

Agricultural Policy Forum 2007 on
“Agricultural and Rural Development Policies -
Challenges for Institutional Set-up and Cooperation
in South Eastern Europe”

Regional Conference, November 16-18, 2007, Dresden

The 2007 Dresden Agenda

During the past decade, South Eastern European (SEE) countries have made remarkable progress in agriculture and rural development. While approaching the EU, the region still faces major challenges in improving economic performance, governance, and quality of life. Experiences gained need to be further evaluated before they can be transferred and shared by all SEE countries. To foster these processes, the Agricultural Policy Fora have been institutionalised as a platform for dialogue and mutual learning.

According to all stakeholders involved, the sequence of fora has been a success story. Starting with a first conference in November 2001, a series of seven events has been organised. Apart from two events in Leipzig, Germany, meetings were held in Romania, Albania, Macedonia/Serbia, and Bulgaria. Concurrent theme of all events was the agricultural and rural transition process in SEE countries. One of the main achievements was the formation of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in 2005.

For the seventh event, representatives of SEE countries as well as of international and German organisations met in November 2007 at the Agricultural Policy Forum on “Agricultural and Rural Development Policies - Challenges for Institutional Set-up and Cooperation in South Eastern Europe” in Dresden, Germany - hereafter referred to as the “2007 Dresden Forum”.

The overall objective of the 2007 Dresden Forum was to foster the implementation of agricultural and rural development policies in SEE countries. Special emphasis was laid, firstly, on issues of further integration of the region's agricultural sector and food industry into international and EU markets and, secondly, on strategies and instruments of rural development.

In particular, the 2007 Dresden Forum aimed at:

1. Improving the institutional set-up for a sound planning, implementation and monitoring of agricultural and rural development policies; and
2. Promoting regional cooperation for improved policy support.

Best practices and successful approaches in SEE and other countries were presented and their potentials explored. This was done within the context of institutional settings at policy, administrative, and grass-roots' level. Achieving the aims of both, improved institutional set-ups and regional cooperation have to be viewed together as the second is seen as prerequisite for the first.

Three major fields of interest and action were identified by the participants of the 2007 Dresden Forum:

1. Strategies, planning and priority setting as well as monitoring and evaluation of agricultural and rural development;
2. Implementation of national and regional agricultural and rural development programmes by relevant stakeholders, in particular the role of the SWG;
3. Necessary measures in human resource development and capacity building.

Regarding the first field of interest and action, the following main issues were identified:

- A paradigmatic change is needed, politicians and decision makers must "understand and think rural" in order to be able to create sound strategies and programmes. A real change in this direction will increase chances for a stronger commitment to programme implementation.
- Programmes shall be decentralised and diversified. Though this approach poses new problems of complexity and risk, its innovative potential offers promising solutions.
- Decentralised and diversified programmes require particularly sound planning procedures. Clarity of vision, tasks, and responsibilities are as essential as impartial and transparent priority setting.
- Decision makers at all levels need reliable statistical data as a prerequisite for realistic, relevant, and locally adapted programming. There is an urgent need to carry out comprehensive regional studies. OECD would be approached to carry out studies in SEE countries on the broader rural sector.
- Crucial to success is sustained - including budgetary - support by national governments and the international community. In particular, support measures have to take into account the time factor necessary for sustained agricultural and rural development.

Regarding the second field of interest and action, the focus was on the future institutional strength of the SWG. The following main implementation issues were identified:

- The SWG has the potential of becoming the institutional memory of agricultural and rural development in SEE countries. In addition, it will have a major role to play in creating awareness for broader rural issues.

- It should continue to be the platform for exchange of experiences, best practices, and information needed for improved regional cooperation.
- The SWG's role in facilitating regional, cross-border, trans-national cooperation and coordinating networking and collaboration between relevant organisations and institutions in SEE countries should be strengthened.
- A strong and resilient relationship between the SWG and the future Regional Cooperation Council shall be established.
- The SWG must campaign within and beyond the region in order to gain further visibility and recognition.

Next to the SWG, the role of other relevant stakeholders in implementing agricultural and rural programmes was discussed.

- The positive role of GTZ, InWEnt, and FAO was acknowledged and the need of further development cooperation stressed. Instruments such as "Innovative Regional Management", "Capacity Building for Rural Development in SEE Countries" (FAO) should be adapted and utilised for rural development.
- There is an urgent need to establish improved communication channels between stakeholders of rural development. Information on existing donor funding sources and means need to be available at all levels including the local level.
- Close cooperation between governments, the private sector, and civil society is essential for a successful combination of bottom-up and top-down instruments. Task forces combining membership from relevant stakeholders may be formed to deal with specified topics.
- Cooperative agreements shall be drawn up and signed by relevant organisations. Against this background, participants particularly welcomed the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the SWG and PREPARE - Partnership for Rural Europe during the 2007 Dresden Forum. The 2007 Dresden Forum participants appreciate an expansion of SWG-membership by additional countries.

Regarding the third field of interest and action, participants highlighted that improved knowledge and skills are needed at all levels. Apart from this general statement, a number of very specific needs concerning human resource development and capacity building were identified:

- Ways have to be found how experiences from new EU member states and countries which are already more advanced in the accession process can be utilised.
- The complexity of participatory programme planning, implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation demands an intensive capacity building and expertise within SEE countries.
- Local actors, such as Local Action Groups (LAG), need to be trained in organisational development, localised programme planning and strategy formulation as well as fund raising.
- EU-accession will demand particular language competencies and experiences.

Against this background, the participants of the 2007 Dresden Forum suggest the following short-term and medium-term activities:

- On November 19th, 2007, the accomplishments and challenges for the SWG will be discussed at a meeting of the respective Ministers of Agriculture and the SWG with the aim of gaining increased and sustained political support. The meeting is a follow-up to the Ministerial meeting during the International Forum for Rural Development and Regional Cooperation held in Skopje, Macedonia, in October 2007.
- In December 2007, representatives of the SWG will present their institution, objectives and projects to the Working Table II of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in Tirana, Albania. The aim of this presentation will be the establishment of close ties with the future Regional Cooperation Council, successor to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe.
- The eighth Agricultural Policy Forum will be held in Montenegro in autumn 2008. A major topic could be the impact assessment of results on regional cooperation reached so far.
- The SWG should increase their efforts to develop trans-national project activities, particularly under INTEREG IV and LEADER.

The participants of the 2007 Dresden Forum kindly request the German government (especially BMZ), the convening and other international organisations (e.g. FAO) to continue their assistance in human resource development and capacity enhancement. The focus of these support activities should be on strategy development, programme planning, monitoring and evaluation at different levels as well as a strengthened role of the SWG.

The 2007 Dresden Forum was held under the auspices of the Saxon State Ministry for the Environment and Agriculture (SMUL) and commissioned by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). InWEnt, Capacity Building International, Germany, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH, Leibniz-Institute of Agricultural Development in Central and Eastern Europe (IAMO), and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) jointly prepared, organised, and held the 2007 Dresden Forum.

The participants highly appreciate the support provided by the German government and the convening organisations for making the 2007 Dresden Forum possible. They express their sincere thanks to Bulgaria, the outgoing presidency of the SWG, and warmly welcome the new presidency of Albania.

Dresden, November 18th, 2007