I start with a story. In 1979, a new Conservative government was elected in my country. They began to introduce policies which may have suited the cities, but would damage rural communities. I give three examples.

First, they proposed that tenants of local authority houses should have the right to buy them: if that happened widely in rural areas, the villages would lose their ability to offer cheap houses to young people and to key workers. Second, they proposed that children living within 3 miles of their primary schools should pay for using the school bus: this would penalise poor rural families, or force children to walk to school on dangerous rural roads. Third, they proposed that pensions should be paid monthly by cheque rather than weekly by cash: this would severely affect old people in rural areas who had limited money and no bank accounts, and would greatly reduce the income of rural post offices through which pensions were paid.

Organisations representing rural people in England were highly concerned about the impact of these policies. They asked the National Council of Voluntary Organisations to lead a campaign. The Council invited me to chair the effort. We gathered representatives of nine national organisations, representing the farmers, landowners, young farmers, farm workers, women’s institutes, parish councils, churches, rural community councils, and groups for the protection of rural England. These bodies formed an alliance, and we called it Rural Voice. In total, the nine bodies had 850,000 individual members, including 380,000 members of the women’s institutes, with a branch in every village. So, we truly could claim to speak for the people of rural England.

We launched a campaign to persuade the government to reflect rural realities in their policies. They agreed to exempt settlements of less than 3,000 population from the right to buy local authority houses; they dropped the idea of charging for use of school buses in rural areas; they agreed that pensioners could continue to be paid weekly by cash. We held a whole-day conference at the Royal Festival Hall in London, like a Rural Parliament, and the key minister – Michael Heseltine – spoke, acknowledging the impact of our campaign. We sustained our vigilance on government policies through the long years of that government … but we also focused also on how rural people can take their own lives into their own hands. We offered advice on rural housing, on alternative approaches to providing rural services, and on creating jobs in the countryside.

The moral of this story is that government policies can greatly affect the well-being of rural communities. Even where governments have no deliberate intention to harm those communities, their lack of understanding of rural areas may be seriously damaging. We in rural communities must make our voice heard. But we should also show that we can take our own initiative, particularly in those countries where local authorities are not truly local.

These truths have driven rural movements throughout Europe. I salute the Nordic countries, which have taken the lead in organising this event. I honour the pioneers in Norway, who created an Association of Neighbourhoods as far back as 1772 and the Royal Norwegian Society in 1809. I
salute the emergence of village action groups in Finland and Sweden in the 1970s, and the creation of the Danish Village Association in 1976, the Netherlands Association of Small Towns and Villages also in 1976, the Finnish association SYTY in 1981, and the Swedish Popular Movements Council in 1989, with its powerful slogan ‘All Sweden shall Live’. I applaud the generosity of the Nordic movements in the support that they have given to the emergence of rural movements elsewhere.

I salute also the founders of ERA and ERCA, notably Vanessa Halhead, whose report on ‘The Rural Movements of Europe’ we in PREPARE had the pleasure of publishing in 2005. That report recorded the existence then of 18 national rural movements in western and central Europe. The emergence of these national rural movements was driven by the wish that governments should recognise the specific needs of rural areas, and should involve the people as partners in meeting those needs.

This bottom-up pressure helped to push the Council of Europe into launching the European Countryside Campaign of 1985-6, and the European Commission to publish its report on ‘The future of rural society’ in 1987. Leaders in Strasbourg and Brussels showed a top-down willingness to foster public participation and partnership between government and citizens.

In 1991 came the launch by the European Commission of the LEADER initiative, to encourage people to pursue development strategies at sub-regional level, with partnership between public, private and civil sectors. This approach has been widely welcomed and applied throughout rural Europe. We now have over 2400 local action groups using LEADER funds, plus more than 250 such groups using the European Fisheries Fund. The Commission has now proposed further widening of this approach, through the concept of Community Led Local Development.

The enlargement of the European Union over the last 15 years has presented a massive opportunity and challenge to rural people in the new Member States or those now preparing for accession. Many of these countries were previously under communist or centralist regimes, which controlled the rural economy and believed that government knew best what the rural people needed. This was not fertile ground for the emergence of civil society. Then came the great change of 1989-91 – the collapse of the Soviet Union; new-found independence for a succession of countries; collapse or transformation of many state and collective farms and nationalised industries; a yearning for new life; and an urge to join the European Union.

New rural movements emerged in Estonia and in Hungary, assisted by the Swedish rural movement. Then, prompted by the European Parliament, a group of NGOs organised the Traveling Workshop of 1999 to Estonia and Sweden, a week-long trip by 60 people from 18 countries to see how bottom-up rural development worked in an accession country and an EU member state. This led to the creation in 2000 of the PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe.

