



Leaders' Platforms for Regional Development

First Interregional Strategic Discussion Meeting

Arbanasi, 13 – 14 January 2017

Summary Report

The Leaders' Platforms for Regional Development project, funded by America for Bulgaria Foundation, is a unique opportunity for bringing together local leaders to discuss horizontal policies for development of regions and communities, but also for interregional cooperation. Such highly motivated individuals, assembled to aid their own local development in a bottom-up approach, are rarely to be found in Bulgaria – a country facing huge demographic problems, depopulation of entire areas and migration of people from the peripheries to larger cities and foreign countries. Migration to large urban centers creates interregional imbalances, the impact of which can be seen in every sphere of local life, and largely affects the incentives of those who remain to work for the benefit of their communities.

The regional forums that were organized succeeded in establishing a pool of professionals - leaders in their areas of competence and expertise - whose interests are in the development of their communities and who are intent on living in and working for the economic advancement and prosperity of their respective regions. They established a network of like-minded individuals within which to exchange their experience, but also to apply this experience in other

regions. Such transferability has a functional aspect – socialization and association of local leaders across regions, interregional spillover of horizontally-applicable practices, workable models of cooperation and exchange between regions, and optimal utilization of comparative advantages cross-regionally.

To build on the achievements of the regional forums and enhance the value-added effect of its results, the project expanded its scope to the interregional level with the organization of the First Interregional Strategic Discussion Meeting, held in Arbanasi, 13 – 14 January 2017. Focus of the discussion were the opportunities for interregional cooperation among the stakeholders in the area of human potential development and the use of the available regional human resources on the labor market - based on shared interests and opportunities to utilize the comparative advantages and specialization of the regions as a collective approach to joint development and mutual benefits.

The interregional meeting succeeded to connect the representatives of the target regions participating in the project to discuss various topics related to the interregional cooperation potential and to exchange views and opinions on the opportunities for interregional initiatives aimed at improving the general welfare of the regions.

As a means of online connection among the members of the developing interregional network, the creation of a Facebook profile was recommended where the participants can share ideas for interregional cooperation and discuss opportunities for implementing various projects and campaigns. The networking effort materialized in the setting up of a Facebook page, which will serve as a meeting space for the project network members, with a potential to expand beyond the scope of the project.

Another recommendation from the forum was to seek opportunities for organizing meetings within the network, for instance twice a year, at which participants would share their follow-up activities and what they had accomplished in their work for the community after the project's completion, which will contribute to its sustainability.

It was also proposed to set up a Bank of Participants with a photo, name and contact details, as well as area of expertise and skills, to be used for the purpose of cooperation among the participating regions and for networking.

Building a sense of community is a prerequisite and basis for the development of intra- and interregional cooperation. This is particularly important in view of the current demographic trends, especially migration and depopulation of villages and towns, which requires urgent measures to tackle development issues such as opening the labor market for the elderly and increased labor mobility between regions.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the First Interregional Strategic Discussion Meeting is that the participating regions do not fully use the existing opportunities for cooperation and their human resources as part of a common strategic framework for shared development. It was reported, however, that there was a potential which should be utilized at both the horizontal and vertical level.

Another inference from the meeting was that its interregional character was an essential asset and contributed immensely to the horizontal networking element of the project. The participants showed great interest in the topics and were very active in the exchange of experiences and ideas. The project shows what it means to be successful in one's own community or region and to disseminate good practices and visions beyond it, to motivate others to bring about change and establish working models for regional sustainable development.

In sum, the first interregional forum succeeded in establishing a community of local visionaries with a sincere urge to work for the advancement and development of their own regions, but also to foster interregional ties and the exchange of human potential based on common interest and mutual benefit. With the organization of the next two interregional meetings, this community is likely to extend not only in terms of sheer numbers of participants, but also in terms of the issues and areas of competence addressed.