



European Network for
Rural Development

EU RURAL REVIEW

No 32

LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS



European Network for Rural Development

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) is the hub that connects rural development stakeholders throughout the European Union (EU). The ENRD contributes to the effective implementation of Member States' Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) by generating and sharing knowledge, as well as through facilitating information exchange and cooperation across rural Europe.

Each Member State has established a National Rural Network (NRN) that brings together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. At EU level, the ENRD supports the networking of these NRNs, national administrations and European organisations.

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Printed by Imprimerie Bietlot in Belgium

Manuscript completed in July 2021

1st edition

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

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Print ISBN 978-92-76-36204-3 ISSN 1831-5267 doi:10.2762/961640 KF-AJ-21-002-EN-C

PDF ISBN 978-92-76-36194-7 ISSN 1831-5321 doi:10.2762/500286 KF-AJ-21-002-EN-N

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Foreword

by Mario Milouchev, Director for Rural Development I and Pre-accession assistance,
Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission



I am very pleased to introduce this issue of the ENRD's Rural Review on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. It comes at an interesting point in time for Europe's rural areas. As I write, the Commission is on the point of adopting a Communication on a long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas, while the long awaited political agreement on the future CAP, as one key instrument for shaping rural futures, has just been reached. This magazine contains an interesting mix of articles and perspectives. The views expressed by the authors of each article provide a valuable contribution to the debate about the future of our rural areas that we have been conducting over the last year.

In developing the Vision, we have done our utmost to engage with and listen to the voices of people from many different parts of Europe and to make true Vice-President Šuica's commitment that this will be "our joint vision, the one developed not FOR rural areas, but rather WITH rural areas". This has involved an intense programme of activities: including a major on-line consultation, the nine-month work of an ENRD Thematic Group, a foresight exercise to identify possible scenarios for rural areas in 2040, inputs and analysis from numerous EU research projects and studies, 170 participative workshops involving over 3 000 local citizens and the creative exchanges that took place between hundreds of participants during the ENRD's Rural Vision Week.

Important themes running through these activities have been the need to 'change the narrative' about rural Europe, and to recognise and find flexible solutions that respond to the incredible diversity of our rural areas. I have also heard very important common messages on the key challenges many of our rural areas face – from depopulation, access to jobs, services and mobility, poor connectivity and IT skills etc., but also underlining the opportunities they can and do offer in growing sectors, whether linked to the bioeconomy, rural tourism, quality foods to name just a few. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unique value of rural places to the wellbeing of the whole of society and that their distinctive contribution is likely to become more important as we come to grips with the climate crisis and the green and digital transitions.



Another strong message to emerge – which I fully endorse – is that people should be at the centre of the Rural Vision – both by recognising their role as the main agents of change and by seeking to improve their well-being. There were calls for policies and concrete actions, which enable and empower rural communities to become stronger, and to seize the new opportunities and overcome the hurdles many undoubtedly do still face, particularly in more remote areas. The EU Rural Action Plan that will accompany the Rural Vision Communication will be an important contribution at EU-level to the process of putting this right.

It is clear that to deal with all the issues relevant to our rural areas the Vision has to go beyond agriculture, or demography or any individual policy. Many contributors have pointed to the need for a more holistic governance, design, and implementation of rural policies. This is clearly a complex and long-term process. However, there is a lot we can do to make the most of the instruments and tools we already have at hand. At EU level, in preparing the Vision we have already taken steps to bring together a wide range of Commission services responsible for policies which affect rural areas. We should also put a stronger emphasis in the future on ‘rural proofing’ of major EU policy initiatives to make sure potential impacts on rural areas are carefully considered. We are also conscious that the success of the long-term Vision is not just a matter of European policies. Implementation will take place at national, regional, and local level. All levels of governance and stakeholders need to engage in the Vision. I believe we need a new Rural Pact to bring together all relevant stakeholders and policies in this endeavour.

I would like to invite you all to read the Commission Communication and the package of documents that will accompany it.⁽¹⁾ I hope you recognise some of your key concerns and aspirations reflected in it. The Communication is just one step in the path toward the future we want to see for Europe’s rural areas by 2040 – stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous – and which we can only create by working together. This Communication builds upon a number of milestones, among which the previous 1988 Communication dedicated to rural areas, the two Cork Declarations of 1996 and 2016, Agenda 2000 and the decades of implementation of the CAP rural development pillar which have followed. Taking on board the evolution in the political, economic, social and demographic context, in a way it is a new beginning of a process for the next 20 years.

I encourage you to get involved in the debate and reflections we hope the Rural Vision Communication will kick-start, and I am sure the ENRD and future EU CAP Network will continue to be at the heart of these important exchanges.

(1) In addition to the Commission Communication, an EU Rural Action Plan, a Staff Working Document analysing the situation in the EU’s rural areas, and a Synopsis Report on the outcomes of public consultation activities around the Vision will all be published on the Commission website at https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en



Introduction

The European Commission is developing a long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas to enable them to make the most of their potential and support them in facing up to their own unique set of issues, from demographic change to connectivity, the risk of poverty and limited access to services. This is being done in close consultation with local and regional authorities and people living in rural areas. This edition of the EU Rural Review builds on the outcomes of the ENRD work on the long-term Vision. The publication looks at the future of rural areas in digital, environmental and social terms, as well as in terms of resilience.

“Our rural areas (...) are the fabric of our society and the heartbeat of our economy. The diversity of landscape, culture and heritage is one of Europe's most defining and remarkable features. They are a core part of our identity and our economic potential. We will cherish and preserve our rural areas and invest in their future.”⁽¹⁾ With these inspiring words, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen launched the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas initiative in July 2019.

The process of developing the Vision has included large-scale public consultation activities; a foresight exercise led by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) and carried out within the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on the Long Term Rural Vision; stakeholder engagement activities organised with the support of a Workshop Package for National Rural Networks and other rural stakeholders; as well

as contributions from research projects, and analytical work looking at the EU and Member State level. All this will be reflected in a Communication by the European Commission expected to be published at the end of June 2021. The ENRD played an important role in this process.⁽²⁾

Between September 2020 and May 2021, the ENRD TG on the Long Term Rural Vision gathered a small but dedicated cross-section of informed and engaged stakeholders from different parts of Europe. Acting as a hub for exchange and discussion, the TG contributed to the JRC's foresight exercise, improved the communication of the Vision and encouraged the sustained involvement of stakeholders in the dialogue around the initiative.

