

ASSET and the European Commission Common Strategic Framework

At the ECOVAST International Committee on 22 April 2012 I reported on the progress of the ASSET Project.

President Valerie Carter and I met Sabrina Lucatelli of REGIO C2 and other officials in Brussels on 28 February. For ECOVAST/ASSET, Valerie has been invited to attend meetings of the RURBAN Steering Group. We have an opportunity to consider an ECOVAST ASSET conference, with support of the EU Committee of the Regions, in 2012 or 2013 and we may have a part to play in RURBAN's major conference in METZ in November 2012.

There was discussion of the Common Strategic Framework that is proposed by the European Commission to cover several funding sources - Cohesion / Rural Development/ Maritime. It has the opportunity to make urban/rural linkages (and coastal) so that towns and rural areas may be considered together. For urban actions, DG REGIO proposes a bottom-up governance process, similar to LEADER, with integrated local strategies.

We learned of this last year at the DG AGRI Rural Development Committee. It would allow small towns to relate to their rural hinterland. That has been a focus of the ASSET Project of ECOVAST. An integrated approach to sub-regional strategy, civil society involvement, urban and rural - all seem to fit well with ECOVAST's Strategy:

http://www.ecovast.org/english/strategy_e.htm

Community Led Local Development in the Cohesion Policy has been announced:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/community_en.pdf

If you only use one link from this article, that one is the most important.

It is available in many languages from:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information/brochures/index_en.cfm#1

I draw your attention to information available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/what/future/index_en.cfm

A detailed explanation is available in two 'staff working documents' :

[csf_part1_en.pdf](#) and [csf_part2_en.pdf](#) use these links to download the documents.

Unfortunately those documents may only be available in English language.

On behalf of ECOVAST international, on 2 June 2012, I sent comments on the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) to the European Commission DG Regio by e-mail.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY ECOVAST

ECOVAST supports the Common Strategic Framework. This accords with ECOVAST's Strategy for Rural Europe. For example:

Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs, the agricultural sector and the fisheries and aquaculture sector

Rural areas have to compete, for political support and funding, with urban areas that have more votes per hectare. Small towns have to compete with larger urban areas and cities, and lack a distinctive spatial policy and need financial support. Yet both these smaller towns and rural areas have potential to contribute to the competitiveness of Europe.

Competitiveness, applied globally, can be seen to be damaging the unique qualities of rural places, people and their activities. The imperative for rural areas is not competition but collaboration, partnership and joint working, not least between farmers and others in local communities.

Supporting the shift to a low carbon economy

Global society and Europe are now deeply involved in the most serious and dramatic changes of recent history. These are due to several coinciding events – among them are increases in population, bad

functioning of food distribution, over-reliance on fossil fuels, rapid progress of technology and scant attention to ethics and ecology of development. Human ecology is the key to sustainability of the built and natural heritage.

Protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency

Sustainability of rural settlements, landscapes and habitats - the assurance of continuity – requires recognition, whilst acknowledging that landscapes have always been subject to change throughout history. Climate shifts will cause change. Blinkered spatial policies, founded on a priority to settlements that have public transport, can lead to clustering of services in larger urban areas and the withering away of hitherto viable rural places. The landscape, itself a valuable spiritual and economic resource for tourism and an incentive for economic investment, needs local people to manage the animals and vegetation essential to its appearance and habitat. If people are less present in the countryside, the countryside, as we know it, will degenerate.

The variety of rural contexts (e.g. coastal, islands, peri-urban areas – the landscapes around towns, remote places, flood plains and mountain regions) requires to be recognised in Rural Development policy by a flexible approach, enabling local communities in civil society to influence local policies, methods of applying finance and implementation.

The unique economic, social, cultural and environmental characteristics of rural small towns and their hinterland of villages and landscape are of specific and high value for all Europeans: in particular, for connecting markets for rural produce with the products and producers in their hinterlands. Small Towns and villages are an asset of Europe, and ECOVAST has a project entitled Action to Strengthen Small European Towns 'ASSET'.

http://www.ecovast.org/english/asset_e.htm

The regions of Europe differ in characteristics and in scale. For example the "Danube Region" has over 100 Million inhabitants, whilst the regions of small towns may have several thousand population. They cannot all be dealt with in the same way.

Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty

Cohesion requires recognition that the trend of rural de-population is now seeing reversal in some Member States - 'counter-urbanisation' that can lead to a disparity, between relatively wealthy incomers from urban areas and the indigenous rural people, that requires to be addressed.

However, the flow of private finance from "town people" to rural and remote regions can bring benefits, including the restoration of valuable vernacular architecture (e.g. historic farmhouses).

