implementing process – including the attitudes of inhabitants and their vision, ensure peer evaluation and reach the disengaged;
- Stress connecting people and communities – extend networks; sponsor events; advice; opportunities for businesses/communities to travel, reflect, exchange ideas;
- Consider first funding learning, and then funding project applications;
- Professionalise the funding service – consideration needs to be made early on how to use funds in complementary and integrated ways;
- Support for an agro-ecological turn (which means stimulation of co-operative and small farm processing, improve and strengthen greening components of the Common Agricultural Policy), agricultural policy reform needs to shift to green growth and other public goods and away from commodity production;
- Regulation can differentiate landscape goals based on geographies, both cultural and ecological.
- Intervene to use rainwater as a basis for resilience in the face of climate change – more sustainable agricultural production;
- Strengthen education about fundamentals of green growth through all levels of education so that Green Growth provides new paradigm for research and innovation: R for D rather than R&D;
- Integrate food and water policy into the same political spheres;



- Policy needs to be carefully crafted because while it can be highly specific to meet environmental goals and address cultural objectives it has to survive court challenges;
- Public policy should shift to create conditions for effective implementation of landscape diversity and perennial cover and away from counter-productive annual crop supports.

Emerging issues for rural research were formulated as: determinants and consequences of changing nature of rural-urban interdependence, vulnerability of rural people and communities, interdependence of nature and rural society, changing the nature of migration and displacement occurring in rural places. To contribute to ameliorating these challenges of the 21 century, rural studies must work across boundaries between academic disciplines, universities and society, research, teaching and engagement and between nations.

### **Relevance to CRP theme(s)**

The conference topic reflected CRP theme “Sustainability in practice”. The main themes of the conference were aimed at social, economic and environmental sustainability of rural areas. Speakers in their contributions described practical background and solutions of real problems that rural areas face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Website for further details – please also indicate if the presentations are/will be available on the website**

The conference website will be maintained two years after the conference as an independent website [www.surap.eu](http://www.surap.eu). Later the content of the website will be available within the website of the Faculty of European Studies and Regional Development of the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (Slovakia).

Presentations of all key speakers are available on the conference website. Conference proceedings will be also available on the conference website.