A landmark step in the process towards the publication of the Commission Communication on the Vision was the ENRD 'Rural Vision Week: Imagining the future of Europe's rural

(1) Ursula von der Leyen (2019) *A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

(2) Check ENRD's Long Term Rural Vision Portal for more details on the process and related materials: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-thematic-work/long-term-rural-vision/long-term-rural-vision-portal_en



areas' (22-26 March 2021).⁽³⁾ This online event included high-level presentations and discussions, workshops and 'fringe' activities, as well as a virtual marketplace. It was also the opportunity to present the results of the public consultation launched by the European Commission in autumn 2020 as well as the foresight exercise.⁽⁴⁾

Rural Vision Week also hosted the final ceremony of the ENRD Rural Inspiration Awards 2021. This year's theme was 'Our Rural Future' and the finalists' projects all promote actions which are already aligned with the anticipated focus of the Vision, by supporting resilient, digital, sustainable and inclusive rural futures.⁽⁵⁾

This edition of the EU Rural Review includes articles by experts from different fields and countries who offer distinctive visions for the future of Europe's rural areas, based on the outcomes of the ENRD TG on the Long Term Rural Vision and Rural Vision Week. The articles in this publication look at the five main aspects of a future rural Vision which were the focus of interactive workshops organised during Rural Vision Week. Just like the workshops, the articles include a 'vision' for rural areas by 2040 and the concrete steps needed to get there.

Article 1 summarises the process towards the EU long-term vision for rural areas, highlighting its participative approach – a Vision developed in partnership with rural people for rural areas.

Article 2 presents a vision for digitally equipped and connected rural futures, where technology, infrastructure and skills respond to local and global challenges.

Article 3 illustrates a vision for 'green' rural futures, where rural areas meet the goals of the European Green Deal and seize the opportunities they have in the transition to a low carbon, circular economy.

Article 4 provides an overview of the main elements for the resilience of rural areas, building among others on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Article 5 looks at rural futures in which tailor-made solutions help alleviate existing disparities for vulnerable groups of society, making rural areas fairer and more inclusive.

Article 6 brings together the main elements of a long-term vision for inclusive, connected, sustainable and resilient rural futures.

The ENRD Contact Point

(3) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en

(4) See the 'Focus on' the Rural Vision Week in Rural Connections 2-2021, https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-connections-22021_en

(5) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/rural-inspiration-awards-2021-our-rural-future_en



1. A Long-Term Vision for European Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

PREPARING THE VISION

RURAL VISION WEEK

REALISING THE VISION

BY MAURA FARRELL

Dr Maura Farrell is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Irish Studies at National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway. Maura's teaching reflects her research specialism which revolves around rural and agricultural geography and her interests focus around processes of social, cultural and economic change for rural inhabitants. Dr Farrell is currently the Principal Investigator on the Irish National Rural Network Project for NUI Galway and the more recent Horizon 2020 RURALIZATION Project. Dr Farrell is a widely published academic and extremely active outside university life, having been appointed to committees and organisations both nationally and internationally.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas across Europe have witnessed fundamental change in recent decades. Technological innovation, globalisation and social modernisation have given rise to economic stability and population growth in some rural areas, while other regions face demographic and economic decline. Development policy and community engagement

practices have endeavoured to stimulate and regenerate lagging rural regions, but socio-economic divisions are still stubbornly evident. In truth, rural diversity may always result in uneven development; however, it is imperative that all rural communities are given an opportunity to reach their potential and strive for high standards of development.

In order to create equal opportunities for rural areas, while also taking into account their diversity, the European Commission has proposed the development of a Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. This Vision aims to provide a clear strategy with realistic but ambitious goals for rural areas, developed and devised in partnership with rural people for rural areas.

PREPARING THE VISION

Initiated and led by the European Commission and supported by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the process for developing the Vision, from the outset, applied a participatory approach which epitomises the ethos of rural development within an EU context. Mirroring the ‘bottom-up’ philosophy of the EU’s thirty-year-old LEADER method, the innovative multi-actor rationale of the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture (EIP-AGRI) and the collective action needed for the success of the EU Green Deal, the Vision process strives for the inclusion of all interested voices.

In doing this, and in line with any investigative procedure, the Commission initially looked towards an existing evidence base to examine key issues. This included an EU Commission public consultation on CAP modernisation and simplification,⁽¹⁾ an EU Commission 2020 report on demographic change⁽²⁾ and any

relevant additional information gathered from ongoing and previous EU-funded research projects. Moving ‘from the desk to the people’, the Vision process embarked on an EU-wide online public consultation survey, which sought the attitudes, opinions and suggestions of all rural stakeholders and European citizens. Responses from 2 326 people across all 27 Member States highlight key challenges facing rural inhabitants, with poor infrastructure and the need for an improved transport system being a priority for most. Quality jobs, the importance of environmentally sustainable agriculture and supporting rural innovation, amongst other issues, were also emphasised and repeatedly reiterated as the process towards the Vision continued.⁽³⁾

To develop the Vision, the ENRD convened a cross-section of key stakeholders to make up a Thematic Group, who, between September 2020 and May 2021, contributed

to a foresight exercise facilitated by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission. Using a combination of stories, data, facts and hypotheses, the foresight exercise highlights possible future rural scenarios and potential opportunities and challenges for expanding or shrinking rural areas that are either networked or fragmented. The exercise created a series of possible pictures of rural life in 2040 and added another layer to the Vision. The Thematic Group discussed this and other evidence, culminating in a series of key messages required, in their view, to realise the EU rural vision. These included the need for a broad set of goals which provide a common direction and motivate rural actors, measurable, operational and trackable targets and milestones, clear governance and coordination mechanisms, rural proofing, action plans at different levels and better data⁽⁴⁾.

(1) EU Commission (2017) *Modernising and Simplifying the Common Agricultural Policy*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/key_policies/documents/summary-public-consul-modernising-simplifying-cap_2017_en.pdf

(2) EU Commission (2020) *Report on the Impact of Demographic Change*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/demography_report_2020_n.pdf

(3) EU Commission (2021) *Factual Summary of the Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Area*, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12525-Long-term-vision-for-rural-areas/public-consultation>

(4) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/long-term-rural-vision-rural2040-3rd-thematic-group-meeting_en

In order to spread the process of engagement and inclusion, a dedicated Workshop Package was designed by the European Commission in collaboration with the ENRD. Enthusiastic National Rural Networks, Local Action Groups and community

organisations used this package to engage in direct consultations with citizens from across the EU.⁽⁵⁾ Over 3 000 participants provided 170 contributions from 19 Member States and, in doing so, directly captured the thoughts of rural citizens.

