



REINVENTING EUROPE THROUGH LOCAL INITIATIVE

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Report on the conference

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This conference was organized by AEIDL, the European Association for Information on Local Development, to mark the 25th anniversary of the Association. Held in Brussels, with plenary sessions at the European Parliament, the conference attracted 155 participants from 27 countries. It was enlivened by presentations of 25 highly varied local initiatives, drawn from 17 countries and covering a full geographic range from metropolitan centres to the most peripheral rural regions. Keynote speakers provoked debate about the political perspectives for Europe and for local development, and the counterpoint between local initiatives and the prevailing governmental and commercial systems.

The buzz of conversation, and the intense discussions, at this [conference](#) revealed a strong commitment to the European project. The participants deeply appreciate what this international endeavour has achieved – almost 70 years of peace; the great boon of freedom which continues to attract so many migrants into the European Union; and the free movement of people and goods within Europe. We celebrated together, during the conference, Europe's wonderful diversity of landforms, climate, ecosystems, wildlife, human history, culture, language, customs, costumes, food, drink, music and so much else. We recognised the contribution which the European Union has made - through LEADER, URBAN, EQUAL and other programmes – towards the encouragement of local initiatives.

A tragic disconnection. However, many speakers referred to a tragic disconnection between (on the one hand) the aspirations of millions of European citizens and (on the other hand) the reality of life for many people.

How may we encapsulate this disconnection? The [introductory paper](#) from AEIDL offers a vision of the Europe that is desired by its citizens ...

“A Europe rich in the diversity of its landscapes, its communities and its culture, open to the world, striving for a new economic, social and environmental equilibrium”.

The conference reminded us just how far we are from having “economic, social and environmental equilibrium”, as shown by the tens of millions of people unemployed, an army of young people who have never had a paid job, millions of people living below the poverty line, people forced by poverty to move from the countryside into the cities or from one country to another, discrimination and social exclusion of many minorities, increasingly gross disparities between the rich and the poor, and growing popular concern about the impacts of climate change and ecological degradation..

In the face of this dis-equilibrium, the European Union has adopted the EU 2020 goal of “**smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**”. It is promoting policies of social, economic and territorial cohesion, and striving to strengthen the competitiveness of European enterprises in the world market. But these words sound painfully hollow to those who are indeed ‘striving for a new economic, social and environmental equilibrium’. They perceive that:

- It is not **smart** to let a large part of Europe’s labour force stand idle; or to depend upon millions of hectares of land outside Europe to produce soya to feed cattle which could eat our own European grass or maize.
- It is not **sustainable** to tolerate a continuing heavy loss of biodiversity in Europe; to draw down aquifers below safety level; to mis-manage our river catchments and so contribute to devastating floods; or to burn fossil fuels on a gigantic scale, causing carbon emissions which accelerate climate change.
- It is not **inclusive** to tolerate, indeed to allow governments and companies to cause high levels of unemployment, under-employment and poverty; or to permit social exclusion of the kind suffered by millions of people in the cities and countryside.
- The focus on **growth** is a cruel joke for the millions who live below the poverty line, for whom the only thing that grows is the cost and difficulty of living, and who see with growing anger the disparity between themselves and the super-rich.
- As for **competitiveness**, in the sense used by the European Commission for companies which may trade on the world market, it is a meaningless term for the hundreds of thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises which form the main part of local and sub-regional economies throughout Europe. What they seek is viability in the markets and at the levels where they operate.

This disconnection between the aspirations of people and the social and political realities they experience serves to explain the other crucial failure emphasized by [François Saint-Ouen](#) and others, namely the **democratic deficit** in Europe. [Marjorie Jouen](#) described how the founders of the European Union paid no attention to local communities and local development. “Citizens did not truly enter the European sphere until the election of the European Parliament through direct universal voting in 1979”. Changes in the 1980s, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, prompted increasing contact between governments and citizens. This led in the 1990s to policies which encouraged local initiative, notably LEADER, URBAN, EQUAL and other initiatives or programmes.

But the democratic deficit is still highly visible. Citizens are less and less willing to vote in European elections. In 1979, the turnout was 62%: it fell at each election to reach the low level of 42% in 2009. There is increasing scepticism about the usefulness, and even the honesty, of politicians. Belief in the

ability of governments, and of the European Union, to solve our collective problems is decreasing. In the last 'Eurobarometer' survey by the European Commission, only 29% of the people considered that their voice counts in the EU.

