



Agricultural Policy Forum 2021:

Green Agenda for the Western Balkans: Commitments and Reality Check

20 - 21 October 2021
Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia

Vrnjacka Banja Agenda 2021

The Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) is a comprehensive regional platform enabling all stakeholders – from academia and policymakers 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 21st Agricultural Policy Forum, “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans: Commitments and Reality Check”, hereafter referred to as the “Forum”, was held from 20 to 21 October 2021 in Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia. The Forum focused on the commitments that come out of the Sofia Declaration adopted on 10 November 2020 related to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. It addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture and rural areas in the Western Balkans, the new perspectives under IPARD III, and the opportunities for development through research, innovation, and technology transfer in agriculture. Additionally, it addressed the sustainable grape and wine production, diversification of economic activities in the rural areas through tourism and the instruments for effective implementation of the LEADER approach.

The Agricultural Policy Forum Agenda 2021 summarises the main outcomes as follows:

1. The governments of the Western Balkan countries/territories endorsed the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The Forum recommends realising the **commitments** of the **Sofia Declaration** on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans without further delay. The competent ministries should **implement actions** in the following **five pillars**: 1) climate, energy, mobility; 2) circular economy; 3) depollution; 4) sustainable agriculture and food production; 5) biodiversity.
2. The Forum underlines that the implementing the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** would strengthen the farmers’ position in the food supply chain, increase their income and competitiveness, production of nutritious and healthy food, the attractiveness





of the region for investments and tourism, economic and job opportunities. The Western Balkans governments should **mainstream environmental and climate protection** in relevant policy areas and create an enabling governance framework. They should further establish a reliable **monitoring system** to reduce the chemical input, and a proper **regulatory framework for waste management**. National legislation should be gradually **aligned with the respective EU legislation**. Farm advisory services and control authorities have to be strengthened. **Standards for keeping land in good agricultural and environmental conditions** need to be applied. Short food supply chains, quality products and economic diversification should be supported using national development measures and IPARD. **IPARD III measures** should be used to the full extent.

3. The Forum discussed the **impact of the COVID-19** pandemic on agriculture and rural areas and assessed the response of the WB governments as adequate, efficient and highlighted the value of regional cooperation and solidarity. Still, for the future, the Western Balkans countries/territories should **develop programmes for effective emergency management** and establish a regional coordination body. Systems for a rapid assessment of public and private stocks of basic foods need to be re-established and/or strengthened, as well as a system for regular **monitoring of national food balances**. As the supply of food mainly depends on the private sector, **cooperation between the private and public sector** needs to be facilitated. The **digitalisation** of the rural markets should be encouraged, and **the needs of vulnerable groups in rural areas** regularly monitored so that **social-assistance schemes** in rural areas can be adequately devised and effectively implemented during shocks and crises.
4. The Forum emphasize the importance of fully establishing **Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems** in the Western Balkans based on national action plans, incorporated and integrated into the national strategies for agriculture and rural development and coordinated at the regional level. Immediate action is needed to strengthen the cooperation and interaction between policymakers, farmer-based organizations, the private sector, education, research and extension services. The Forum strongly advises the national authorities in the WB to consider the implementation of the proposed IPARD measure “**Cooperation for Innovation and Knowledge Transfer**”. Agri-food Centres of Innovation and Entrepreneurship should be established, while **internet broadband connectivity** in rural areas needs to be enhanced to facilitate digitalisation.
5. The Forum recognizes the need for creating favourable conditions for young and women entrepreneurs in agriculture and rural areas, including **investment incentives, access to low-cost credit for start-ups** and policy measures related to **easing access to land** through inheritance, purchase or tenancy. Develop new financial instruments and a Rural





Development Guarantee Fund to facilitate the financing of farm modernization and the adoption of green and clean technologies.

6. The Forum confirms that the **wine sector** shall contribute to achieving general economic and environmental goals. **Improving competitiveness and reducing the environmental impact** of the wineries should be the highest priority for the WB. **Efficient management of energy and natural resources** such as soil and water remain key factors for sustainable development. The wine sector continues to aim at high-quality wine. Furthermore, access to **research, innovation and knowledge** encourages wineries to improve their grape and wine production. Raising awareness on the major challenges for integrating sustainable grape and wine production in the Western Balkans, including its **linkage with rural tourism**, is the first step ahead. Promotion and information campaigns are **needed**.
7. The Forum underlines that to **develop rural tourism**, relevant authorities should enable **cross border cooperation, Area-Based Development (ABD), trade facilitation and easing border crossing** to result in **regional tourism products** of the Western Balkans. The Forum recommends that the rural areas are jointly promoted as green, attractive, safe and secure travel destinations and a functional **waste management** system is put in place. **Capacity building** initiatives should support the increase of ICT use and inclusion of territorial products in the tourism offer while tourism support policies and territorial planning should be implemented coherently and following an evidence-based approach at the central and local level. The Forum emphasises that **tourism development should follow the principle “value over volume”** and policies and regulations should **encourage short supply chains** as well as the **provision of local and traditional products**. The Forum calls for stable and long term **financial and technical support** to improve rural infrastructure, education, and the quality of services. Revenues from **tourist taxes** need to be used locally to address diverse problems in rural areas and categorization of rural accommodation facilities should be harmonized. Destination management should be an obligatory function of municipal bodies and institutions in charge of supporting tourism locally.
8. **The Forum recognizes LEADER** as a strong instrument to activate local democracy. Leader measures under the IPARD III program should contribute to the improvement of the socio-economic life of the local **community**, the improvement of **public spaces, environmental standards** in LAG's areas and promotion of **renewable energy** use by the local community. **The communication with the relevant authorities and stakeholders** should be improved to accelerate the process of **accreditation of the LEADER measure**. The Balkan Rural Development Network and national rural development networks should articulate their positions to national ministries and EU





institutions. **Networking** among Local Action Groups (LAGs) should be enhanced through the national rural networks. To sustain the enthusiasm of the LAGs and strengthen their capacities, national schemes should complement IPARD (LEADER-like measures). Technical Assistance IPARD measure should support potential LAG's to be ready to apply for the LEADER approach. The **roadmaps to LEADER** – a straightforward action plan for implementation of LEADER in each WB country should be followed on three levels: institutional, national rural development network members, and LAGs. The Forum recommends that besides the existing IPARD beneficiary countries, all other WB countries should be included for support through the IPARD.

The Forum agreed that:

- The APF Agenda 2021 will be presented and discussed at the 15th Annual Working Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture from South-Eastern Europe on the 17th of November 2021 in Tirana, Albania;
- This Agenda will be conveyed to the EU institutions, UN agencies and other relevant national and international institutions and organisations;
- The 22nd Agricultural Policy Forum will take place in the autumn of next year in Albania, which will hold the SWG Presidency for 2022.

The Agricultural Policy Forum 2021 was held under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South-Eastern Europe.

The participants of the Agricultural Policy Forum 2021 highly appreciated the support provided by the convening institutions and organisations: Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture of Germany (BMEL), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Commission (DG Agriculture and Rural Development), and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