Many contributions revolved around the need for good services and digital infrastructure to unlock rural potential, but a recognition of civic engagement, entrepreneurship and protection of the environment were other messages delivered by many participants.

RURAL VISION WEEK

Every good process must have a finale and, in many respects, the ENRD provided a forum for bringing together all the activities surrounding the process towards the Vision during their event ‘Rural Vision Week: Imagining the future of Europe’s rural areas’ (22-26 March 2021).⁽⁶⁾ Rural Vision Week was a clear example of online engagement, networking and inclusion, involving a large number of people across the EU. The online format (the ‘new normal’ since the COVID-19 outbreak) offered the opportunity for widespread

engagement, arguably involving more diversity of thoughts and practices compared to a traditional conference format. All those who participated got to experience high level plenaries and engage in a wide range of thematic and fringe workshops, while also experiencing the excitement of the Rural Inspiration Awards and the collaboration of the Rural Marketplace.

‘OUR RURAL’ Marketplace,⁽⁷⁾ a smart virtual replica of a conference exhibition with video stalls and

online material, provided an insight into the work of many National Rural Networks, Horizon 2020 Projects and other rural stakeholders linked to the future Vision. The Greek NRN, for example, shared its rural vision of a better standard of living; sustainable development; a natural chemical-free environment; agri-tourism development and equal opportunities for rural inhabitants. Many of these messages were evident throughout Rural Vision Week, in addition to calls for an inclusive process, which was so well articulated by Dubravka Šuica, Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, when she suggested that, “We want to make sure that this vision is our joint vision, the one developed not FOR rural areas, but rather WITH rural areas.”⁽⁸⁾

Enrique Garcilazo (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD) provided an excellent overview of the week’s key messages⁽⁹⁾ and although some were similar to the messages of the past, they still need to be put into practice and prioritised. These included the need for holistic rural policies, for capturing the diversity of place and the imperative nature of



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(5) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/ltvra-workshop-package-nms-and-other-rural-stakeholders_en

(6) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en

(7) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week/our-rural-marketplace_en

(8) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/suica/announcements/vice-president-suica-delivers-speech-opening-plenary-long-term-vision-rural-areas-stakeholders_en

(9) Enrique Garcilazo (OECD), Summary of Rural Vision Week, https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1-joseenrique-garcilazo-ppt1-pl2-day5_0.pdf

bottom-up processes, as well as the production of a Vision that is inclusive and empowering to those who are vulnerable and excluded.

Our knowledge of key rural issues, however, is only one side of the coin, with the most inspirational component of Vision Week coming from the ideas for achieving our Vision. These included empowering rural communities, while also enabling them to become resilient in the face of transition and adversity, and supporting them with vital digital infrastructure, skills and services. Coordinated and participative governance, policy simplification and ‘going beyond rural proofing’ were recurrent ideas in both fringe workshops and high level plenaries that could enable us to achieve our rural Vision. Additionally, the need to generate good data and knowledge, while at the same time considering the geographic scale of rural regions, was seen as imperative by many workshop participants.

European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, felt that “We all need to come together with our ideas and aspirations” to realise our Rural Vision.⁽¹⁰⁾ Similarly, Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, spoke of both the “urgent and important” problems we need to solve in Europe, while also suggesting



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that the answers we find in our rural Vision will shape our future, leaving us in no doubt about the imperative nature of the Vision.⁽¹¹⁾ Rural Vision Week in itself provided a multitude of messages, some negative reflecting the challenges faced in some rural areas, but many more filled with hopes and solutions.

The winners of the Popular Vote category of the Rural Inspiration Awards, Kamila and Bogdan Kasperski (‘Angelic Gardens’ project, Poland) believe that “A green future is possible – we are part of nature and the actions

of each of us have an influence on the future of all people.”⁽¹²⁾

As Rural Vision Week came to a close, what became as important as the messages and solutions was the people delivering them. The week allowed the voices of all those concerned with a rural vision to be heard; whether they were from small peripheral rural areas; the islands, in close proximity to urban centres, in position of power, farmers or the Local Action Group. The ENRD facilitated a forum, which gave a public voice to the Vision.

REALISING THE VISION

The voices, ideas, messages and solutions for our Long-Term Rural Vision have been recorded and documented. Realising our future Vision must start now and, while the EU Commission is in

charge of putting the next step into words, by coming forward with a Communication, the implementation must be a collective process. It is imperative, therefore, to take all we have learned, from ‘greening

our environment’ to ‘supporting innovative rural entrepreneurs’ and use collective, bottom-up action that builds community and individual capacity. As Vice-President Suica said when she closed Rural Vision Week:

(10) Rural Vision Week – Closing plenary, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnRB4muYhFk&list=PLocST8_BBegYLud6YZcJVsn7bUaC6ZBlw&index=1

(11) *ibidem*

(12) Rural Inspiration Awards Ceremony 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQp7ZgOHknA>

“We will make the Vision operational and concrete, with an action plan with rolling projects with tangible initiatives. We will measure the progress and report back. We will not disappoint you because we want to ensure that we do not disappoint ourselves.”⁽¹³⁾

The Vision needs to be a living document, which can empower rural people not just to bounce back from adversity, but to bounce forward into a new rural era. Rural regions need a flexible approach, which combines policy and resources and allows

rural areas to have a thriving future. A resilient future, where well-being is as important as innovation and where people are as important as the land.

Rural Vision Week

COMMON STRANDS AND STEP CHANGES REQUIRED FOR ACHIEVING THE FUTURE RURAL VISION

The third meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group on the Long Term Rural Vision⁽¹⁾ concluded with the identification of the following strands and step changes, which the TG members considered necessary for achieving the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas:

- **Overarching goals which inspire action and change the narrative.** The Vision needs to contain a broad set of goals which provide a common direction and motivate a wide range of actors to seize the opportunities that are opening for rural areas.
- **SMART objectives, measurable targets, and milestones.** The broad principles and narratives need to be translated into concrete human centred issues that are meaningful to people everywhere – such as access to comparable quality of services, digital connectivity and skills, mobility, housing, youth, energy and so on.
- **Strategies, plans and programmes.** If it is to lead to real change, the Vision will need to be translated into national, regional and even municipal levels.
- **Stocktaking, proofing, and tracking results.** There were many comments about the need for a regular system of ex-ante proofing and ex-post assessment of (territorial) impacts of policies and legislation as well as tracking results.
- **Governance, leadership and who does what.** Many participants expressed the view that little will change without the necessary political leadership. Some also argued that the Green Deal had illustrated the advantages of a higher level of coordination to bring about change.
- **Policy alignment and coordination.** In addition to clear leadership, there needs to be effective mechanisms for coordinating policies. The idea to systematically integrate rural concerns into the European Semester process gained interest.
- **Rural intelligence, data and capturing the differences.** Suggestions for improving intelligence and data on rural issues included the ideas for an EU Rural Think Tank or Observatory linked to science- society-policy platforms and knowledge hubs of different kinds across Europe.
- **Enabling and empowering local action.** TG members made many suggestions: flexible, easy access, ring-fenced local budgets, more resources for strategic animation, outreach and project development work, local knowledge and innovation hubs, understanding the central role of municipalities and their partnerships with civil society, and particularly strengthening the involvement of young people.

