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RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Statement by
Ms. Marta HRUSTEL MAJCEN
Deputy Head of Delegation

on behalf of the European Union
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The European Union (EU) is committed to realising the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI).

Internally, the EU addresses key issues of sustainable rural development:

Over 60% of the population of the EU's 27 Member States live in rural areas, covering 90% of the total territory. Rural development is a vitally important policy area and strengthening it has become an overall EU priority. Ensuring integrated environmental requirements in the Common Agricultural Policy is an on-going priority. The EU recognises the important role of rural populations and the need to enhance the quality of life in rural communities.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) promotes the multifunctional role of farming as a provider of food products and as a steward of diverse landscapes and the cultural and natural heritage in rural areas. The EU's rural development policy, the CAP's second pillar, supports the agricultural sector and encourages diversification, innovation and sustainable local rural development and aims at building local capacity for employment and diversification. The EU Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development identify as priority areas inter alia (a) biodiversity and the preservation of high nature value farming and forestry systems, (b) water, and (c) climate change and the development of renewable energy.

Rural development is also central to the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) as well as to the Lisbon process. The overall aim of the EU SDS is to identify and develop actions to enable the EU to achieve a continuous long-term improvement in the quality of life through the creation of sustainable communities, able to manage and use resources efficiently, to tap the ecological and social innovation potential of the economy and in the end ensure prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion. The EU SDS is thus closely related to the issues of agriculture and rural development, namely for: conservation and management of natural resources, social inclusion, demography and migration and global poverty and sustainable development challenges.

When discussing sustainable development in agriculture within the EU, we cannot emphasise enough the importance of a strong rural development policy. Sustainable economic growth in farming is pursued through measures established under four axes. EU Rural Development Policy is implemented through national or regional programmes and through local development plans of Local Action Groups (LAGs), establishing measures within these axes: These aim at (I) improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors, (II) improving the environment and countryside, including support for the EU's Birds, Habitats and Water Framework Directives, and (III) improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging economic diversification. The horizontal LEADER approach (axis IV) promotes local bottom-up initiatives.

Special attention is paid to maximizing synergies between the different axes. Furthermore, rural development programmes seek synergies with other EU strategies concerning cohesion policy and

regional development, renewable energy sources, climate change, forestry, and other thematic environmental strategies, including the sustainable use of natural resources and soil protection.

Organic farming has become one of the most dynamic sectors in EU agriculture. The EU endorses organic farming as an important part of sustainable farming systems. To enhance consumer confidence and ensure well-defined product properties for organic products, the EU has established respective legal provisions. Nearly all EU Rural Development Programmes promote organic farming.

European farmers are significant beneficiaries of Community rural development support. The significance of agriculture in preserving the rural environment and the cultivated landscapes is beyond doubt. In this sense, rural development policy clearly serves the need of the broader European society and beyond.

Internationally, the EU is also addressing the challenge of sustainable rural development:

- The European Commission's 2002 Communication on "Fighting Rural Poverty" presents EU policy on rural development and sustainable natural resource management in developing countries. The Communication recognises that rural poverty is a complex problem with a number of common characteristics: low incomes, low consumption rates resulting from low productivity, inequalities in ownership and access to productive assets, poor local health and low educational levels, degraded natural resources, vulnerability to risk, and poor access to political power. In response, EU policy integrates the objectives of poverty reduction, food security, and sustainable natural resource management and promotes a coherent and integrated approach to rural poverty reduction.
- In this context, the EU also wishes to highlight that the local level requires further strengthening, better integration in participatory decision-making and adaptation of development strategies to local needs. Local governance processes are of fundamental importance to make public institutions more effective in meeting citizens' needs and to create the right conditions to empower civil society and involve it in the management of its own affairs.
- Agricultural development is crucial for many developing countries, due to its impact on economic growth, food security, and rural development. The last decade has seen a decrease in investments in agriculture. The recent rise in national budgets allocated to rural and agricultural development in several African states (in line with the Maputo Declaration) is thus a step in the right direction and is welcomed by the EU.
- Furthermore, the EU supports interventions in support of food security, for example through the "Food Security Thematic Programme" (FSTP). Under the FSTP targeted support will be provided to programmes relating to agricultural research for development, food security information for action systems, policy development and strengthening farmer organisations. Furthermore, a component on natural resource management is in preparation.
- At the same time, the Africa-EU Partnership on the MDGs includes a priority action on food security. Within this Partnership, agriculture and food security will be regarded as integral and strategic parts of the development agenda at national, regional and continental levels.
- The EC and several Member States are also active members of the Global Donor Platform on Rural Development, a concerted drive to reduce poverty in the rural areas of the developing world and also seeking to clarify and address the challenges of aid effectiveness in the context of sustainable agriculture and rural development.
- The EC is also engaging in a reflection on addressing rural poverty through territorial development. This focuses on bottom-up, endogenous, local development strategies integrating different policies at the territorial level (social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of development).
- In line with its 2004 "Action Plan on Agricultural Commodity Chains, Dependence and Poverty", the EU supports the improved competitiveness of commodity chains and primary production. This involves linking producers and rural businesses to competitive international, regional and national markets, helping partner countries to implement commodity chain and diversification strategies and to develop regional support services.

Thank you.