



Samobor Declaration

**ECOVAST CONFERENCE, SAMOBOR, CROATIA
15 OCTOBER 2007**

We, the 72 delegates from 9 countries (Note 1) attending the FINAL PLENARY session on 15 October 2007 of the conference organised by ECOVAST CROATIA at Samobor, on the topic of **SMALL EUROPEAN TOWNS – THEIR ROLE IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND HERITAGE PROTECTION**;

Noting that the Conference is positioned at the outset of the European Rural Development programme (ERDP 2007-2013), and

Aware of the prospect of a Health Check of the Common Agricultural Policy in 2008, which is also the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, but

Addressing ourselves to all the governments and peoples of the wider Europe;

Welcome the initiative by ECOVAST of the **ASSET** (Action to Strengthen Small European Towns) project;

Believe that there is a major gap in European Policy. Cities and **large towns** are well covered through the European Regional Development Fund, as are **rural areas** through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). However, **small towns and their hinterlands deserve more attention**. The small towns close to larger urban areas are similarly without a clear policy;

Support the initiative by the European Commission to improve understanding of, and to develop policies related to, the close relationships between towns and rural areas;
(Note 2)

Urge all European Governments, in shaping and developing their rural development programmes, to place a policy focus upon small towns, and their potential for sustainable development. We also urge the European Union to place greater funding emphasis on Pillar 2 to implement rural development;

Believe that towns should be seen as consumers of rural products and centres of support for rural businesses including the promotion of rural tourism. For small towns and their hinterlands, land management has a key role in local food production, other local products (crafts, arts, building materials) and in sourcing renewable energy;

Call for a full recognition, by the EU and by governments at all levels, of the key principle that the rural dwellers and people of small towns should be not only the main beneficiaries, but also the main shapers, of development policy and programmes which affect their areas. This principle reflects the great variation in the character, cultural diversity, distinctiveness, needs and resources of different rural areas throughout Europe. It recognises also the ability of local people to take the lead in efforts to improve their own lives, and to have a true sense of 'ownership' of these efforts;

Welcome the initiatives being taken in many European countries to sustain and regenerate the vitality of small towns and their rural hinterland. Small towns have a key role in the community life, in the protection of heritage and in the economy of the rural regions. They are set in the landscape and are motors for rural development. However, they face many threats to their continued well-being, such as loss of younger people, replacement of full-time residents by owners of second homes, and the challenges to survival of local facilities and independent local retailers;

Encourage the creation and activity of Town Partnerships, involving municipalities, enterprises and particularly civil society, to lead the process of sustaining and revitalizing small towns and to enable beneficiaries to draw upon European, national, regional and private funding;

Urge that the focus of policy for rural areas should be on sustainable development, seeking to achieve the social, cultural, economic and environmental well-being of the rural people and areas. Development can only be sustainable if it emanates from both men and women, of all ages and origins, who have or who seek the necessary experience, understanding and skills and who take responsibility at grassroots level. Development should be conceived through a process which is participative, taking into account local cultures, and which liberates and fosters the energy of all;

Emphasise the decisive importance of life-long learning for the real participation of rural people in their own development process. There is a widespread need for education, training and skills development; and for advisory services to help individuals, enterprises and communities to take initiatives and to strengthen civil society and local partnership.

Note 1

Participants:

ECOVAST members and guests, including staff and students of the University of Gloucestershire MSc Course "European Rural Development"

Countries of origin

Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom,

Croatian small towns represented at the conference included:

1. Samobor
2. Otočac
3. Senj
4. Delnice
5. Stari Grad, otok Hvar
6. Ogulin
7. Crikvenica

ECOVAST Croatia members were from the towns of:

8. Petrinja
9. Kostajnica
10. Dubrovnik
11. Slatina
12. Zaprešić

Note 2

"In the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the so called **Pillar 2 on rural development** agreed in 2005 for the period 2007 - 2013, **urban-rural relations are mentioned** as an element of the rural development policy.

Under the...Axis 3 themes like *wider Rural Development i.e. renovation and development of villages, ensuring basic service and economic diversification* are addressed.

Small and Medium Sized Towns (SMESTO) are not mentioned explicitly in the Pillar 2, although they could play a crucial role as potential nodes in a spatial strategy especially in rural areas far from metropolitan regions." *European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON 1.4.1 "The Role of Small and Medium-Sized Towns (SMESTO)" Final Report 2006)*