

**Prof. Dr.-Ing. Holger Magel**  
**President, UN Habitat Professionals Forum**

## **The resources of rural areas. A plea for sustainable land management and an active civil society**

*Abstract of Presentation at the  
5<sup>th</sup> European Congress on Village Renewal  
St. Pölten, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005*

The recent flood disasters have dramatically brought home to everyone what far-seeing experts have long known and propagated: town and country are intimately bound together, not only physically but also economically, culturally etc. Where damage is caused or mistakes are made in the countryside, such as the establishment of insufficient retention areas or the exaggerated canalisation of watercourses, the towns also suffer. The reverse, however, is also true: where towns make undue demands on resources the countryside also suffers. Hans Sedlmayr's famous metaphor about the "Verlust der Mitte" (Loss of the Middle) is proven more than ever.

The issue is that society should more than ever be conscious of the indispensable resources of rural areas, that it should husband and develop these resources in a sustainable manner, so that vital and attractive living conditions are preserved for the future both in rural and in urban areas. The new realities in rural areas, i.e. over-ageing, depopulation, loss of jobs, down-grading of the infrastructure, deficits in the provision of basic and primary needs etc. demand concentrated efforts as well as discussion of future living standards and quality of life. It is gratifying to note that the recent programmes of the European Union and its member States tend in the direction of integrated development. An active civil society must be consciously promoted to a greater extent than hitherto because the State, local government structures, and economic entities can no longer by themselves guarantee the future. Individual initiatives and co-operative self-help of "citizens as partners" are more important than ever, as practised for many years in an exemplary manner particularly in the context of village renewal and rural development.

In view of drastic reforms of administrative structures across Europe and the substantial reduction in the number of public officials, an appeal must be made that responsibility for comprehensive land management in the sense of a "quadrophony of activating advice, planning, decision-making and building" is not lost. It must be ensured that this core responsibility continues to be exercised by competent institutions.