In brief, PREPARE’s aim over the last 13 years has been to strengthen civil society, particularly in the accession countries, and to promote exchange in rural development. The impulse to animate civil society, and to build a national rural movement, must come from within each country. But PREPARE, which is a partnership of existing national movements, can help by finding and encouraging the ‘fiery spirits’, helping them to come together within a country, organising multinational gatherings and traveling workshops. PREPARE has supported the emergence and the flowering of national rural movements in all the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe,
in accession countries such as Macedonia and Serbia, and is now active in many neighbour states of the European Union.

So, today, here in this Parliament, we can celebrate the fact that we have national rural movements in at least 23 European countries; increasingly widespread action by civil society in rural areas; a great family of local action groups and the prospect of wider funding for those groups. We have affirmed the right of rural people to be heard, to take initiative in pursuing their own well-being, to be treated as partners by government. We know that we still have much to do in persuading governments to accept the value of that partnership, but we have created a way of working, focused on rural people.

So, we have a way of working, but what are we trying to achieve with that work ?.

I suggest that the answer to this, in one phrase, is **integrated sustainable rural development**.

By this I mean an approach which embraces, in a holistic way, the people, the economy and the environment, and seeks win-win-win solutions while sustaining, and if possible enriching, the resources which will serve people in the future. I offer the example the ‘House of the Pear and the Apple’ in Normandy, which assists and promotes the work of farmers in producing apples, pears, cider, calvados and poirée. Tourists can visit the farms and buy the products. This creates social contact, enhances the income of farmers, and sustains the orchard landscape of the regional park.

The participants in this Parliament reflect the wide variety of circumstances in rural Europe, from the sparsely populated areas of Scandinavia to the subsistence-farming communities of Romania and Bulgaria, the mountain communities in our Alpine countries, the rich arable plains of West and Central Europe, the peri-urban communities which surround ours cities.

Each type of region has its own challenge for development. But I believe that the principles, the basic ingredients, of development are broadly constant, although they may (so to speak) be selected to create different menus.

My own home base among the many rural organisations of Europe is ECOVAST, the European Council for the Village and Small Town, set up in 1984. I joined it the following year, and became President in 1986, in which capacity I recall speaking passionately against Ceaucescu’s ‘systematisation programme in Romania’ at the final event of the Council of Europe’s Countryside Campaign at Lübeck Travemunde. In 1991, the year that LEADER was introduced, we in ECOVAST published our ‘Strategy for Rural Europe’, which established us as a force in Europe and of which the ideas – updated as necessary – are as valid today as they were then.

Drawing upon that experience, and upon my work with Euracademy, PREPARE and ARC 2020, I offer you – as a provocation for debate – eight key ingredients in rural development ... eight elements in the message that I hope this European rural Parliament will proclaim.

First, rural people deserve a quality of life which may be different from, but should be equal to, that in the cities. We must ensure that they have fit housing; good quality and variety of rural services, such as schools, post offices, clinics, day centres, shops, libraries, village halls and public transport; and access to modern infrastructure, including broadband communication.
Second, that farming, in all its variety from extensive grazing to intensive cultivation, should be maintained everywhere, in order to keep land in good heart and secure our long-term food security.

Third, this farming must be done in a sustainable way, which respects the health of the natural environment and the quality and diversity of landscapes, heritage and wildlife.

Fourth, the survival and viability of small farms may be secured by diversifying the farm enterprise, adding value locally to the basic product, promoting cooperation among the farmers and within the food chain. The future of subsistence-farming communities demands a subtle mixture of cooperation, farm amalgamation and strengthening of other parts of the rural economy.

Fifth, the forests and woodlands which cover over 40% of the territory of Europe should be so managed as to bring multiple benefits in landscape value, wildlife, timber, biomass, renewable energy, recreation and added value to forest products.

Sixth, rural economies should be diversified, by encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises in all appropriate fields, building upon the natural and human resources of each subregion, and recognizing that rural areas, with their relatively low costs and clean environments, can provide the base for innovation.

Seventh, the wide and marvellously diverse heritage of landscape, archaeology, history, culture and nature in rural Europe should be celebrated, protected and enhanced, as a setting for our lives now and in the future. That heritage can be used in imaginative ways to sustain and revive our rural economies and communities, and as a great resource for education, recreation and tourism.

Eighth, we need to sustain effective links between the countryside and the towns. The urban-rural relationship is a major issue in many countries, offering both danger and opportunity to rural people everywhere. A particular challenge within it is to recognize and strengthen the key role of small towns.

Ingredients such as these form the raw material for local development throughout rural Europe. There are no standard answers. Each subregion must identify its own needs, its own potential, its own strategy for development. Governments can provide the broad policy. The European Union can offer funds. But, in each place, the initiative must be taken by the rural people themselves. They can take their own lives into their own hands; be active in all forms of social and economic development and environmental protection; be assertive, and offer constructive criticism and positive partnership, in their dealings with governments; and form alliances and networks through which to strengthen their own understanding, their capacity and their voice.

With such action, the rural people of Europe can ensure that the rural areas can thrive, and can contribute - on equal terms with the cities – to the well-being of Europe. They can proclaim that “All Europe shall live”.

European Rural Parliament 2013 Dower speech