

ECOLISE Policy Briefing, Communities for Future launch, Sept 2020

Rebuilding communities: the path to prosperity in Europe

“Those of us who are concerned with unlocking human potentials need to recognise the importance of authorising citizens to constitute their own local jurisdictions and associations using the knowledge and experience they have concerning the public problems they face. We have much to do to enable citizens all over the world to participate actively in local public economies” Elinor Ostrom¹ Nobel Prize winner 2009

Successful responses to multiple global emergencies point to the critical role of local communities in underpinning the transition to a safer, more sustainable and more prosperous future. While EU policy has pioneered innovative approaches to local development, participation has often been hindered by limitations around scope and accessibility. Now is the time for a new, forward looking local development policy in Europe that engages citizens and unlocks the powerful potential of communities.

Local communities have been an essential lifeline during the pandemic and much attention has focused on the importance of local economies to our resilience in the face of such crises. However, as we look to the future, the role of vibrant local communities takes on an even greater significance.

Any vision of the future that acknowledges the societal shifts catalysed or accentuated by the pandemic, and the intractable challenges of the climate and ecological emergency, must also rethink the place of local communities. Undermined for decades by a centralisation of investment and employment, and by an economic model that has favoured individual over collective endeavour, local communities now hold the key to a different future.

Transitioning to a post-carbon society inevitably requires a shift to local production and consumption by shortening supply chains, to a high employment and low impact economic model that focuses on public good, and to new models of collective ownership that support equity and social justice. This implies the need for a massive shift in investment to local economies and local communities

A new European local development policy

EU local development policy, implemented since 2013¹ through Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), has been instrumental in pioneering new innovations to support

¹ The Common Provisions Regulation (EU No 1303/2013) specifies that CLLD be carried out through integrated and multi-sectoral area based local development strategies. Articles 32-35(4) are based on the LEADER approach and concern four of the Funds covered by the Common Strategic Framework – the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund – in the 2014-2020 programming period.

bottom-up decision making. However, decisive action is now needed to move EU local development policy into the mainstream as a central pillar of the European Green Deal.

While there are many positive elements of the existing policy that should be retained, there are also limitations around the thematic and geographical scope of CLLD, and its accessibility to many citizens and communities that do not have the capacity or resources to navigate bureaucratic processes.

There are also other EU policies that run counter to or undermine efforts to promote local development. This includes agricultural and industrial policies that still prioritise scale over sustainability, and economic and fiscal policies that fail to adequately take account of social and environmental impacts. As a result, local, eco-social enterprises that adhere to high environmental standards are forced, unfairly, to compete with larger enterprises that benefit from economies of scale without the requirement to factor in social and environmental impacts.

As we have entered a period of unprecedented change, it is imperative that we work towards a new policy that puts citizens and local communities at the centre of the transition to a sustainable, resilient Europe. We need a policy that responds to the rapidly growing demand among citizens for a meaningful role in addressing the climate and ecological emergencies and in shaping the society of the future. A policy that responds to the urgent need to transition to a post-carbon economy and society, and that recognises the deep transformation needed to bring this about, including the revitalisation of local economies and a much greater share of community ownership.

In this context, we are calling for a new EU local development policy, that priorities two main pillars:

1. **Community building**: with a special emphasis on promoting awareness of the new policy at the sub-local level (in villages and neighbourhoods) and supporting citizen engagement, organisational development and capacity building for active participation in local transformation processes. This could integrate many aspects of the existing Smart Villages initiative, but expanded to also include urban and fisheries areas, and with a clear emphasis on community-led transformation in the context of the climate and ecological emergency. This pillar should be presented to the public as a call to action. It could be modeled on and developed in cooperation with the **Communities for Future (CfF)** initiative, including the annual European Day of Sustainable Communities. The Community building pillar should support actions that prepare communities to progress to, and access support available through, pillar 2 (below).
2. **Transitioning to the post-carbon economy and society**: with a priority focus on supporting collective, community-based initiatives. These initiatives could cover four areas of intervention

- a. Economic: focusing on enterprise and enterprise support systems, with an exclusive requirement that projects and initiatives respect the principle of a regenerative economy².
- b. Cultural: with a focus on artistic and cultural activities that help promote awareness of and dialogue on the climate and ecological emergency and help shift the narrative around the future shape of our society.
- c. Ecological: focusing on projects that help to protect and enhance biodiversity, provide green space to boost recreation and wellbeing, and contribute to carbon sequestration.
- d. Digital: address gaps in the provision of and access to digital services at local level.