(1) 3rd ENRD Thematic Group meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision, 27 January 2021 – Highlights report, https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/long-term-rural-vision-rural2040-3rd-thematic-group-meeting_en

(13) Rural Vision Week – Closing plenary, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnRB4muYhFk&list=PLocST8_B8egYLud6YZcJVsn7bUaC6ZBlw&index=2



2. Digital rural futures

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INTRODUCTION

DIGITALLY EQUIPPED RURAL FUTURES

ENABLING THE DIGITAL TRANSITION: CONNECTIVITY AND SKILLS

ENSURING THAT RURAL AREAS ARE DIGITALLY EQUIPPED AND PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE

BY EMILIJA STOJMEANOVA DUH

Emilija Stojmenova Duh, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the Faculty of electrical engineering of the University of Ljubljana. She is also Head of 4PDIH, a Digital Innovation Hub. Emilija founded and is coordinating the national FabLab network in Slovenia. She is also coordinating numerous projects on digitalisation for innovation and rural development. Emilija is a member of the Management Board of the Slovenian Research Agency, a member of the Expert Council of the Employment Service of Slovenia, member of the Council for Development in Agriculture, Forestry as well as a member of the Strategic Council for Digitalisation of Slovenia.

INTRODUCTION

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no doubt that digital infrastructure, technology and services play an important role in our everyday lives. The pandemic proved that nowadays it is almost impossible to live and work without digital infrastructure and digital technologies. We rely on

them to communicate, study, work, research, improve business operations and respond to current climate and environmental challenges.

In 2018, 29.1% of the EU's population lived in rural and peripheral areas.⁽¹⁾ In its 'Shaping Europe's digital future' strategy,⁽²⁾ the European

Commission clearly highlights that the digital transition should work for all, putting people first and opening new opportunities for businesses. To ensure the widest coverage of the digital transition, it is important that its benefits are extended to all the people living in rural areas.

DIGITALLY EQUIPPED RURAL FUTURES



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The evolution of technology, especially digital technology, is one of astounding promises and opportunities on the one hand, as well as uncertainty on the other. This is why it is extremely difficult to predict what a **digitally** equipped rural area will look like in the future.

Digital technologies can fuel economic growth by creating jobs, introducing new business models and increasing added value in the local area (see the example from Slovenia in the box page 13). In addition, digital technologies can also be used to support transparency in governance,

social innovation and have a positive social and environmental impact in the local area.

Nevertheless, there are several factors that could enhance the digital maturity of a rural area (i.e. its ability to respond and take advantage of technological developments that change how society and the economy function).

- Enabling universal and equal access to **human-centric digital technologies**⁽³⁾ to enhance the quality of public and private services and improve service delivery across education and

training, transport, health, energy, justice, safety, social and community services, and environmental protection.

- Providing **lifelong learning opportunities** to enable at-scale reskilling and upskilling of rural inhabitants (particularly populations at risk of unemployment and social exclusion) and equipping the whole population with the digital, green and cognitive skills they need to perform the jobs of the future.
- Using **interoperable data platforms, systems and services** to enable social and technological innovation and new business models based on data portability.
- Using efficient digital solutions to monitor, mitigate and adapt to the impacts of **climate change** and support **environmental protection**.
- Arranging functional **digital innovation ecosystems** to support and accelerate the digital transformation in rural areas.

(1) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200207-1>

(2) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_20_278

(3) Human-centric digital technologies are designed with human behaviour in mind and aim to enhance the skills and abilities of the users.



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DIVINA WINE HUB ŠMARJE (SLOVENIA)

Divina Wine Hub Šmarje was created in Šmarje, a rural village located within the pilot region of Slovenia under the Horizon2020 Liverur project⁽¹⁾. Liverur, which started in May 2018 and is finishing in October 2021, received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme. The Divina Wine Hub is primarily aimed at the young winemakers of the Slovenian Istria region. The digital hub was created on the initiative of young winemakers of the region who want to ensure a viable presence in the future on both domestic and foreign markets, as well as an innovative industry integration and organised support in the field of open, social and digital innovation and advanced ICT tools. The hub connects key actors in the area to create new developmental, entrepreneurial and employment opportunities and strengthen sustainable production, consumption, exchange and spatial organisation.

Three key learning potentials have been identified within the hub's priorities:

1. Participation of young winemakers;
2. Identification and use of advanced ICT technologies in joint promotion, marketing and sale of the common and individual products – wines; and
3. Economic efficiency and optimisation of business.

Divina Wine Hub Šmarje represents a unique rural supportive hub for the promotion of local wine products using ICT tools. Wines, together with specific instructions for wine tasting, such as how to store the wine, what kind of glasses should be used, what kind of food should be consumed during the wine tasting, etc., are received in advance. The virtual event takes place approximately twice a week through an online meeting tool. Participants order the wines in advance. During the event, in addition to tasting it, participants can also learn about the wine, but also about the winemakers, their legacy and ambitions. The implementation of this initiative also benefits other stakeholders from the Slovenian Istria area (branch wine organisations, associations, consortia, farms and companies, tourist organisations, municipalities etc.) by encouraging networking, boosting sales and promoting tourism across the whole region.

Further information:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-RHtjO6xs4>
- <https://www.facebook.com/divinawinehub>

(1) <https://liverur.eu>

ENABLING THE DIGITAL TRANSITION: CONNECTIVITY AND SKILLS

There are two essential elements to be considered when it comes to digital transition: connectivity and digital skills.

