



## European Council for the Village and Small Town



Retz Austria

### ASSET PROJECT (ACTION TO STRENGTHEN SMALL EUROPEAN TOWNS)

In November 2004, a conference on small towns in Europe was held in Retz, Austria, organised by ECOVAST, SEEDA (South East England Development Agency) and Niederösterreich (Lower Austria Regional body).

This successful event attracted more than eighty delegates from a dozen countries across Europe.

From the discussions in Retz, it became apparent that there is a “policy gap” in Europe with regard to small towns. Policy exists in abundance for cities and regions, and rural policy is evolving. However, small towns fall between these defined areas, yet they account for 20% of the continent’s population (more if you include their hinterland). It was agreed that, with small towns facing many challenges and difficulties, there was a need for a project which would offer them support and the chance to exchange experience and good practice; one which brings together the agencies, governmental and otherwise, who offer support to small towns in Europe.

European small towns have great importance in providing a focus for social, cultural and economic life in their subregions, and interacting with the villages in their surrounding areas, and with larger towns and cities. They vary greatly in their origin, age and character, and embody a local distinctiveness that is a vital part of the European heritage.

Remarkably, no major European programme covering the whole continent has focused on small towns in their own right.

In some countries, government agencies or regional councils have focused on small towns, providing advice, finance and other support and encouraging networking and exchange of good practice and some national networks of small or market towns exist, such as Action for Market Towns in England and similar bodies in Croatia and Poland.

The ASSET Project is the outcome of the thoughts which emerged in Retz.

It has the following aims:

- To promote co-operation, and the exchange of good practice, between governmental and other agencies throughout Europe who offer support to small towns
- To promote contact and the exchange of good practice between individual small towns throughout Europe
- To speak on behalf of small towns to influence the European Commission, Council of Europe, Committee of The Regions and governments.
- To facilitate, support and encourage the delivery of research to enable evidence-based policy approaches to strengthen the well-being of small towns.



## European Council for the Village and Small Town

Faringdon, Oxfordshire IK



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ECOVAST, as an established European NGO, believes it is well placed to undertake this project, and has recruited partners:

*SEEDA, Yorkshire Forward, UK; Commission for Rural Communities England, UK; APURE (l'association pour les Universités Rurales Européennes); the Association for the European Rural Universities, and MONTE, Portugal.*

Additional partners are actively being sought, in preparation for the fund raising which is about to commence seeking income from the European Union, and Grant Giving Trusts and Foundations.

Careful consideration was given to the scope of the project and it was decided that it should cover the whole of Europe (including Russia) and that the definition of a small town would be those with a population of between approximately 2,500 and 30,000 people, although these parameters are flexible, allowing for variations between countries (for example, in sparsely populated areas or close to urban conurbations).

The problems faced by small towns also vary across Europe, although many are common to most. They include:

- Loss of functions to the larger cities, as part of the process of globalisation or centralisation
- Commercial centres losing vitality because of the creation of out-of-town shopping and service centres
- Streets and public spaces often suffer from excess traffic or car parking
- In some areas, small towns overwhelmed by modern development or absorbed by nearby cities

In the preliminary phase of ASSET, information gathering has been taking place, with the preparation of databases and questionnaire. As the project evolves, the scope of activity will increase, with meetings, both virtual and actual, and web based work also important.

The ASSET project is envisaged to last at least three years.

**For more information about ASSET, please contact either**

**Philip Turner, ECOVAST**

**e mail: [p.turner@ruralnet.org.uk](mailto:p.turner@ruralnet.org.uk)**

**or**

**Pam Moore, ECOVAST**

**Secretary General e mail: [pam.moore59@ntlworld.com](mailto:pam.moore59@ntlworld.com)**