The impetus towards local initiative

The title of the Conference, 'Reinventing Europe through local initiative', poses the question of whether, and how, local action can heal this disconnection, and redeem this democratic deficit... For most people, the impulse to take action does not come from their vision of Europe, but rather from their family, their home, their neighbourhood, their locality. It comes from the heart. If the world does not give them a good life, they seek to take their life into their own hands.

We can be greatly encouraged by the explosion of local initiatives in the last 20 years, as exemplified by the [25 case studies](#) received at this conference. Generalising from this rich set of examples, we can see the impetus towards action as driven by three main types of motive – social, economic and environmental.

Social impetus. Many initiatives spring from the desire among communities to help themselves out of poverty, exclusion, unemployment or other disadvantage. A moving example is offered by the project "Together for each other" launched by the Roma community in Cserehat, breaking out of poverty by intelligent use of their own resources of farm and forest. Similar motives drive the projects in the Kavar Basin in Turkey and in Raval, one of Barcelona's most disadvantaged districts. These examples, and many others, show that local initiative can tackle disadvantage across the whole span from the inner parts of metropolitan areas to outer parts of cities, large and small towns, peri-urban areas, rural regions and sparsely populated or peripheral territories of Europe such as Lapland.

The need for local initiatives of these social kinds may depend not only on the degree of disadvantage but also on the structure of public authorities. Where local authorities are truly local, they may give leadership in local initiatives. For example, some years ago, the village school in La Porcherie, a small village in the south of France, was threatened by the lack of children. The village Mayor took direct action to solve this problem. The head-teacher's house was vacant. The Mayor advertised in the national Press for a large family to move into that house. 70 families applied. The Mayor chose an unemployed lorry-driver from Lille, who moved in with his 10 children. The school was saved, and the driver became the village carpenter. This is elective democracy at work.

By contrast, a municipality in northern Sweden may be so large that the Mayor is 200 kilometres from a typical village. Small village communities, remote from other settlements, coping with hard winters, are forced to be personally and communally self-reliant. That is why Sweden has over 5,000 village-level action groups, focused on sustaining or creating communal services and enterprises upon which they depend. This is participative democracy at work.

Much of the local action that we have discussed springs from this desire to sustain and improve the quality of local services and people's lives, or from a commitment to social inclusion, for example among the Roma people and their children in Cserehat, the Roma in Cluj-Napoca, the unemployed in Greece or Limerick or Barcelona, youth in Grosseto, women in the Indian initiative. The Sustainable

Citizen Neighbourhoods initiative in Brussels, the Tot Raval foundation in Barcelona, the Southill Development Cooperative in Limerick and the Open City Museum in the South Tyrol provide examples of comprehensive action to improve the quality of life and social cohesion for the local population. Many of these initiatives have found “win-win” solutions which bring both social and economic benefits – a point vividly illustrated by the local action group in Lapland, which enables people to find work in their own villages by providing services for senior citizens or families with small children.

Economic impetus. Many of the local initiatives presented at the conference have their starting-point in the frustrations felt by small farmers or other small enterprises, because they are low in the pecking order of Europe’s capitalist system. In that system, most of the bargaining power rests with the multinational corporations, the great processing or trading companies, or the large farms, often linked in horizontal or vertical chains. They have a massive combined influence on European markets, and on governments and politicians. They are the main beneficiaries of growth and competitiveness: they provide no guarantee of either sustainability or inclusiveness.

The scenario within which these powerful players move is summed up in the concept of Europe as a single market. But in reality Europe is also a multiplicity of local markets, none of which are ‘islands’ divorced from other economies, but each of which may have a high degree of internal trade. Within these local markets, the economic structure is one of hundreds of thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises, for whom competition in the European or world market is not relevant. For them, the key issue is viability, to be able to make a living by providing goods and services for residents of, and visitors to, their own region. Their businesses are generally built upon the skills and resources of their own region; their products form part of the traditions, the culture and the character of the region; and they add to that culture by innovating and adapting their activity to the needs of today.