In terms of **connectivity**, rural and peripheral areas in Europe have always been lagging behind urban and peri-urban areas. In 2015, after the introduction of the Digital Single Market Strategy,⁽⁴⁾ rural and peripheral areas began to catch up with urban regions in terms of network coverage as measured by

the proportion of households having access to high-speed broadband of at least 30 Mbit/s.⁽⁵⁾ However, the digital divide remains large. As Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, pointed out in her State of the Union speech, 40% of people in rural areas still do not have access to fast broadband connection.⁽⁶⁾

Connectivity is not the only area where rural areas are lagging behind in the digital transformation process. According to Eurostat, the overall

level of **digital skills** in the EU in 2019 was lowest among adults living in rural areas. Only 48% of adult rural inhabitants had basic or above basic digital skills, compared to 55% for adults living in towns and suburbs and 62% for adults living in cities.⁽⁷⁾ As digital skills are considered essential for global competitiveness, the lack of digital skills in rural areas mirrors socio-economic inequalities between rural and urban areas and increases the digital rural-urban divide.

ENSURING THAT RURAL AREAS ARE DIGITALLY EQUIPPED AND PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE

Clear goals and targets for digital development must be set specifically for rural areas along with allocation of adequate funding. For example, when it comes to connectivity, the share of rural households with access to broadband should be at least equal to the national average. Similarly, when Member States and the European Commission fund programmes and initiatives, they must allocate an adequate share of funds to rural areas. Concretely, the European Commission is aiming to invest € 1.5 billion in the European digital innovation hub network to support green and digital transformation, financing approximately 200 digital innovation hubs in the period 2021 to 2027.⁽⁸⁾ Since almost 30% of all Europeans live in rural areas, a possible benchmark would be for at least 20% of the funds allocated

for the EDIH network to be reserved for digital innovation hubs working with companies, organisations and communities in rural areas.

Another very important issue is **raising awareness** about the opportunities digital technologies bring to people, businesses and communities and **building trust** in using them. Low digital literacy – which, as we have seen, is more widespread in rural than urban areas – leads to a lack of understanding of how digital technologies work and a subsequent lack of trust or fear of using them. That is why, in addition to the rural digital innovation hubs, it is important to engage people who are working as **digital brokers or intermediaries**. Their main role is bringing digital technologies closer to the rural inhabitants, companies and organisations. A successful

example from Ireland is described in the box page 15.

Last, but not least, **rural development policies** can play a key role. It is important to include goals for rural development in digitalisation policies and strategies, such as the European Digital Agenda and the national digital strategies of the Member States and look for common goals and links between rural and urban areas. Interesting recommendations in that sense come from the EUSALP Smart Villages project (see box page 15).

If rural areas are going to progress from being lagging recipients to active players in the digital transition, then decisive action must be taken on all the points above. This should be a central component of the action plan which must accompany the rural Vision.

(4) <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-single-market-strategy-europe-com2015-192-final>

(5) DESIRA project (2020) *The state of rural digitalisation in Europe*, https://desira2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Briefing_Digitalisation-in-Europe.pdf

(6) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655

(7) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200207-1>

(8) <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/digital-innovation-hubs-eu15-billion-network-support-green-and-digital-transformation-starts>



DONEGAL DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM (IRELAND)

Donegal Digital ecosystem is a public-private partnership formed by eight permanent organisations, including a public authority, an Institute of Technology and development agencies. The objectives of the partnership include the stimulation of digital technologies in the small traditional businesses in the area, digital transformation of key sectors such as food, tourism and energy, provision of innovative digital public services and connecting talent to the transfer of digital research, to name but a few. All of them are underpinned by the provision of high-speed broadband and the implementation of a network of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) distributed throughout the county.

Digital hub managers are key in supporting the digital transformation in Donegal. They play a vital role since they facilitate the delivery of digital technologies to businesses, citizens and public administrations. On the one hand, the hub managers are connected to the community and know its needs and challenges. This is a crucial element when identifying the potential support to be provided. On the other hand, they serve as the gateway for the community giving it access to a range of supporting services to assist in its digital transformation.

County Donegal could not foresee a successful local digital ecosystem without these active digital hub managers.

More information: www.donegaldigital.ie

Rural Vision Week

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP ON DIGITAL FUTURES DURING RURAL VISION WEEK

- Set a number of targets to boost action and resources for rural digitalisation
- Develop local digital ecosystems by deploying a network of rural innovation hubs
- Support local digital brokers to animate and network local actors
- Ensure an enabling legislative framework for new emerging areas of digital technologies

EUSALP SMART VILLAGES PROJECT – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Smart Villages project is an operational initiative of the macro-regional strategy for the Alpine space, EUSALP. The project runs from 2018 to 2021 and is funded by the Interreg Alpine Space Programme, with partners from Switzerland, France, Italy, Slovenia, Austria and Germany.

The Smart Villages project developed the following policy recommendations:

- R1: Consider the smart transformation of mountain, rural and peripheral areas and villages as a priority
- R2: Integrate the notion of Smart Villages in existing and future strategies and policies
- R3: Allocate funding to integrated approaches such as Smart Villages
- R4: Allow room for innovation and experimentation
- R5: Encourage networking and exchange of experience around the Smart Village approach in relation to urban areas
- R6: Use the potential of the Smart Village approach to communicate on the innovation and attractiveness of rural and mountain areas and to link rural and urban areas
- R7: Develop digital infrastructure and associated skills in line with technological needs and opportunities

Further information:

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/03/29-03-2021-eusalp-policy-recommendations-from-the-%C2%AB-smart-villages-%C2%BB-project



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3. A Green Deal for the future of European rural areas

INTRODUCTION

OUR VISION: EUROPEAN RURAL AREAS ARE THE BEATING HEART OF HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

OUR VISION: RURAL ECOSYSTEMS ARE THRIVING AND OUR NATURAL CULTURAL HERITAGE IS CHERISHED

OUR VISION: RURAL ECONOMIES ARE CLEAN AND CIRCULAR AND RURAL AREAS ARE DYNAMIC AND CONNECTED

A JUST TRANSITION FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL AREAS, LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

BY PATRICK TEN BRINK AND CELIA NYSENS WITH INPUTS FROM BARBARA MARIANA, BÉRÉNICE DUPEUX, SERGIY MOROZ, STÉPHANE ARDITI, DAVIDE SABBADIN, LAURA HILDT AND MARGHERITA TOLOTTO, EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAU (EEB).

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB) is Europe's largest network of environmental citizens' organisations, bringing together over 160 civil society organisations from more than 35 European countries. EEB stands for sustainable development, environmental justice and participatory democracy.

