



"Reinventing Europe through Local Initiative"

Great success for the AEIDL conference

(21 February 2014) - More than 150 people participated in the conference, 'Reinventing Europe through Local Initiative', in Brussels on 19-20 February by the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL) on the occasion of its 25th anniversary. Presentations, discussions and networking focused on 25 'promising initiatives', which have shown that local, citizen-led and participative initiatives for sustainable development are needed more than ever.

With the European Parliament as the venue for the event and to the music of Bruce Springsteen, AEIDL president Márta Márczis looked back on how Europe has developed over the past quarter of a century since the establishment of AEIDL in 1988. That was the year of the memorable "Boss" [concert in East Berlin](#), at the foot of the "wall of shame" which was to come down the coming year. At that time Europe was still divided, with the two sides unable to come together - on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, there were Europeans thirsting for freedom, while on the western side European construction (still) had the wind in its sails. The Single European Act, the abolition of border controls and the launch of the first "local development initiatives", including ELISE (*European Local Initiatives System of Exchanges*) which was to lead to the creation of AEIDL and its subsequent surge, riding the LEADER (rural development) wave from 1992 onwards.

The Europe we cherish

More than 150 people came together in one of the Parliament's amphitheatres: local development practitioners, MEPs, academics, representatives from local development organisations and networks, or simply citizens interested in local development and its concrete implementation in different regions.

[Yves Champetier](#), board member of AEIDL, recalled the values and ideas promoted by the association. These are summarised in a [statement](#) produced for the event: *"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."*

His speech was followed by one from Chris Brooks, professor at the Paris Science Po, who pleaded for local development to become a spearhead of change, though dependent on a deep-going reform of the context in which it takes place (in particular the banking system and a rebalanced labour-capital relationship).

[Marjorie Jouen](#), special counsellor for the Notre Europe-Jacques Delors Institute think-tank, went on to recall the origins, current challenges and the more than ever indispensable importance of local development for *"moving from today's 'individualistic homo economicus' to tomorrow's 'cooperative homo localicus'."*

The local cooperative approach upheld by AEIDL was illustrated by presentations of five concrete projects from throughout Europe: The Tot Raval initiative strengthening social cohesion in a deprived neighbourhood in the centre of Barcelona; the “Együtt Egymásért” (All Together for Each Other) social cooperative established for and by the inhabitants (mainly Roma) of a small village in Hungary; REALIS, a social innovation ecosystem set up in Languedoc-Roussillon (France); the development strategy and projects implemented in the Barycz valley (Poland) centred on exploiting its flagship product, carp; and last but not least, ECOLISE, the new European network of local groups engaged in the transition to green energy and in the fight against climate change, which is currently in its start-up phase facilitated by AEIDL.

MEPs Kinga Gönsz and Eric Andrieu (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats) and Hannes Lorenzen (advisor to The Greens/European Free Alliance) then presented their vision of the policy perspectives awaiting Europe and local development in the years to come, underlining the need to *“move from an economy based on competition to one based on collaboration”*.

Two aspects were highlighted in the debates following these speeches: the ingredients (the “magic powder” in the words of facilitator Peter Woodward) necessary for the success of a local development approach, and the messages needing to be conveyed to policymakers. Looking first at the ingredients, these included the quality of the human factor (underlining voluntarism and a collective approach according to Eamon O'Hara from ECOLISE), the aspiration to happiness, and the resources needed to achieve it (Imre “Zorro” Mata from Együtt Egymásért) and also the *“desire to transgress”* (Michel Dupoirieux from REALIS). As to the messages to be conveyed to policymakers, these included: the urgent need for a truly social Europe, the empowerment of local actors, and the need for government institutions to take better account of local action.

25 promising initiatives

The second day (20 February) saw the conference decamping to the very friendly setting of Bouche-à-Oreille, a café-theatre located close to AEIDL. The focus of this second part of the event was a series of workshops enabling participants to exchange experience on [25 promising initiatives](#) within the EU and elsewhere, presented by their representatives.

The morning session was introduced by François Saint-Ouen, lecturer at the University of Geneva's Global Institute and Secretary-General of the European Centre for Culture. In his speech entitled [“The Europe beneath Europe”](#), he recalled that the birth of the European Community had occurred without its citizens, and that it had been local development which had brought citizens closer to Europe, but that today's Europe again seemed to have distanced itself from its citizens and their concerns. It is therefore urgent, he concluded, to re-invent Europe hand in hand with its citizens, and not merely on their behalf.

Based on the diversity of the concrete project presented, the subsequent 6 parallel workshops were an opportunity to discuss all present and future aspects of local development: cohesion and inclusion, a social and solidarity-based economy, territorial development and short distribution channels, quality of life, the transition to renewables and climate change, etc.

The quality of the debates and exchanges at the conference was (brilliantly) summarised by University of Gloucester professor, [Michael Dower](#), a long-time militant in the field of local development. Going through the buzzwords of the European Commission's Europe 2020 Strategy (*“smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”*) one by one, like Yves Champetier had done it to introduce the conference, he showed that the growth currently seen in Europe was neither “smart” (the poor use of technology, etc.), “sustainable” (waste of resources), nor “inclusive” (massive youth unemployment). He went on to insist on the need to give priority to participative action and democracy, to support SMEs in standing up to the global giants, and to make much more sensible use of resources, whether human or material. He underlined the crucial role of animation, of mobilising stakeholders, and of local

development bottom-up approaches, reminding everyone that local development was not an alternative to a macroeconomic and institutionalism approach but instead an essential complement thereof.

"A 'quiet revolution' has been going on for 25 years and this revolution needs networks," he said. "ARC2020, other networks and those such as ECOLISE or FARNET that AEIDL is highlighting, fit perfectly into this philosophy which will ultimately ensure that – paraphrasing the movement launched in Sweden two decades ago, 'all Europe shall live'."

All in all, it is fair to say that this AEIDL conference was a complete success, both in the quality of exchanges it inspired and in the intense networking it facilitated, often among participants who were meeting for the first time.

The evening reception held on 19 February in the freshly renovated AEIDL building proved to be a further way of boosting and enriching contacts between "local development actors" in a warm and friendly atmosphere.

Re-inventing Europe through local initiative has obviously got off to a good start!

[Programme](#)