

Honorable Mr. Deputy Prime Minister,
Dear participants,

I am talking in this International Conference on behalf of the Rural Forum of Shkodra, which was established in 2002. Every year, we hold many activities and a conclusive Conference, which ends with a declaration addressed to all the central and local government structures, mass media, and other relevant stakeholders. The Forum has taken part in the discussion for the National Strategy on agriculture and rural areas. We have had talks with MPs, representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, with the Parliament's Agriculture Committee and other important actors in the agriculture field. The Forum has tried to realize a connection between local inclusion and policy-making and considers establishment of a national platform for a wider participation all over the country a necessity. This platform shall enable dialogue about priorities and policies, ensuring compliance between the European agricultural and rural development policies and the needs of country's development. More than half of the population lives in the rural areas. These people work mainly in agriculture, but they are trying to transform their entrepreneurship in real farms. This part of the population has attached their lives to agriculture and rural areas, and this is why the forum has dedicated a special attention to their development.

The fate of agriculture is determined by the market; it is not possible for the Albanian market to establish its fate or to change it. The farmer aims at putting contacts with the market and feels that he cannot be called a farmer if he does not manage to go to the market. In order to be able to be in the market, farmers should get specialized and grow their economic role. But, in order to be able to realize this pre-requisite some important conditions have to be fulfilled, such as land sustainable management; organization and functioning of the land market should become a reality the soonest possible, but what is the most important item and condition is the development of the cooperative possibilities between farmer organizations and functioning of the land market, which is even more important than selling of land given the diversity of activities in villages.

A farmer feels himself not appreciated when he reads in the press that "agriculture is one of the sectors with the weakest contributions in the country's economy and that growth in this sector is lower than the country's average economic growth".

We all know that the overwhelming part of farms through their activity ensure only their family needs, as they have weak connections with the market.

We have pursued and hailed the Government policy with regards to setting of priorities for financial support and the reforms taken for helping the inhabitants in the rural areas.

The Forum, which is the voice of the ones that are not in Government, who not only know of the problem, but also live with it every day, should be considered as the main government partner for development of policies, programmes and solution of rural problems. But, the Rural Forum of Shkodra cannot serve this purpose, and this is the reason why a national-wide forum should be established for this purpose.

The farmers are faced with problems and hindrances for the agricultural and rural development, such as;

I shall not speak about EU standards and policies that should be achieved and or other similar issues, but I shall halt the attention on the most emergent topics as:

-- agricultural land and its status, as farmers have problems with;

- Certification of ownership titles pursuant to the Law no 7501 and the ones that have not been subject of this law, in the mountainous and partially hill-side areas. About 60% of the interviewees from our ranks report that land is not registered in the Land Registration Office, that is it is not in the market and that the cost of registration is high,
- Its fragmentarization; land is dividend on 3-5 plots on average; there is a need for consolidation of the land policies, similar to the European country policies
- Payment of 10% of taxes for the agricultural land sale or purchase; favoring consolidation, not splitting of land.
- Increase of the number of property titles; children of a household shall be divided one day, therefore, land shall be split and depreciated even more; work should be done for raising the awareness of farmers on the anti-economic prospect of land fragmentarization.
- The land surface is gradually reducing because of erosion, construction of houses, or other reasons, etc.
- Problems related to the land maintenance such as drainage and irrigation, use of fertilizers, setting of zones for housing, etc.

-- the second difficulty is related to the guarantee that the farmers shall manage to ensure their living by trading their products. For this purpose we require;

- Development of cooperative possibilities between farmers. The new law on cooperatives and cooperation should contain fiscal facilities for the ones interested in cooperation; its provision should be simple, clear, applicable and recognized by all. To achieve the amount of land of a farmer in the west, in Albania we should ensure a grouping of at least 20 farmers.
- More importance should be paid to the small and big agro-processing, so as it realizes attraction of production and augmentation of surfaces, helping in the proper functioning of the farmer groups. This is a good possibility to connect the farmer with the market and to aim at a safe sale. The realization of direct sales in one or two-day markets in public centers or places, such as in Tirana, Shkodra, Durres, Fieri and Vlora for at least once per month. The local government should also understand the importance of the rural economy for the urban development, the importance of healthy products, local products, a moving economy, as well as the importance of traditions and tastes that are an added value for all of us.

- Certification and standardization of agricultural and dairy products for the farmer groups shall be supported by the government, for at least some years, and there is a need to establish a relation where the state shall invest together with the farmers and management is done by the farmer groups.
 - Insurance of agricultural products; the agricultural products has to be ensured so that the farmers have a protected investment and are not left in the mercy of time and deceases. This, and all mentioned above, shall yield an improvement to the entire chain as the requirements of many actors have to be fulfilled.
 - Building of the first sustainable basis towards a multi-plan functioning of agriculture in nature preservation, biodiversity, landscaping, traditions, etc. agro-tourism, handcraft, economies of small households shall become pylons of development.
 - Use of the alternative energy sources such as solar panels, wind etc. when there are possibilities of small hydro power stations, which shall help not only the farmer groups, but shall also enable a clean environment and saving of electricity.
- The third difficulty, not because of the importance, is related to the relations of farmers with banks and loan-giving institutions to establish a double-side profit relationship for both parties with the aim of developing and strengthening the farms.

Establishment of the public guarantee fund shall reduce the risk, and, consequently, the loan interest which is in almost unaffordable levels. The contact and connection with the market are measured by the funds in circulation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The voice of the Rural Forum comes on behalf of all the ones who have connected their lives and the lives of their family members with the village, and this is why this voice is very insisting and in protection of the important social problems, protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity, education and recreation of children, protection of their health, etc.

We are thinking of separating tourism in all its forms, but in particular in the family tourism, focusing on the splendid mountainous areas, which, combined with the organic agriculture development improve the health of environment, vegetation, animals, people and the entire country.

E believe in the huge potential of the country to increase the agricultural product, and we do also trust that the Government shall keep undertaking the appropriate policies to help and stimulate the Albanian farmers, being convinced that agriculture shall be one of the sectors with the highest contribution in the economy of the households and of the country.

Thank you!