Geographical scope

We believe that EU local development policy should cover the entire EU territory. Citizen engagement through organised local processes is essential to building a healthy democracy and to creating the basis for real engagement around global and local challenges. This possibility must be available to all EU citizens and local development policy must cover all types of areas; rural, urban, fisheries. It should adopt a similar approach across these areas, with funding coming from a single European Local Development Fund. This is essential to ensuring effective sharing and collaboration across these areas and to avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy and a sense of division or competition between local communities in these different areas, which face many common threats and challenges. The concentration of investment, employment and wealth can have equally devastating effects on urban and rural communities, so the goal must be to decentralise investment, job creation and wealth creation within both urban and rural communities.

Local decision making

The existing CLLD implementation structure has proved effective over a long period, and has expanded to include over 3,000 local action groups (LAGs) across the EU. It is important to retain and build on this infrastructure in future. A genuine partnership between public, private and civil society organisations is essential to ensure inclusiveness and engagement. At the same time, real decision making power must be devolved to the LAGs to ensure a truly bottom-up approach.

Local development strategy

The local development strategy is an essential element of CLLD and should remain a key part of any new local development policy. Important considerations here are the size of the area covered by the strategy, which should remain consistent with existing guidelines, and the thematic scope, which should be in line with the priorities of community building and transitioning to a post-carbon economy and society. Essential here also is the need for a

2

https://capitalinstitute.org/8-principles-regenerative-economy/?utm_source=Final+Copy+of+Draft+of+Act+IV+Release&utm_campaign=CI+August+Newsletter+2020&utm_medium=email#

broad participatory process, with meaningful engagement with all sectors and all groups, including ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups.

An effective support framework

The existing CLLD implementation framework highlights the importance for LAGs of a support framework that facilitates exchange and cooperation across different levels, as well as technical support and training to address evolving needs. While this provides important lessons for the future, we believe there is a need to evolve this support framework to ensure a much greater inclusion of the wide range of stakeholders engaged in supporting community-led transformation in Europe.

In this regard, there is a need to rethink the existing structure of support networks at EU level (ENRD, FARNET) and at the national and regional levels. The current structure should be replaced with a single support network at EU level (European Local Development Network), with an exclusive focus on local development, including urban areas, for which there is currently no support network, and national/regional networks with a similar exclusive focus on local development.

EC contracted bodies could be the convenors and facilitators of these support networks, but it should also include the relevant stakeholders at different levels; which would be resourced to guide and support the work of the networks, building on existing activities. Too often EU policy overlooks the opportunity to work with existing, bottom-up frameworks, undermining the potential to implement policies that because of this are seen as top down and not aligned with real needs.

This process to involve stakeholders should be organised through an open call, but at the EU level could, for example, involve a partnership of organisations such as: ELARD, ECOLISE, RESCoop, RIPESS, Slow Food, and others. At national/regional level, it could include LAGs, national/regional networks of community initiatives, research and training organisations, and other relevant stakeholders.

In this same spirit, we call on the EU to make a greater effort to work with existing bottom-up support frameworks and initiatives, such as the *Communities for Future* programme, which already engages a wide range of organisations in a Europe-wide collaboration to support a community-led transformation. This alignment of bottom-up and top-down is essential to realizing the powerful potential of local development in Europe.

Social justice

Social justice must be at the heart of the new policy. If not, there is a real danger that the most vulnerable and marginalised in society will be left behind in the transition to a low-carbon economy and society, perpetuating the inequalities that are an inherent part of a failing economic model that is at the root of the climate and ecological emergency.

We cannot build a sustainable resilient society unless we address these growing levels of inequality.

Policy integration and mainstreaming

Building strong, resilient and sustainable communities and local economies cannot succeed unless there is a level playing field. The often overlooked benefits of strengthening social ties, of improving social inclusion and civic participation, and of creating small-scale, locally-owned enterprises with a low ecological impact must be recognised and the appropriate incentives and safeguards must be put in place to ensure that all EU policy areas complement rather than undermine local development policy.

At the same time, local communities should also be seen as a strategic partner in the delivery of a wide range of other policies, including climate, energy, food, biodiversity, mobility. Mainstreaming of local development policy in other policy areas and funding programmes is essential to making this a reality.