<https://eeb.org>

INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal (EGD), the top priority of the Ursula von der Leyen Commission, is designed to be a transformative agenda for Europe at all levels. The application of the Green Deal in rural areas is an important and necessary part of this transformation. Delivering the EGD is essential for the transformation and resilience of the EU's rural future and will define this Commission's legacy.

The Green Deal can create a new dynamic in rural areas and opens up opportunities for them to contribute to a more resilient future in both rural and urban areas. To achieve the multiple benefits made possible by the EGD, the interconnections and inter-dependencies between farmers and other stakeholders need to be appreciated, governance and collaboration improved and a new social contract created to

reflect an inter-dependency that is often overlooked. In the next pages we present our vision for 'green' rural futures, based on the European Environmental Bureau's long-standing experience and largely confirmed by the outcomes of Rural Vision Week organised by the ENRD in March 2021.

OUR VISION: EUROPEAN RURAL AREAS ARE THE BEATING HEART OF HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

In our 2040 vision, every European has access to healthy and sustainable food, which is the easiest and most attractive choice. Our agriculture is in tune with our nutritional needs and with the environment: we eat and produce less and better meat and animal products, more seasonal fruit, vegetables and legumes.

This is the result of a paradigm shift across Europe, away from agricultural intensification and globalisation, towards food systems grounded in agroecology and food sovereignty (i.e. democratic control over food systems).⁽¹⁾ Self-confident and vibrant farming communities are the backbone of food systems,⁽²⁾ while agroecological land management⁽³⁾ and extensive livestock farming⁽⁴⁾ help restore and maintain thriving biodiversity, contribute to carbon storage and cut pollution significantly.

Central to this change is the growth of localised food systems: social innovation in production and distribution models and investment in small and medium-scale local processing facilities give a boost to short, local supply chains, reconnecting rural and urban areas. Circular approaches to nutrients and materials management also reconnect farm and fork, with food waste a thing of the past. Food is no longer treated as a mere commodity but recognised as a valuable common good.⁽⁵⁾

This vision is already a reality in many parts of Europe, with hundreds of farms, cooperatives, local authorities, and citizens' groups delivering local solutions to the challenges facing rural areas. The EEB has covered dozens of 'Future Farming Stories'.⁽⁶⁾ For example, the story of Romanian livestock farmers who transitioned away from

conventional production and selling raw products to big companies, to instead produce high quality products (raw and processed) for local markets. This allowed them to produce food in an environmentally-friendly way while improving their income.⁽⁷⁾

The Common Agricultural Policy is central for this vision to come true; but it needs a fundamental reform to be fully aligned with the European Green Deal. Public spending through the CAP must be used to leverage the transition to agroecology. Reconnecting what we produce with what we (need to) eat is crucial. The Farm to Fork Strategy is a first step in that direction, but more efforts are needed to achieve coherent agricultural, food, trade and public health policies. We need a Common Food Policy for Europe with agroecology and food democracy (or sovereignty) at its core.

(1) <http://www.ipes-food.org/pages/LongFoodMovement>

(2) <https://meta.eeb.org/2021/01/13/future-farming-cultivating-people-friendly-food-systems/>

(3) <https://meta.eeb.org/2020/03/24/agroecology-farming-for-a-better-future/>

(4) <https://meta.eeb.org/2020/06/22/future-farming-a-romanian-recipe-for-european-livestock-farming/>

(5) SAPEA (2020) *A sustainable food system for the European Union*, <https://www.sapea.info/topics/sustainable-food/>

(6) <https://meta.eeb.org/?s=future+farming>

(7) <https://meta.eeb.org/2020/06/22/future-farming-a-romanian-recipe-for-european-livestock-farming/>

OUR VISION: RURAL ECOSYSTEMS ARE THRIVING AND OUR NATURAL CULTURAL HERITAGE IS CHERISHED

In our 2040 vision, we have stopped the deterioration and restored millions of hectares of precious ecosystems (15% of the EU's land and sea area as well as 15% of free flowing rivers), bringing nature back. We have also tackled pollution caused by intensive animal farming and intensive agricultural practices, air is clean everywhere and healthy rivers, lakes and groundwaters are the norm and full of life. Rural areas feature rich natural and built cultural heritage that offer a foundation for dynamic economic activities.

We have made huge progress on clean air and water by tackling pollution at source: livestock farms do not exceed sustainable stocking densities; agricultural waste is not burnt but recycled into the farm system; and agroecological farming and integrated pest and nutrient management has replaced routine synthetic pesticide and fertiliser use and cut diffuse pollution from agriculture. Plastics are used sparingly and carefully in agriculture to reduce risks of plastic litter and microplastics in soils and water. Industrial investments are strictly regulated to avoid pollution.

Our investment in restoring nature is paying off: it has built resilience and helped mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis, creating numerous sustainable jobs and bringing direct benefits for human health and well-being in rural areas and beyond. Citizens, businesses and public authorities recognise the benefits of healthy rural and peri-urban ecosystems such as clean water provision, carbon storage, as well as their role in attracting recreation and

tourism activities. This appreciation fosters cooperation to restore old growth forests, wetlands, floodplains and wider rural landscapes. This in turn leads to a deeper appreciation of the value of European nature for social and health benefits.⁽⁸⁾

Similarly, the multiple aspects of cultural heritage are given due recognition, valorisation, stewardship

and investment to ensure that they are protected while being used as a motor for local development and cultural historical awareness and meaning. For example, 'slow food' approaches using local produce and cuisine based on local traditions are promoted as a way to strengthen the identity and brand of regions, in turn boosting agri-tourism. Local, regional, national and EU authorities collaborate to



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RESTORATION OF THE RIVER LAHN AND ITS FLOODPLAIN (GERMANY)

The ongoing restoration of the Lahn River and floodplain in Germany has provided space for nature and habitats for charismatic species such as the kingfisher and beaver, increasing the area's attraction for nature tourism. In addition, the restoration of the floodplains reduces flood risks for neighbouring communities. Some of the restoration measures being implemented include the removal of weirs, the creation of buffer strips to prevent pollution from agriculture as well as the re-naturalising of the river banks. Nature conservation groups have suggested concrete targets to measure the success of the project, e.g. aiming to see 100 breeding pairs of bluethroat, 30 breeding pairs of oriole and 50 breeding pairs of kingfisher by 2040. This € 15.7 million project for the period up to 2025 is funded by national authorities and EU LIFE funds and is jointly carried out by the German nature conservation group NABU and local authorities, setting a good example for stakeholder involvement and cooperation.