These local markets provide the context for local economic initiatives of the kinds described during this conference. The Polish initiative “The Valley of the Carp”, builds on the centuries-old practice of carp harvesting through innovative activity and cooperation between many rural actors, attracting up to 500,000 people each autumn and greatly strengthening the local economy. Many other local initiatives show how local traditions, food, drink, heritage, wildlife and other resources can be put to new and imaginative use in order to create jobs and enhance incomes in rural or urban areas. New or updated forms of social or cooperative economy are emerging, for example the cooperative business centre in Dortmund created by Union Gewerbehof, or the enterprises supported by REALIS, the support network for social innovation in Languedoc-Roussillon.

Environmental impetus. The third driver of many local initiatives is a strong sense among millions of European citizens that we should be taking better care of our planet. Thinking globally, they increasingly want to act locally, as shown by the organisations within the new ECOLISE network initiated by AEIDL. They sense that national governments and the European Union are not truly grasping the severity of the environmental challenge, the reality of climate change, the link between human activity (notably the gigantic use of fossil fuels) and potentially disastrous heating of the Earth’s atmosphere, and the continuing heavy loss of biodiversity.

So, many local initiatives are driven by the conviction that citizens should act where governments cannot, or do not, act. That conviction drives the widening network of Transition Towns; local energy initiatives such as that at Samsø, Denmark; and practical initiatives such as the community gardens in Porto. It underpins projects to look after the natural environment; to redeem derelict land, such as that near Belgrade; and to renew urban neighbourhoods, as in Dortmund.

The elements of action

This variety of starting points – social, economic and environmental – explains the wide variety of local initiatives described or represented at this conference. But speakers on the first day, and workshops during the second day, enabled us to articulate the essential character of local initiatives, and to identify the elements of action which link many different projects.

Characteristics of local initiative. [Yves Champetier](#) focused on many common traits of local initiative – a high level of energy, a search for alternatives, creation of new partnerships and methods of working, a focus on the potentialities of each place, a willingness to innovate and to exchange ideas, the creation of links between different interests and sectors, openness to the world, and solidarity. When the conference chairman invited participants to define “innovative action”, they offered ideas similar to Yves’ list, and added “long-term strategic vision, a good action plan, evaluation and willingness to learn, care for the environment, a willingness to experiment and to think ‘outside the box’.”

Elements of action. The local initiatives described during the conference offered many different elements of action, sometimes innovative and unconventional, which together may form both an inspiration and a toolbox for those who wish to launch or pursue local development. Notable among these elements are the role of animators; the role of catalyst organizations; and the innovative techniques which are being applied.

Animators. The conference recognized the crucial role of individuals who take the lead, who provide the spark which lights a local initiative. In Sweden, they are called ‘fiery spirits’. When provoked by the conference facilitator to say what qualities such people should have, participants offered a range of attributes – “enthusiasm and confidence in other people, courage, a bit of madness, a sense of urgency, care for others, generosity, the ability to explain complicated ideas with simple words, links to local networks, profound knowledge of the territory, organisational ability and perseverance”. The animator must be “cooperative, optimistic and responsible, open in spirit, visionary, empathetic, passionate, disobedient but open to social needs, impatient but enduring”. He or she must be able “to promote the general interest, to build the capacity of people to participate, to create new things alongside those which already exist there” ... must be “a dreamer with feet on the ground”.

Catalysts. A local initiative may indeed be launched by one ‘fiery spirit’: but it will rapidly fail if it depends only on one person. Local action succeeds when it is truly ‘owned’ by the local community, when the people are involved, when it becomes a venture in participative democracy. François Saint-Ouen captured this point neatly when he said :

“There is a difference between civic *initiatives* and the creation of civic *communities*. Civic initiatives cannot create civic communities *if they remain isolated*. Such communities will be created only *by the relations* that will develop between each other.”

To provoke, and then to sustain, these relations and this communal participation is the role of catalyst groups or organisations. Neat examples are provided by Tot Raval, the community-based foundation which is at the centre of the stream of projects to improve the quality of life and social cohesion among the people of the Raval district in Barcelona; the Social Innovation Centre in Torino; and REALIS in Languedoc-Roussillon have a similar role of catalyst.

Innovations. The local initiatives presented to the conference illustrate vividly the wide range of innovations which have been developed by local actors in order to make good things happen from the bottom up. They include new forms of cooperatives, local food chains, local energy groups, eco-villages, transition towns, slow cities. Financial mechanisms have been created, in order to retain money in the local economies or to apply local capital to the meeting of local needs : they include local currencies, local banks, time-banking, crowd funding, equity capital and regional branding, of kinds that are illustrated by the local initiatives RUAB, Samsø, Nitra, Torino and *le Zeybu Solidaire*.

