



A CONTRIBUTION BY AEIDL ON THE OCCASION OF ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY

Rethinking the **European project** from the perspective of **citizens** and **local communities**

AEIDL, working for 25 years to bring Europe closer to its citizens

AEIDL, the European Association for Information on Local Development, was founded in 1988 by like-minded individuals who believed that European integration could make a positive contribution to citizenship and to the sustainable development of local communities. Its objective was to contribute to bringing Europe closer to its citizens and to promote interaction at local level, between all those who wanted to open up new development opportunities.

Over the last 25 years, AEIDL has seen significant changes in Europe, marked by the search for that elusive equilibrium that Jacques Delors defined as, “competition that stimulates, cooperation that strengthens and solidarity that unites.”

Since its creation, AEIDL has been an active stakeholder in various policies introduced by Europe. Policies that targeted local initiatives, promoting communication and exchange at European level, identifying good practices, strengthening local capacities, empowering local actors, supporting cooperation, exploiting and disseminating knowledge, and evaluating results.

Among the initiatives we have been involved in over the years are: the Local Development and Employment Initiatives (LDEIs), the “Rural Carrefours”, the Territorial Employment Pacts, rural development policies including the LEADER Community Initiative and its equivalent programme for fisheries areas (FARNET), the EQUAL Community Initiative, numerous cooperation programmes, urban development initiatives (URBAN, URBACT), the EU’s main environment programme, LIFE, the local development aspects of the EU Cohesion policy, and ESF initiatives focusing on social enterprise and the social economy.

These different initiatives have contributed to building an open, inclusive and imaginative Europe - a proud achievement for countless local actors and project promoters who have received EU support for their projects. These people are proud to be involved in the construction of a community unique in the world, rich in diversity and multiculturalism.

Economic, social and territorial cohesion

The Single European Act, signed in 1986 in response to growing euroscepticism in the face of the oil crisis and the massive restructuring of whole sectors - coalmining, steelmaking, shipbuilding, textiles, gave the EU a new competence, that of “economic and social cohesion”. In concrete terms, this involved a doubling of the Structural Funds in 1988 and their concentration on the most underdeveloped regions.

In 2007, the territorial dimension, which is at the heart of all AEIDL’s actions, gained stronger recognition. Complementing the principle of economic and social cohesion, the Lisbon Treaty added “territorial cohesion”, the aim of which was to build on the strengths of each Member State of the EU, enabling them to make the greatest possible contribution to sustainable development and European integration.

Despite the difficulties encountered, the results are there for all to see: an unprecedented transformation in Member States, high-quality infrastructure in all regions, including those at the very periphery of the EU, a major reduction in disparities between countries, a significant drop in unemployment rates, and a European social model serving as an example for the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, over this 25 year period there has also been tensions and crises, in Europe and elsewhere in the world, highlighting the weaknesses of our economic system. Globalisation has gone hand-in-hand with massive deregulation, bowing to the myth that “the market”¹ could solve the problems of global development.

Nevertheless, growth continued in our Western societies, helping us to forget that it was nurtured to a large extent by the disfunctionality it gave rise to: by social inequalities, and by unlimited exploitation of natural resources, with an unsuspected impact on climate change. But it cannot be said that we were not forewarned. We only need to recall the warning of Club of Rome in the early 1970’s or, more recently, of Al Gore, the 2007 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his fight against global warming.

Unchecked globalisation and weaknesses in the European construction

The subprime crisis sparked by the failure of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis sparked a meltdown of the system. A third crisis – and one with the potential to have a much more profound impact, is the ecological crisis. Yet responses to this crisis, and proposals for transitional policies, remain sadly lacking in the face of recession, national egoism and conservatism.

Unchecked globalization, an increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth, a financial system without proper controls, and property speculation leading to unsustainable growth - all these have produced a situation that is unprecedented since the 1930s.

This situation has been exacerbated by the fragility of the European project, and the difficult in choosing between deepening and enlarging, and between the “open market” and truly common policies. Ambitious initiatives such as the single currency were undertaken, though without - at least at that time - adequate governance instruments.

In general, Europe is suffering from decision-making mechanisms that are difficult to understand for the majority of citizens. Even if major progress has been made, especially in boosting the role of the

1 From the 1980’s onwards, the “Washington Consensus” has served as a basis for interventions of major international organisations, advocating the liberalisation of trade and financial markets, the privatisation of state enterprises and deregulation.