<https://hessen.nabu.de/news/2019/25901.html>

(8) ten Brink P. et al (2016) *The health and social benefits of nature and biodiversity protection*, <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/intro/docs/Health%20and%20Social%20Benefits%20of%20Nature%20-%20Final%20Report%20Main%20sent.pdf>

ensure our cultural capital is improved and secured for future generations.⁽⁹⁾

To achieve our vision, new and revised EU laws are needed to deliver the key objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy:⁽¹⁰⁾ a strong new regulation is needed to set legally-binding ecosystem restoration targets and the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive needs to be strengthened with legally-binding pesticides use reduction targets. Existing EU nature and water legislation must also be properly implemented and enforced. For example, ambitious river basin management plans need to be introduced across Europe. Of course, the reformed Common Agricultural Policy must also contribute to these objectives, by implementing the ‘do no harm’ principle and dedicating funding to positive measures that cut pollution at source⁽¹¹⁾ and bring nature back on farms.⁽¹²⁾

More attention is needed to plastic waste, and to methane emissions reduction targets and more ambitious ammonia emissions reductions, complemented by continuous air quality monitoring in rural areas. Finally, we need to develop regional cultural heritage strategies, building on the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage⁽¹³⁾ and the EU’s Creative Europe⁽¹⁴⁾ Programme using rural development funds, other European Structural and Investment Funds⁽¹⁵⁾ as well as national and regional support. This requires increased awareness of the multiple benefits of cultural heritage for regions and of the opportunities for engaging in its revitalisation.



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GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE IN RICE PADDIES IN RIVER PO (ITALY)

The north-western part of the Po River valley has over 200 000 hectares of rice fields, representing over 50% of European rice production. The paddies are usually heavily impoverished environments due to the high production intensity that results in monoculture over wide areas and high use of herbicides. Private initiatives – supported by the EAFRD – delivered the restoration of aquatic ecosystems on vast paddy areas in the territory between Milan and Pavia, in Lombardy.

Cassinazza’s agricultural district extends over 1 400 hectares, of which 107 have been converted into wetlands and woods over 20 years. The agricultural environment has been enriched by the plantation of 110 km of hedges, and the aquatic biodiversity of paddy fields has been enhanced by the creation of rice field margins, complex ecosystems that occupy 7-10% of the cultivated area, where water levels are conserved to allow aquatic species to survive dry cultivation stages. The rice field margins are located at the edges of the fields and have a width that varies between 15 and 30 metres.

Another important change is the shift from intensive to extensive cultivation following conservation agriculture principles. This cultivation concept prioritises soil management practices aimed at enhancing minimal soil disturbance, permanent soil cover and crop rotation. The fertilisers used come from the compost and the organic matter from the nearby urban area. The results include an increase in ornithological, aquatic and amphibious biodiversity, and a consequent decline of problematic insects and weeds.

Source: EEB/Gruene Liga, *Agriculture Practices that Protect Water*, https://www.umweltfestival.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/EEB_GL_Water-Agri-NEXUS2019_EBOOK.pdf

(9) <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policies/selected-themes/cultural-heritage>

(10) https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

(11) The European Environmental Bureau (2020) *A CAP for zero-pollution and a circular economy*, <https://eeb.org/library/a-cap-for-zero-pollution-and-a-circular-economy/>

(12) The European Environmental Bureau (2020) *A CAP to bring nature back to our farms*, <https://eeb.org/library/a-cap-to-bring-nature-back-to-our-farms/>

(13) European Commission (2019) *European framework for action on cultural heritage*, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a9c3144-80f1-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>

(14) <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/>

(15) <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/Yes-The-EU-supports-cultural-heritage/9gyi-w56p/>

OUR VISION: RURAL ECONOMIES ARE CLEAN AND CIRCULAR AND RURAL AREAS ARE DYNAMIC AND CONNECTED

In our 2040 vision, we have 100% renewable energy supply, smart grids everywhere in Europe and wide uptake across rural and remote areas. We barely use bio-based energy to avoid the competition for productive land between food and fuel as well as to avoid negative impacts on biodiversity. We only use resources from agriculture or forestry in line with the biomass use hierarchy⁽¹⁶⁾, with little use for energy generation.⁽¹⁷⁾⁽¹⁸⁾ We have reduced our use of virgin resources and we use biomass in line with planetary boundaries. Sharing, re-using and repairability are the norm, waste prevention has created new profitable activities, and we recycle the remaining waste.

In rural areas, the principles of circular economy are as relevant as in urban areas (for examples, see the links in the footnotes). Repair practices and sharing have existed for decades in agri cooperatives and have been extended to a greater use of adaptive manufacturing and maker/repair centres, as well as selective energy conversion (e.g. biogas). Waste management infrastructure and services in rural areas have been improved and inspection and enforcement measures to avoid illegal waste sites have been increased. Furthermore, sealing new soils is minimised by reusing brownfield sites and making the best of unoccupied buildings.

Living in rural areas does not require owning a car to go places, as we have alternative mobility solutions

for all. There is also clean mobility for all, reduced congestion and hence reduced associated social costs, air pollution and health impacts. Digital solutions facilitate inter-modal transport, connecting public transport, accessible shared mobility (e.g.

BlaBlaCar, Cambio), zero emissions vehicle parking zones and bike storage areas. Zero-emissions public transport links cities and rural areas efficiently and cheaply and a wide network of connected cycle paths facilitate active travel in and out of towns and cities.



© Wikipedia, Kuebi

PRATO ALLO STELVIO (ITALY)

Prad am Stilfserjoch (Prato allo Stelvio), a small rural community of 3 000 inhabitants in the Italian Alps provides an interesting example of the benefits that the distributed production from renewables can deliver for rural and isolated areas: 80% of the families have joined a cooperative that delivers electricity and district heating via a mix of (old) hydro, wind, photovoltaic and biogas from local farm manure. In addition, thanks to support from the cooperative, the share of installed photovoltaic roofs is among the highest per capita in the country. Energy prices are among the lowest in Italy and this contributes to keeping businesses in the area, which would otherwise be disadvantaged because of the harsh climate and distance from the main roads.

www.comunirinnovabili.it

(16) A biomass use hierarchy is based on the relative value and efficient use of biomass resources. It follows a hierarchy of use, reuse, recycling, and energetic use.

In practice, preference is given to high added value use of furniture and building materials that lock in carbon, then paper, recycling/re-use (in other products and in forest ecosystems), conversion into fuels, and finally direct energy use (with no use for electricity generation).

