

2013 ECOVAST - a Global Strategy for Europe

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[A Strategy for Rural Europe](#)

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ECOVAST's Strategy for Rural Europe was previously revised in 2008. The following aspects remain relevant to the current position in 2013.

Global society and Europe are now deeply involved in the most serious and dramatic changes of recent history. These are due to coinciding cases, which include 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.

Europe can and should take a leading role in addressing and improving responses to global processes, based on an approach that recognises the unique identity of the many different parts of the continent and on experiences drawn from history, culture and agriculture. The effects of global markets, depletion of oil and gas resources, and consequential rising food costs may find solution in a focus on localism and regionalism.

Principles

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. Rural areas have to compete, for political support and funding, with urban areas that have more votes per hectare. For small enterprises, both rural and urban, the challenge is to be viable, not to be globally competitive.

Cohesion requires recognition that the trend of rural de-population is now seeing reversal, in some parts of Europe. This 'counter-urbanisation' can lead to a disparity, between relatively wealthy incomers from urban areas and the indigenous rural people, that requires to be addressed. It has some benefits – for example the people moving from urban areas, or from other states, can use and repair traditional rural buildings. They can bring new skills to a locality that can be harnessed for civil society activity. Migration across continents, probably intensified by climate change, may become a greater challenge in the longer term.

Sustainability implies the assurance of continuity and quality in rural settlements, landscapes and habitats, while acknowledging that landscapes have 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 rural areas, the countryside as we know it will degenerate.

Policies

Integrated Rural Development. ECOVAST wishes to see rural communities involved in Integrated Rural Development within and beyond the farm gate, in active partnership with the producers. This partnership should embrace farms and food, forests, fishing, mineral workings, energy and landscape management. Regional and national government should recognise the special qualities of rural areas and the needs of rural communities; and should reflect these in integrated Rural Strategies and in all relevant sectoral policies.

The variety of rural contexts (e.g. coasts, islands, peri-urban areas, the landscapes around towns, remote places, flood plains and mountain regions) should be recognised in Rural Development policy by a flexible approach, enabling local communities and civil society to influence local policies, methods of applying finance and implementation. We believe that the approach to integrated rural development, crystallised in the Cork Declaration of 1996, embracing the social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of action for the future sustainability of rural areas, continues to be an effective way forward. We urge national and regional governments towards such integrated policy, joining up across departments and divisions of responsibility, and upwards and downwards between the national and local levels.

Small towns and villages. The small towns of Europe, and the villages in their hinterlands, should receive the same policy focus and support that is currently given to larger towns and to other aspects of rural development. Without such focus, the smaller settlements face threats to their survival. However, they and their surrounding landscapes can contribute to sustainability by supporting local production of food, timber and renewable energy.

The unique economic, social, cultural and environmental characteristics of small towns and their hinterland

of villages and landscape are of specific and high value for all Europeans. In particular, small towns can connect markets for rural produce with the producers in their hinterlands. ECOVAST's project Action to Strengthen Small European Towns (ASSET) shows the high value of small towns and villages as assets to all the citizens of Europe. The ASSET project enables regional governments and agencies to make effective partnership with small towns and their connected villages and to bring national and European resources to bear on meeting their needs.

Landscapes. Rural landscapes, largely created by the labour of farmers and others over past millennia, provide the fundamental appearance and character of European rural regions. Urban landscapes reflect the influence of other forces, such as industry, infrastructure and tourism : but farms and woodlands still form basic elements of the rural landscape, with its beauty and its historic roots reaching back through centuries.

Governments and peoples should accept the need for long-term stewardship of Europe's heritage of wildlife, landscape and culture. This heritage, and that of the built environment, contributes greatly to the attraction of investment to rural areas, through tourism and also by encouraging enterprises to seek locations that offer quality of life to their employees and clients. But globalisation runs counter to cultural heritage, and bio-diversity and landscape heritage are threatened by changes due to global warming and the perceived economies of scale of global enterprises. Each country should pursue effective measures to assess, protect and maintain features of heritage value, and to extend public understanding of the heritage.

ECOVAST encourages local people to engage in the identification and recognition of the types, characters and quality of landscapes. Our published "Landscape Identification Guide to Good Practice" is designed 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.

Agriculture. We wish to see farming sustained throughout rural Europe. The emphasis in farming policy should move from quantity of food to quality of food. Farmers should be enabled to gain income through adding value to farm products, and other economic activity. They should be paid to act as stewards of our heritage. Agri-environment funding and other measures within the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development allow farmers to diversify their sources of income, including a focus on local and regional food chains, in which the quality of products can be branded with the quality of the landscape and heritage.

Farmers and farming enterprises offer two products to society for which they should receive appropriate income: food and landscape. Production of food has been a central and traditional part of the farmers' identity, while "landscape" was created as a by-product of their work. Landscape is now beginning to be seen and understood by the public and the governments as an additional part of the farmers' identity. The farmers are no longer paid on the basis of production alone : they are also paid incentives for shaping, caring and developing the landscapes and habitats that are distinctive of the rural regions. This essential component of rural development links the European Landscape Convention to the EU 2020 Agenda.

Forestry. In implementing the forestry elements of the new European Rural Development Policy, Member States should place greater emphasis on the multiple purposes that forests and woodlands can serve, to benefit the countryside and rural people. Crops of woodlands and fields should be utilized to contribute to a new localness in the production and consumption of non-fossil fuels, whilst enhancing the pattern of landscapes that encompass and relate to towns and villages.

Manufacturing and service industries should be encouraged, on a base of regional resources and local entrepreneurship. Western Europe now has many examples of the strong role that rural enterprise is playing in regional economies, and instances of small enterprises moving from cities to rural locations to enjoy the quality of life. ECOVAST wishes to encourage such enterprise in member states and other European countries that see advantages in reviving rural economic activity through diversification of agricultural buildings and land. Telecommunications can greatly assist this process. Broadband communication has enabled much more people to work from home.

Rural tourism should be promoted in a way which respects the character and capacity of the receiving areas.

Rural services. Governments should sustain rural services, and encourage the social and cultural vitality of rural communities. Sustainability of rural communities is dependent upon access to a range of services and housing that can be afforded by people of rural families that wish to continue to live in the local area. ECOVAST urges national and regional governments to ensure that their policies are carefully 'proofed' so that they may bring benefits to rural areas, and ECOVAST wishes to see spatial planning policies that have a particular focus upon rural areas, in order to reduce rural disadvantage. Rural people should be enabled to gain good housing with modern amenities, while respecting local traditions of building.