European Parliament, the EU is still seen as distant by European citizens, and in many countries there is a great temptation to blame “Brussels” for everything that goes wrong!

The Europe to which we aspire is in great danger - unemployment is exploding, jobs are becoming increasingly insecure, social and environmental dumping is commonplace, populism and protectionism are gaining ground, and citizens are losing confidence in their leaders, both at national and European level.

Unprecedented changes

The world has changed radically over the last decade and new ways of doing things are needed. As Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve today’s problems with yesterday’s solutions.”

Europe is going through a fundamental change, associated with the globalisation of trade and information, the emergence of new world power structures and unprecedented environmental challenges, notably major climate change and a sharp decline in biodiversity.

In March 2010, the European Commission presented its new 10-year strategy for getting the European economy back on track. Entitled “Europe 2020”, its aim is to promote “smart, sustainable and inclusive” growth.

Given the slump that now seems to be gripping most of the continent, these objectives appear extremely ambitious and represent a formidable challenge:

- when entire sectors of the European economy are devastated and when many areas have lost all their economic activities;
- when the transition to a green economy and combating climate change receive such little attention, and when biodiversity is in serious decline;
- when unemployment is hitting more than 11% of Europe’s working population, and more than 50% of under-25s in Spain and more than 60% in Greece are out of work. According to Eurostat figures for 2011, 27% of children under the age of 18 were exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion, with the proportion rising to 52% in Bulgaria, 49% in Romania and even 38% in Ireland. In 2012, more than 114 million people (25% of the EU population) were threatened by poverty or social exclusion;
- when the expected growth is continually postponed.

Has the time come to use “smartness, sustainability and inclusion” to look for new ways forward?

In the absence of any clear timelines for sustainable growth, has the time not come to leverage “smartness, sustainability and inclusion” in the search for new ways of doing things?

New thoughts abound in this area, but unfortunately they are all too often obscured by the dominant thinking - even though “yesterday’s solutions” are indisputably insufficient to overcome the challenges we are faced with.

In the 1970’s, Ignacy Sachs came up with the concept of “eco-development”, the book, “*The Limits to Growth*”, was published at the request of the Club of Rome, and Paul Schumacher popularised the concept, “*Small is beautiful*”.

In 1995, Jeremy Rifkin wrote in his book, *“The End of Work”*, that we need to announce the transition to a post-market economy, to define new forms of business and new ways of distributing income. This requires strong action in two areas: reducing working time and developing the ‘third sector’, in which people organise themselves in communities providing a growing proportion of the services they need.

New concepts are now appearing, such as “prosperity without growth”, “simple living”, or “transition initiatives”.

Joseph E. Stiglitz regularly alerts Europeans to the damage caused by excessive liberalisation and growing income inequality, pointing to the ineffectiveness of austerity policies increasingly becoming the “suicide of Europe”, and the need to look for alternatives.

“There is a serious danger of a rise in poverty, unemployment and xenophobic discourse without anything being done about it”, said Michael D. Higgins, President of the Republic of Ireland.

And is it possible to ignore the conclusions of the World Social Forum (“Another world is possible”) held on 26 - 30 March 2013 in Tunis, even if everything discussed there seems a little utopic?

“The Assembly hopes that civil society actors will coordinate their actions in the best possible way, enabling all inhabitants of our planet to regain their rights and replace an economic system based on individual selfishness, the plundering of natural resources, competition, male domination and war, by one based on fraternity,² resource conservation, cooperation and peace among all people.”

Put in a nutshell, what we really need are practical ways to give hope to young people in the 18 - 30 age range, those hit most by the economic downturn and the rise of ostracism and cynical selfishness.

Citizens’ initiatives, bearers of hope

In the face of the crisis, and in the face of failed economic models and disenchantment with the lack of change, fragile local initiatives are emerging, showing that there is hope:

- “short circuits” are becoming increasingly common, with farmers and fishermen selling directly to local customers;
- local trading systems, bartering, local currencies, and time-banking are emerging;
- networks of entrepreneurs are being developed, giving priority to inter-relations, promoting local trade and constituting critical masses to tackle new markets;
- in the context of voluntary “social and environmental responsibility” policies, companies are increasingly taking action against exclusion and becoming involved in finding solutions to environmental problems;
- through social networks, new forms of trade, solidarity and mobilisation are appearing;
- new forms of entrepreneurship are emerging and developing: social enterprises, citizen enterprises, cooperatives and network enterprises. The European Commission, in particular via its Social Business Initiative, wants to help create an environment that favours the development of a solidarity-based social economy in Europe;
- social innovations are to be found in many fields, promoted at the local level, but in the context of support programmes at European, national or regional levels;

