

Agricultural Policy Forum 2020:

Agriculture and rural development policy in the Western Balkans in times of pandemic

12 – 16 October 2020
Online webinar

APF Agenda 2020

The Agricultural Policy Forum (APF), hereafter referred to as the “Forum”, is a comprehensive regional platform enabling all stakeholders – from academia and policy makers to farmers and civil society – to get together and address key concerns about the future of agriculture and rural development, and their role in the prosperity of the South Eastern European region. The current and future state of agriculture and rural development in relation to the dynamics of the European Union (EU) integration process is the central topic of the APF.

The 20th Agricultural Policy Forum, “Agriculture and Rural Development Policy in the Western Balkans in times of pandemic”, was held as an online webinar from 12 to 16 October 2020. It addressed the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture, food and rural areas in the Western Balkans and stressed the necessity of regional cooperation in times of pandemic. The Forum reviewed recent agricultural policy developments in the context of the EU approximation process and elaborated on the research, innovation and technology transfer capacities in the Western Balkans. Small holders and rural areas were once again in the focus of the APF, emphasizing their importance in times of pandemic through development of short value-chains, diversification of economic activities in rural areas and application of the community-led local development approach.

The Agricultural Policy Forum Agenda 2020 summarizes the main outcomes as follows:

1. **COVID-19** has had multiple impacts on the agriculture and rural areas in the Western Balkans. It emphasized the need for **improved food self-sufficiency** of the countries/territories, reduced import dependency and **enhanced supply chain infrastructure**. The Forum confirms the necessity of **evidence-based and transparent policy making** with special compensation schemes for farmers. Further **formalization of the farming sector** is a prerequisite for such schemes and for further broader

national and **IPARD support** for sustainable development of the sector. COVID-19 reality also raised awareness of **economic diversification opportunities** of the rural areas, emphasizing the importance of further development of rural tourism, short value-chain development and digitalization.

2. **Regional cooperation** in the Western Balkans proved to have **crucial importance**, especially in times of crisis, such as COVID-19 pandemic. It should focus on trade facilitation, policy dialogue, coordination of anti-epidemic measures, sharing knowledge, experience, and best practices among WB countries/territories. The joint challenges on the path to EU accession enhance the need for such cooperation. For that purpose EU and international organizations are being called upon for further **support of and cooperation with regional platforms**, such as SWG.
3. The Forum discussed and assessed the weaknesses in implementation of **IPARD II** such as: weak, unsteady and demotivated **administrative** and **advisory capacities**, lack of efficient **cooperation** among responsible authorities, poor quality of guidance for beneficiaries and complex procedures, limited access to finance for private co-financing, inadequate IT systems in the paying agencies. The Forum strongly recommends that the above-mentioned deficiencies be addressed while preparing for the IPARD III program.
4. The Forum appreciates and applauds to the efforts of the EU to assist the region in overcoming the current health and economic crisis as well as in accelerating the integration of the WB region into the EU through the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the WB. **Environment** and **private sector** are in the focus of this plan.
5. Analysis of recent agricultural policy developments of pre-accession countries shows some progress and confirms that **EU remains main priority** on the Western Balkan political agenda. Yet, there is a **lack of strategic planning** of agricultural policy and **use of intervention logic** in creating support measures, while coupled measures being dominant instrument. To support evidence-based policy making the Forum strongly calls for **better agricultural and rural statistics** for proper monitoring, evaluation and decision making. **Analytical capacities** should be continuously developed and utilized, while **communication among institutions** should be strengthened. Allocation of higher budgetary transfers should be directed towards **structural and rural development measures**.
6. Participation in **short supply chains** is an attractive way of adding value and improving farm livelihoods. The short supply chains provide access to diverse and more profitable niche markets. Therefore, the governments should seriously consider **advisory, cooperation and investment policy measures**. The Forum recommends a set of policy actions comprising incentives and active animation for farmers' collaboration which contributes to diversification of their economic activities. In addition, the policy measures should be designed in a way to provide small holders with up-to-date

information on business opportunities, consulting services on rural non-farm business activities, finance through national programs and IPARD.

7. **Rural tourism** is a key sector for diversifying economic activities in rural areas, whose potential has been particularly seen in times of pandemic. Governments should adjust and implement strategies to **promote rural tourism, improve the image** of rural areas as tourism destinations, implement the **Area-Based Development (ABD), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** and **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)** approach and ensure consistent long-term **financial and technical support** for sustainable rural tourism development.

8. The Forum addressed the major challenges for integrating and making the **LEADER approach** operational in the Western Balkans through **the Road Maps** that will serve as guidance for future activities at various levels of national governance, as well as for the intermediary networks and the local action groups. The Forum supports the EU Commission recommendation to make extensive **use of IPARD Technical Assistance** as an opportunity to strengthen **LAG capacities** in the WB region and recognizes the need to enhance the practical knowledge and awareness **on LEADER and CLLD** among the key stakeholders. The Forum notes the considerable differences between the countries/territories concerning the state of progress in this matter. Therefore, it makes an appeal to the relevant stakeholders from the WB countries/territories to engage in partnerships and more intensive exchange in order to learn from each other. **Regional-wide cooperation** focusing on joint promotion of social dialogue within the rural population, facilitating good governance through local partnerships, fostering employment and strengthening human capital and collective action at local community level in the region is seen as key priority. The creation of a suitable **legal framework for LEADER** implementation is strongly recommended in order to build up trust in institutions and to ensure adequate funding of bottom-up development initiatives and projects.

9. **Agricultural research, innovation and technology transfer (RITT) capacities** are factors that determine the future agricultural development in the region. Therefore, the Forum recommends that national authorities should focus on proper **implementation of strategic frameworks for RITT**, appropriate **allocation of financial resources**, strengthening links between **science, advisory services and business sector**, encouraging farmers' **association and cooperation**, providing **opportunities for transfer of technologies and knowledge** through networking, trainings, practical demonstrations and study visits. **EU programs** should provide **preferential treatment**, more funds and/or more flexible conditions to proposals containing institutions from WB, with special focus on young researchers. To further contribute to institutional capacity building, EU programs should support **networking** and introduce **mentor institutional programs** connecting institutions from EU countries with institutions in the Western Balkan countries/territories.

The Forum agreed that:

- The APF Agenda 2020 will be presented and discussed at the 14th Annual Working Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture from South Eastern Europe on the 17th of November 2020;
- This Agenda will be conveyed to the EU institutions, UN agencies and other relevant national and international institutions and organizations;
- The 21st Agricultural Policy Forum will take place in the autumn of 2021 in Serbia, which will hold the SWG Presidency for 2021.

The Agricultural Policy Forum 2020 was held under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development of Kosovo* and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe.

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*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence