



## A proclamation on Rural Learning for Development in Europe

### **Concept and background**

Rural development forms an important pillar of EU's policies and an issue of priority for many European countries. Despite the decline of the primary sector of economy over the last years, rural production is an important aspect of European economy, and rural communities form a proportion of the overall EU population that cannot be neglected. However, the viability of rural areas needs more than agriculture alone. Rural development policies need to place agriculture in a broader context taking into account protection of the rural environment, quality of produced food, increasing competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector, enhanced quality of life in rural areas, and, eventually, attractiveness of rural areas to young farmers and new residents.

The role of learning and education, in all their forms, in this direction is crucial: better educated rural citizens of all ages and backgrounds, with ample life-long learning opportunities and access to the contemporary resources of the Information Society and the Knowledge Economy, can resist urbanisation tendencies, protect the natural and human resources of the countryside, understand the new challenges for rural Europe and respond to them with new initiatives, flexibility and adaptability.

In face of this evident need for the promotion of "rural learning", all levels of education, from primary to tertiary, all forms of learning, from formal to informal, from conventional professional training to open and distance learning, have to respond in a coherent and creative fashion. What is more, for rural learning, just as for rural development more generally, a strengthened bottom-up approach appears to be essential, so as to better tune rural learning programmes to local needs.

### **The RuraLEARN response to the challenges**

In this context, the RuraLEARN project started in Autumn 2006 aspiring to become a timely and targeted contribution towards the emergence of rural learning as an issue of priority in discussions and planning for learning and rural development in Europe.

This has been achieved through a carefully designed campaign, which peaked into the organisation of a coordinated cluster of public events on 24<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> June 2007. The events were organized in remote rural settings on the Greek island of Chios, a mainly rural, geographically disadvantaged, less developed piece of insular land at the south-eastern fringe of the European Union, which however presents a tremendous developmental potential and a challenge for sustainable development initiatives. By choosing this remote and rural setting for the organization of the public events, the RuraLEARN project sought to directly exemplify the challenges faced by Europe's rural communities in terms of development and inclusion, as well as the relevant opportunities that lifelong learning presents for Europeans of all ages in rural and geographically disadvantaged areas. The project had the opportunity to present these to the various stakeholders invited to the events, including policy makers in education and development from the local to the national and government level (e.g. a Greek Government Minister for Development), the tourists that happened to visit the island (which is a mild tourist destination in the Aegean Sea during summer), invited visitors from outside Europe (the Turkish coast lying opposite to the island, Southern Asia, South and North America), thus extending the impact of the project far beyond Europe, as well as, importantly,



to the local communities themselves, including rural citizens, and students and teachers from all levels of education represented on the island (pre-school to vocational training and university). The strong bottom-up RuraLEARN approach should be particularly highlighted. The rationale behind it lies in the aspiration to better tune the RuraLEARN intervention and rural learning initiatives more widely, to local needs.

### **RuraLEARN as a starting point: first conclusions and promises**

The RuraLEARN experience has been perceived as particularly successful by all people and organisations involved, in any of the diverse ways of involvement in the RuraLEARN initiative. It was indeed a timely intervention, bringing to the lights of publicity on 'rural learning', an issue of tremendous importance for the future of rural Europe – and its urban counterpart. This success, reflected in the comments of all participants, can be traced back to various critical factors.

It has been very important that the groups targeted by the project have been many and diverse. Beside the added knowledge value for all participating institutions and their activities and partners in the field of rural learning, the RuraLEARN project achieved further-reaching impact at all levels of stakeholders directly and indirectly involved in rural learning, with a dual focus on both local communities and the wider educational community.

The felt impact of the project on the various target groups is diverse, but in all cases leading to advanced opportunities for initiatives promoting rural development through lifelong learning.

People active in EU-funded actions will use this experience to co-develop ideas for further work promoting rural learning, both locally in their countries and at the European level. Policy makers, inspectors and advisors at various levels, and social partners in general have become more aware of the challenges and opportunities for rural learning, and more sensitive and motivated towards initiatives in this field. The general public has also been informed and mobilised for the causes of rural learning. Through tourists and visitors, the promoted projects and concepts have become known across and beyond Europe, achieving an interaction of the European approach to rural learning with other cultures and approaches. Last, but not least, all local citizens, the rural communities in general - not only those directly involved in Chios, but those in all participating countries and across Europe – have learned more about possibilities for international cooperation, and particularly about opportunities for the promotion of rural development through educational and other learning initiatives, through concrete examples and schemes foregrounding their own local needs and priorities.

In all aspects presented above, there has been a strong innovative nature. The RuraLEARN project may be unique in having looked at a less attended yet crucial aspect of education and learning in Europe, i.e. rural learning as a vehicle for local development, thus opening up new roads for European education and learning policies, initiatives and projects. It has done so by scanning and valorising work accomplished across the Socrates Programme and other EU programmes over the last ten or more years, involving also partners from those areas of education that have so far focused less on rural issues, thus triggering a better distribution of EU-funded efforts connected with rural issues. The communication campaign envisaged took place within rural communities rather than in 'sterilised' urban research communication settings, without loosing in target groups and outreach. But most importantly, it involved local people and rural 'players' from all over Europe, and helped them in practice to become active European citizens, listening to their own needs and expectations.

The end of the contractual period of RuraLEARN is definitely for its organisers and friends a starting point, a promise for future collaborative endeavours in the field of rural learning.



“Rural learning” emerged throughout RuraLEARN as a fascinating, emerging and expanding field standing on the cross-section of lifelong learning and rural development, definitely worth of further and deeper investigation at the European level. The manifested interest of various stakeholders, from the rural communities themselves to high-level academics and national government representatives, clearly demonstrated that this field deserves much more publicity and attention, through further initiatives building on and expanding the RuraLEARN paradigm.

As a response to this need, RuraLEARN contributes its promise to keep the RuraLEARN web portal, available at [www.ruralern.eu](http://www.ruralern.eu), alive, updated with all information about the project, a virtual place dedicated to awareness raising and exchange in the field of rural learning.

Hopefully, out of this experience, visionaries among us, the RuraLEARN partners and participants, will preserve the RuraLEARN momentum by exploring the possibilities for the set-up and consolidation of a European Association for Rural Learning, as a means for the dissemination and exchange of information and experiences about innovatory initiatives in rural development through learning. Such a scheme should definitely adopt an inclusive approach covering areas and fields of the rural learning landscape as diverse as school education, higher education, adult education, vocational and professional training, technology-supported learning and the fight against the digital gap.