Local and global

Two of the keynote speakers at the conference – Chris Brooks and François Saint-Ouen – focused on the relationship between the burgeoning array of local initiatives around Europe and the global systems of capitalism and of government. Their key point was this – local initiatives, however widespread they may become, should not seek to compete with the global systems. Rather, they should seek to complement, to influence, and to humanise those systems.

Chris Brooks urged us to strengthen and professionalise our local initiatives, and the networks of these initiatives. We could then use the collective strength of this movement, and of the widening array of people involved in and affected by it, to influence the practices of the major players in the capitalist system. The citizens of Europe can exercise that influence by their action as consumers, as shareholders, as voters, as members of cooperatives or social enterprises. Some supermarket chains, for example, are increasingly offering locally grown, or organic, or fair-trade, products in response to consumer demand.

François Saint-Ouen emphasised that the collective of local action is not a substitute for government at all levels. Rather, this movement – this ‘participative democracy’ – should be seen as a complement, a stimulus and a partner to elective government. The great ongoing process of action, of development in urban and rural areas, should be based on effective partnership between government and people: it should be both “bottom-up” and “top-down”.

Looking ahead

Building on this message from our keynote speakers, we can say that the rising tide of local initiatives throughout Europe is indeed a quiet revolution. But it is a movement that will only gain its true revolutionary impact if it becomes collectively less quiet, more assertive, and more visible.

Networking. To achieve that greater visibility, local initiatives must find a collective voice. That implies the need for more networking; the creation of what François Saint-Ouen called a ‘dense and solid network’. We already have the beginnings of such a network, with organs at regional or national level, such as Locality in England and the Latvian Rural Forum, or at European or wider level such as Transition Towns and Ecovillages. The ECOLISE initiative, launched by AEIDL, will contribute

to this networking ideal by bringing together groups and networks with a focus on local, community-based action on climate change and sustainability, to strengthen collaboration and the link with “the top”. It was suggested that AEIDL might take some broader lead in the networking process. Other actors, such as ARC 2020, which is a platform of over 150 rural and environmental NGOs, may play a part. A particular challenge, illuminated by the wide geographic range of the projects presented at the conference, is to link the local initiatives in both the urban and the rural regions of Europe.

Stronger initiatives. But networking alone is not enough. We need to secure also the strengthening of the number and the capacity of local initiatives. Perhaps we should use, and play back to them in different forms, the words used by the leaders of the European Union – “smart, sustainable and inclusive”. Local initiatives, and their networks, should seek to become:

- more smart i.e. more skilful as animators and catalysts, more expert in use of organisational and financial techniques, more imaginative and humane in the use of information technology, more creative in the use of local resources
- more sustainable, in respecting the environment and the heritage, in finding ways to save or create energy without use of fossil fuels, in securing continuity of local initiatives over time
- more inclusive, by ensuring that initiatives bring benefit to every citizen in the area; by encouraging the active involvement of people who are now socially excluded; and by ensuring that participative democracy is genuinely democratic, which will give long-term legitimacy to the local movements and contribute to the building of a more democratic Europe.

Localness. The strength of local initiatives lies, above all, in their localness. We should continue to cherish localness in all things – the sense of a place, its history, its people, its customs, its resources, its community, its economy, its environment. This is not to advocate an introverted approach: communities will gain by being open to the world. But we should have pride and confidence in the ability of local people to take their own lives into their own hands. This ability, this resourcefulness, is the true starting-point of local development. Inputs of policy or of money from government at any level are secondary to this prime local resource. A crucial principle for local development should be “Fund your programme: do not programme other people’s funds”. This means that you should decide first what action your community needs, then consider what help you may need from government or elsewhere. Do not start by looking for government help, and distorting your own action to attract that.

This point is well illustrated by three projects which came together in a single workshop at the conference – the Roma project from Cserehat in Hungary; the Kavar initiative from Turkey; the SEWA project from India. In each case, a local animator appeared; then, a catalyst from outside the area (UNDP in Hungary, the Hüsnü M. Özeyğin Foundation in Turkey, World Bank in India) offered ideas for the process of action; then, the local community developed its own action plan; and, on the basis of that plan, public funding was sought. Moreover, in each of these three cases, the local community then developed its own enterprises as a source of longer-term funding and self-reliance.