Investing in education, skills and lifelong learning

ECOVAST's Samobor Declaration emphasises "the decisive importance of life-long learning for the real participation of rural people in their own development process. There is a widespread need for education, training and skills development; and for advisory services to help individuals, enterprises and communities to take initiatives and to strengthen civil society and local partnership."

http://www.ecovast.org/english/asset_e/asset_e_anx_e.htm

ECOVAST encourages local people to engage in the identification and recognition of the types, characters and quality of landscapes. We have published the ECOVAST Landscape Identification Guide to Good Practice. The purpose of this guide is to help the citizens of Europe to understand, to celebrate and to protect the landscape in which they live; and to assist governments in their work to implement the European Landscape Convention.

http://www.ecovast.org/papers/good_guid_corr_e.pdf

Administrative capability

To enhance governance, ECOVAST wishes to see rural communities involved in Integrated Rural Development within and beyond the farm gate – in active partnership with the producers: farms and food, forests, fishing, mineral workings, energy and landscape management. Linkages between towns and rural areas will require collaboration across administrative boundaries, and between the plans and programmes of several ministries in each member state.

Local Action Groups of LEADER have shown how such involvement can be effective. ECOVAST welcomes the application of the LEADER approach to urban areas and sees the potential for **integrated local development strategies** - "local place-based strategies and integrated investments drawing from all four funds" - to cover urban and rural areas of sub-regions. We therefore welcome the proposals for Community Led Local Development.

In each member state, the challenge for government departments will be to work together to align the functional areas with LEADER LAGs (urban and rural). ECOVAST would like to see coverage of the whole of each member state and optimisation of urban/rural linkages.

In Austria a tried and tested example of "good practice" is the semi-official "Regional Managements".

There are certain Common Strategic Framework objectives which might be more suited to thematic, 'issue-based' programmes.

Mechanisms would be required to ensure sufficient local flexibility and involvement in decision-making and strategic guidance. ECOVAST is strongly in favour of INTEGRATED STRATEGIES. City region strategies should embrace the smaller towns and rural hinterland. That is because very often, almost as a norm, there are strong, mostly historic based links between the small (historic) towns and the big cities that should be strengthened or revived. The multitude of historic small towns and their character is an essential part of European and regional identity.

ECOVAST welcomes the possibility for delegation of management of Integrated Territorial Investments to NGOs as well as local authorities. We believe that this could be effective at a very local level, within the areas of wider partnerships.

There are opportunities for more localised place-based programmes or projects within programmes and for which Funds or combination of Funds

There is a need to change in the way the Funds are currently used in order to reduce the administrative burden involved, whilst conforming to EU management control requirements.

The core funding of Partnerships is needed and could be enhanced by the proposed 'Joint Action Plans under the ERDF and ESF to deliver specific outcomes. These proposals would provide for lump sum payments above €10m, to be available to a single beneficiary to manage a group of projects aimed at a specific purpose, with payments linked to fixed milestones and results'

Specific combinations of Funds, or elements of Funds, can lend themselves to operating in joined-up programme arrangements. Combining EAFRD and LEADER funding with EMFF would enable rural projects to be related to those for coasts and ports. ERDF and ESF linked to EAFRD (and EMFF for maritime places) would give opportunities for small towns and their hinterlands.

Complementary measures and outcomes could be:

- Sustained vitality of the enterprises of small towns and rural areas.
- Energy resources. One example is the "Danube Strategy" there is an urgent need to investigate the regional sources of renewable energies for the Danube Region, especially in the times of "peak oil"
- Enhanced supply chains for food.
- Sensitively utilised role of built heritage and landscape of towns, villages, rural areas and coast in enterprise and tourism.

ECOVAST welcomes opportunities for using some of the options proposed by the Commission to promote more localised and co-ordinated programming, such as Joint Action Plans, Integrated territorial Investments and Community-Led Local Development. ECOVAST is VERY STRONGLY in favour of INTEGRATED joint action plans, and welcomes the opportunity to bring the four funds together for very local and for 'larger than local' programmes. Community Led Local Development (CLLD) has been an objective of ECOVAST International from founding in 1984, so we are STRONGLY IN FAVOUR.

H. **Preserving the Heritage of Rural Spaces.** The heritage is the base of economical enterprises like cultural tourism and of the identification of rural people with the distinctive character of their region.

Thank you to Dr Arthur Spiegler (Austria) and Prof Dr Ralf Bokermann (Germany) for assisting with the wording of these comments.

Related action in the UK

For England UK the Department of Business and Skills published a consultation paper on CSF and partnerships in March, and ECOVAST UK sent comments by 27 April (on which the above summary to the EC DG Regio is based).

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/Consultations/delivery-of-structural-funds-rural-development-funds-european-maritime-fisheries-fund?cat=open>