

Reinventing Europe - with and for its people

A proposal from the CARMEN group

Europe needs to rebuild the trust and hope of its people more than ever before. Brexit is just one sign of growing nationalism, populism and suspicion of European institutions and projects. This feeling is being fueled by an increasingly uncertain global situation, climate change, terrorism, migration and greater inequality. Some people have gained – but many others have clearly lost.

To regain the trust of its people – Europe needs to show that it trusts them.

Past lessons. How to enable and share local creativity across Europe.

In the past, Europe has experimented with a number of highly successful initiatives which provide ordinary people with the means and tools to explore new solutions to the challenges they face. One notable example is LEADER which, over the last 25 years, has evolved to become “Community-Led Local Development”. Now more than 3000 local groups, each made up of hundreds of local people, design and implement their own strategies. They cover most European rural areas, much of the coast and, more recently, a growing number of urban neighbourhoods with major achievements in terms of social cohesion, job creation and sustainable development.

Another example, is ERASMUS, which, in a decentralized way, has allowed more than three million young people to develop a sense of European identity by allowing them to explore and absorb the diversity of European culture for themselves.

What lessons can we draw from these past initiatives? Can they help us to rethink the policies required to reconnect Europe to its citizens and meet the emerging challenges we face today? These were the questions addressed by CARMEN group¹.

Responding to change and diversity.

Over this period, Europe has changed enormously. It has expanded from 15 to 28 members facing massively different socio-economic and institutional circumstances. Some dynamic metropolitan and rural areas have benefited from the opening of frontiers, the single market and economic and social cohesion policies. But new social and territorial divisions have emerged. Large numbers of rural areas, small towns, urban and peri-urban neighbourhoods have been left out. Their future and that of their people, feels and is, increasingly insecure.

Of course, people have not, and never do, just sit back when confronted with such challenges. There has been surge of community and citizen driven initiatives in fields as diverse as food, energy, broadband, transport, social care, alternative finance, climate change and so on. Many particularly exciting initiatives have been led or involved young people.

Unfortunately, policies and institutions have often failed to keep up with the people. In particular, despite well-meaning intentions for mainstreaming and extending LEADER through multi-funding, its local partnerships have become increasingly institutionalized and restricted by disproportionate bureaucracy. Unless measures are taken to breathe new life into LEADER, there is also a risk that the local groups will fail to meet the diverse and rapidly changing needs of local people.

¹ The CARMEN Group is made up of people with significant experience of the LEADER approach and territorial development, who have decided to make their ideas and proposals available to all who wish to draw inspiration from them. They met in CARMEN, Alentejo (Portugal).

Putting in place the principles of collaborative governance.

Given the speed, diversity and complexity of the changes affecting Europe it is impossible to find one-size-fits all solutions. However, it is possible to reinforce the space that people have to develop their own responses - by strengthening certain principles of collaborative governance at EU level. These include;

- **A pledge of trust to all Europeans**, inviting them, and especially young people, to play a role in the European “project” through local initiatives which provide them with the means to develop their own solutions in a spirit of collaboration and co-responsibility.
- **Recognising the importance of the local level** for developing creative, open and tailor-made strategies, supported by the EU and Member States. These strategies should nurture and respond to grass roots citizen`s initiatives (e.g. at village level) within the framework of broader goals for social cohesion and economic environmental sustainability.
- **Reinforcing participative and forward-looking partnerships or platforms** which bring together public, private and civil society actors. These partnerships should be balanced, open and inclusive and provide the missing link between many policies implemented at national or regional levels and grass roots initiatives at village or neighbourhood level.
- **Encouraging cooperation and synergy between different types of territory** by overcoming traditional distinctions between urban and rural, rural and coastal or dynamic and lagging areas.
- **Promoting dialogue and joint learning** not only between the different actors in a given territory but also between actors at different institutional levels, in different places, and different domains (e.g. research, public, private, NGO, etc.).
- **Adding value to local assets, collective goods and ecosystems.** Priority to be given to investments which increase community knowledge and capacity and enhance the sustainable use strategic assets (e.g. environmental assets, energy, broadband, transport, food, waste, etc.)

Translating the principles into practice

1. The EU should demonstrate its trust for EU citizens by pledging a *significant proportion of all ESI funds to local initiatives led by local people.*
2. Ideally this should be managed through *a separate fund* for citizen-led local development with separate programmes in the MS and/or regions. In any case, the amounts committed by ESI funds should be earmarked for the objectives set by citizen-led strategies *with no distinction or demarcation between funds.*
3. The programme should be coordinated at EU level by an inter-departmental body (to be decided). Similar coordinating bodies need to be established at national and regional levels.
4. *Finance* must be decentralized to provide the flexibility for local strategies to respond to local needs and challenges with a shift from compliance to achieving goals and respecting the agreed principles and methods.
5. *Partnerships* need to be visible and recognized as legitimate bodies for carrying out different tasks, with continuity of funding and clear rules of engagement which ensure openness, participation and a continuous flow of new ideas.
6. *Exchange and joint learning* should be encouraged by an ERASMUS for local actors.

To avoid the mistakes of the past, the group that met at Carmen would welcome discussing the principles above and the mechanisms for putting them into practice with a wide group of concerned stakeholders from different parts of Europe. Please send any contribution to contact@carmen.pt
More information on <http://carmen.pt/page165.html>