So, we should have pride and confidence in locally-based action. We should strengthen the number and the capacity of local initiatives. We should develop strong and dense networks of these initiatives. We should be assertive and visible. But how do we build the partnership between government and people which is so crucial within the great ongoing process of development in

urban and rural areas? How do we ensure that this development is both “bottom-up” and “top-down”?

Partnership based on mutual respect. The “new economic, social and environmental equilibrium” that we desire in Europe cannot be achieved by local initiatives alone, however smart, sustainable, inclusive and networked they may become. Nor can it be achieved by governments working alone, without the full and collective involvement of citizens. The need is for effective partnership between government and people, and that partnership must be based on mutual respect.

Those who are acting at local level must recognise that the broad governmental and commercial systems are here to stay, indeed are likely to become progressively more global in their nature. They should acknowledge the benefits which these systems can bring, and seek to work with, rather than against those, systems in striving for the new equilibrium. They should accept the legitimacy of national and international development programmes, and seek to contribute positively to the shaping of those programmes, from the perspective of the communities that they represent. They should acknowledge, in particular, the efforts of public bodies at all levels to provide support for local development programmes and to achieve social, economic or territorial cohesion. At this crucial moment of transition within the European Union, from one programme period to the next, they should grasp the opportunity offered by the European Commission’s focus on the Common Strategic Framework between major funds and upon the widening concept of Community Led Local Development.

Local actors may then fairly ask the governments of Europe and the European Union itself to recognise the value of locally-based initiatives, which can breathe reality and relevance into processes of development. We can ask them to accept that local people can have the most accurate insight into their own needs and problems; that local resources, both human and material, offer a prime starting-point for development; and that their own institutional resources should be used to complement and support local initiative. We can ask them to honour the individual and collective rights of Europe’s citizens to adequate housing, jobs, services, household income, quality of life and social inclusion.

This mutual respect may then nurture a willingness to humanise the complex processes of development in which we are all involved. Local actors will accept that institutional resources – which are crucial in order to achieve true social, economic or territorial cohesion - must be used with proper accountability and fairness. Governments will accept that administrative processes can be so flexed and humanised as to encourage, rather than to block, local initiatives and to provide a user-friendly climate for innovation, which (in words used at the conference) ‘cannot bloom in a desert’. They will perceive the value of linkage, harmony, and a sensible degree of subsidiarity, between the policies and actions at different levels of government. They will recognise that the best guarantee of long-term well-being is the emergence of active and self-reliant communities.

A step-change in relationships. To realise this vision demands a step-change in the relationship between governments and local actors, between elective and participatory democracy. We need to enhance the existing, and develop new, mechanisms for linking top-down government and bottom-up initiatives. The LEADER Initiative, launched by the European Commission in 1991, has been widely

used as one such mechanism: the case studies from Ireland, Slovakia and Finnish Lapland illustrate how LEADER support and funding have helped local initiatives. In the new EU programme period, governments and peoples together should grasp the opportunity to apply LEADER principles and the formalised concept of Community Led Local Development to the support of local action in both urban and rural areas throughout the European Union and in accession and neighbouring countries. We should all seek to make resourceful use of all relevant programmes and funds to support and nurture local initiative, and to encourage and facilitate the networking between local initiatives which can speed up and strengthen the whole creative force of local action.

Reinventing EUROPE through local initiative

In these ways, we may in coming years be able to realise the full force of the 'quiet revolution' which was explored in the conference. The emergence of active and self-reliant communities, energised by local initiatives, and the acceptance by governments that such communities are the best guarantee of long-term well-being, can indeed lead to a reinvention of Europe and a rising commitment by its citizens to the European project. We may thus be able to grasp the vision of a Europe "rich in the diversity of its landscapes, its communities and its culture, open to the world, striving for a new economic, social and environmental equilibrium"... a Europe which is indeed (in the proper use of these adjectives) "smart, sustainable and inclusive".

The powerful movement in Sweden which supports, and speaks for, over 5000 village action groups, is called '*Hela Sverige Ska Leva*' –ALL Sweden shall live. If we can realise the ambition of the growing movement of local initiatives throughout this diverse continent, then indeed we may be able to say "**ALL Europe Shall Live**".