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PRESS RELEASE

European rural communities take the hemicycle of the European Parliament and call on the EU to strengthen rural development policies

At the European Congress of rural areas involved in the LEADER rural development program on the 18th and 19th of December in Brussels, 800 representatives from 36 EU Member States and candidate countries met to discuss the role of rural development in European policies.

With the European elections in June 2024 just a few months away, and the 2023-2027 European programming period getting underway, the actors of the European rural territories met in congress in Brussels in the hemicycle of the European Parliament. This unique event was organised in partnership with the European Commission, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Council. The congress was an initiative of the French presidency of the ELARD network, the European federation of national LEADER networks.

The event highlighted the importance of the LEADER program and, more broadly, the role of rural development in Community policies. As part of the consultation on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy post-2027, this congress was an opportunity for the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union to reiterate their support towards rural development actors.

The work was organised around two intense days: the first day was a plenary session within the hemicycle of the European Parliament and the second day was in working group format at the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Council.

"This congress was an historic moment. For the first time since the beginning of the program in 1991, the European representatives of the LEADER program were welcomed in the hemicycle of the European Parliament, the beating heart of European democracy. This gathering, which went beyond the current borders of the European Union, sent a clear message: rural areas are entitled to their share of Europe, because they are the Europe of territories, in their diversity, and carry in them a part of the answers to the major challenges of the European Union. More than ever, LEADER and, more generally, local development led by local players appear to be one of the answers for a Europe closer to its citizens", emphasises Thibaut Guignard, President of ELARD.

Putting rural areas at the heart of community policies.

Launched in 1991, the LEADER program - the European Union's bottom-up, participative rural development policy - is the only European program dedicated to rural development projects. The LEADER approach is founded on local development led by local actors, and is based on

experimentation, cooperation, capitalisation, dissemination of good practices and the pooling of resources and networks.

In the presence of Janusz Wojciechowski, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Carolina Gutiérrez, representative of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Isilda Maria Prazeres Gomes, President of the NAT Commission of the European Committee of the Regions, and Peter Schmidt, President of the NAT Commission of the European Economic and Social Council, this European event highlighted the added value of LEADER and its influence on new rural development policies, particularly within the framework of the European Rural Pact.

"LEADER is not just a European fund; it is one of the few initiatives that structures democratically the European project and ensures, since 1993, the presence and visibility of the European Union in every commune and every village. More than just a funding tool, LEADER is a rural development program with its own fundamentals, and remains one of the most popular measures in Europe alongside the Erasmus program. The European Rural Pact is an important first step for rural areas, but it requires financial resources that are currently limited to LEADER-CLLD. We cannot meet all the challenges with just 5% of the EAFRD. It is now imperative to strengthen the LEADER-CLLD approach in post-2027 European policies, regardless of the scheme or the solutions, but we need to provide real financial resources for LEADER and rural development", points out Thibaut Guignard.

These words were echoed by Janusz Wojciechowski, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development: *"We are convinced of the importance of LEADER and rural communities. What was initially only a vision is now an essential tool that citizens, authorities and Member States can use. Today, thanks to the ambition and efforts of LEADER, we are implementing the long-term vision through the Rural Pact. But to achieve our ambitions, we must strengthen the LEADER-CLLD approach".* Irène Tolleret, Member of the European Parliament, who supported the organisation of this congress, concluded by adding that: *"LEADER is a tool for conquering rural areas, and we need to strengthen it in the next programming period. The voice of rural areas and the needs of those involved in the LEADER program must be placed at the heart of the roadmap for the post-2027 programming period."*

To end the first day of the Congress and as a result of all the discussions, a resolution presented by ELARD was unanimously voted in the hemicycle of the European Parliament. This resolution is based on the following principles: strengthening the role of LEADER-CLLD in European policies, developing new financial resources, simplifying and facilitating access to funds, and launching now the work on the future of LEADER in order to have time to consider all the proposals.

A plea for Europe a few months before the European elections.

With the European elections in June 2024 just a few months away, the Congress was also an opportunity to send a strong message to both the representatives of rural areas and to the European institutions.

"It is essential that citizens of all generations, wherever they are, truly feel that democracy is working in their favor, that democratic institutions designed to serve all citizens leave no one behind, because rural areas are vital to Europe's future. Rural areas are essential to strengthening democratic resilience throughout the European Union. LEADER is the local cement that keeps all local actors together", said Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission.

A message underlined by Thibaut Guignard: *"We often regret that rural people feel remote from Europe. We need to break the idea of a successful, urban, pro-European Europe against a conservative, Eurosceptic rural Europe that feels neglected. That is why we need to talk about Europe to rural people, and about rurality to the European Union. Rural areas play a major role in Europe's energy, ecological and economic transition. We need to convince rural people of the virtues of the European Union, at the risk of confirming the people's disavowal towards Europe which has expressed since 2005. Giving greater consideration to rural areas in the European project could help save Europe from euroscepticism and the return of nationalism".*



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