² <http://www.fsm2013.org/fr/node/12978>

- citizens are mobilising in support of these initiatives: on the financial side for instance, we are seeing a range of new initiatives, from tontine systems, to “crowd funding” and “business angels”;
- local authorities, local associations, networks (“slow cities”, “cool cities”) are working to promote “cities or territories in transition” through local climate protection programmes, energy initiatives, eco-villages, eco-districts and the “re-localisation” of business.

Focusing on such aspects as proximity, energy transition and new forms of governance, these initiatives are driven by groups of citizens in search of alternatives, often without the help of institutions, whether local, regional, national or European. Once started, a large number of them are seeing their further development backed by government policies, often at a European level.

Helping to identify and propogate new initiatives

Radical changes or forms of transition or policy adjustment, generated by the necessary energy transformation, the urgent need for action to combat climate change, the duty to safeguard future generations, the need to find new ways of sharing work, “social and environmental responsibility” for everyone, and the evolution of new local development models focused on “voluntary simple living”, all offer a wide range of possibilities for citizen initiatives.

Aware of these challenges and opportunities, it is AEIDL’s ambition to identify new initiatives emerging at the local level and within civil society, to decode early signs of social innovation, to distinguish between legitimate indignation, desperate anger (all too often exploited by extremists of all colours), and everyday inventions of new collective values.

By bringing people together, whether physically or virtually, whether within or between territories, whether at regional, national, European or international level, AEIDL aims to support the citizen-based co-construction of new practices, new public policies and new tools, which can be made available to those who understand that change does not merely involve revamping Einstein’s “yesterday’s solutions”, but requires innovative solutions from conceptual, ideological and political ideas still to be invented.

We need to keep our ears and eyes open for these faint yet hopeful signals from all those people on the working, often under difficult circumstances, to develop new responses to our needs.

We see it as our job to identify these initiatives that are still untested, sometimes perceived as being a bit radical or far fetched, to make them known, to help them to network, to identify the lessons and to establish a virtuous circle of solutions and hope.

We also want to help implement resource-centred networks, allowing us to identify, document and disseminate the new know-how needed to make this seismic transformation of our society a success.

A grassroots overhaul of the European project, based on cooperation between actors and between territories

We are convinced that local initiatives, citizen involvement, social innovation and experimentation, the identification of and respect for shared assets, solidarity between regions here and elsewhere, and the invention of new forms of multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance, can all contribute to building the Europe we aspire to - a Europe rich in the diversity of its landscapes, its communities and its cultures, open to the world, and striving for a new economic and social equilibrium.

Twenty-five years of experience in local development have taught us a lot about the inventiveness of local communities when public and private and community actors get together and start listening to what is happening in their areas, and, jointly, trying to find solutions to the problems posed, with a view to constructing - on a local level - a better society.

In the face of unprecedented change and the need to reinvent the future (“tomorrow’s solutions”), what is now needed more than anything is to restore hope and the capacity to act, to listen to the disaffected, to those whose lack of hope makes them silent, to support initiatives, and to bring together all those wishing to innovate.

The challenge now is to promote citizen involvement, to support and encourage all those who - whether in the public, private, or community and voluntary sector - are helping to open up new perspectives at local level: regional projects, business and social entrepreneurship projects based on solidarity, alternative development projects using local resources, local trading systems, local climate action plans, etc.

This requires that we contribute to a renewal of local democracy and to empower local communities to take their future into their own hands.

That we support all policies and programmes likely to promote citizen and territorial creativity, with a special focus on “community-led local development”, the term now commonly used by the European institutions.

That we encourage and facilitate synergies and cooperation between actors at local, regional, national, European and international level, with a view to enriching the collective discourse and progressively constructing the tools needed for ecological and socio-economic transition and the construction of new forms of solidarity.

That we experiment with the implementation of these innovative approaches in all territories, whether rural, coastal, urban or suburban, where groups of citizens, public and private stakeholders are willing to act and innovate.

That we have confidence in our culture, and in the intelligence of communities and territories and in their capacity to address the economic, environmental and societal challenges we face, and help rebuild the European project.

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