(17) EEB, CAN Europe (2020) *A net-zero EU is possible*, <https://caneurope.org/net-zero-eu-is-possible-findings-from-ngos-paris-agreement-compatible-energy-scenario/>

(18) CAN Europe, EEB (2020) *Building a Paris Agreement Compatible (PAC) energy scenario*, <https://eeb.org/library/building-a-paris-agreement-compatible-pac-energy-scenario/>

There are many solutions for small-scale, decentralised energy production and farmers are fully deploying them, empowering communities and supporting rural autonomy. The 'Energy Efficiency First' principle applies to all rural areas, agricultural buildings are smart and energy efficient while agricultural machinery runs on clean energy and protects soils and the wider environment.

To achieve this vision, countries need to commit to higher national binding GHG targets, involve and enable rural communities, and support them

by funding decarbonised energy production, spur innovation and deliver higher climate ambition. The Fit-for-55 Package⁽¹⁹⁾, expected this summer, is an opportunity to give a crucial policy steer, hand in hand with investments, to adapt the grid to facilitate local clean energy production and rethink mobility systems for accessible clean transport. Spatial planning tools and the use of both Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are essential to avoid trade-offs with biodiversity.

Furthermore, we will need to implement the Circular Economy Action Plan⁽²⁰⁾ and associated sustainable products and waste prevention perspectives (reuse, repair, remanufacture, recycle), with related awareness raising, skills building, as well as investment in repair centres. We will also have to incentivise biotic resource protection and savings through savers earn schemes⁽²¹⁾, while establishing polluter pays systems to finance and manage waste and pollution generation, notably for agricultural plastic films and the packaging of toxic materials.

A JUST TRANSITION FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL AREAS, LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

The European Green Deal represents an opportunity for a transition towards sustainable rural areas. However, to be successful, we must seek out positive interconnections between ecological, social and economic systems as well as understanding and addressing the trade-offs. With a positive inter-connected vision, there is an opportunity to revitalise rural areas, leaving no one behind, and leaving a positive heritage for future generations.

As we heard at Rural Vision Week 2021,⁽²²⁾ we need to empower rural communities to take ownership of the green agenda to deliver solutions that are tailored to each locality; we need policy frameworks to set the direction of travel, build confidence and encourage green investment, embrace inclusiveness in stakeholder engagement, and foster responsible

governance that integrates local views and the needs of rural ecosystems.

There are increasing examples of sustainable solutions – linked to farming and the wider dimension of a

sustainable rural future as described above. Rolling these out will be the proof that the vision can work and deliver a Green Deal for the future of European rural areas.

Rural Vision Week

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP ON GREEN RURAL FUTURES DURING RURAL VISION WEEK:

- Empower rural communities to take ownership of the green agenda to deliver solutions that are locally tailored
- Different types of knowledge brokers, education and expertise are needed to act as drivers of change that can accomplish goals at local level
- Strong (but flexible) policy frameworks should set the direction of travel, build confidence and encourage investment

(19) https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/2021_commission_work_programme_new_policy_objectives_factsheet_en.pdf

(20) https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/circular-economy-action-plan_en

(21) 'Savers earn' is the other side of the coin of polluter pays principle. It has been introduced notably in the context of forestry/biodiversity management. The idea to be further explored is how we could create incentives for not harming natural resources (e.g. drastically limiting logging a forest), where the potential revenues from preserving (e.g. preserving eco-system services) would get close or equal to the possible revenues coming from over-exploiting. If the two sides of the coin are combined – polluter pays and savers earn – we could re-balance the way natural resources are managed (and create a fairer competition for those preserving).

(22) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en



4. Resilient rural futures

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INTRODUCTION

TACKLING THE UNDERLYING CHALLENGES TO RURAL RESILIENCE

BUILDING ON RURAL STRENGTHS

TOWARDS RURAL RESILIENCE

BY ALESSANDRA FAGGIAN

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INTRODUCTION

Rural areas have been and will be subject to all kinds of economic, social and environmental shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only highlighted certain specific weaknesses and risk factors but it has also shown that it is important to build up resilience more generally on all fronts. The geographical spread of the COVID-19 crisis is very spatially uneven. In many countries, especially in Europe, it is not only the large and densely populated urban areas that

have been hit. Smaller or medium-size cities have been strongly hit as well,⁽¹⁾ recording the highest numbers of per-capita cases. Nevertheless, metropolitan and urbanised areas have garnered the most attention in academic and policy debate about the pandemic, and conversely there has been little reflection on the impact of the pandemic in rural areas.⁽²⁾ This omission is problematic, as recent evidence has shown that, while rural communities have certain advantages,

they are also highly susceptible to COVID-19.⁽³⁾ Furthermore, they often represent the most socially and economically vulnerable populations, who are less resilient to the medium- or long-term effects of such a large-scale exogenous shock. This is due to different factors, to be explored in the next pages. All of these factors need to be addressed in order to build a more resilient future in rural areas.

TACKLING THE UNDERLYING CHALLENGES TO RURAL RESILIENCE

On the one hand, as emerged in the opening sessions of the 2021 Rural Vision Week,⁽⁴⁾ rural areas are challenged by long-running pressures, namely depopulation, out-migration, ageing and limited access to services and infrastructures. This makes them particularly exposed to abrupt changes or any kind of disaster. As they have long since faced prolonged perturbations due to peripheralization – often referred to as ‘slow burn’ – shocks such as natural hazards or economic recessions might irreversibly alter their development trajectories. ‘Chronic’ disturbances are in fact corrosive of the adaptive capacity of places, and the impact of an ‘acute’ disturbance can push a regional system, already stressed by

slow-moving challenges, to its ‘tipping point’ leading to a rapid and sudden decline. The severe and persistent negative economic impact unleashed by the pandemic will disproportionately affect⁽⁵⁾ people living in disadvantaged or peripheral locations.

On the other hand, a growing number of arguments have started to emerge questioning the consequences of an ever-growing urban concentration and population density. Those taking this position advocate the need to rethink our cities⁽⁶⁾ and reflect on the potentials and hindrances of pursuing alternative modes of urbanisation, while also reconsidering rural areas and their assets. In this sense, according to experts from different fields, the present COVID-19

emergency might represent a window of opportunity for rural places, which become attractive destinations for relocation, either temporarily or even permanently. They can rely on low population density, abundance of space and environmental quality. These characteristics may have relegated these places to the margins of economic development so far, but, at least in the current emergency phase, they could represent an advantage over urban concentration.

While it is true that some new prospects could potentially open up for rural areas, we must be aware that the very factors behind their progressive abandonment in many parts of Europe are precisely what makes them more vulnerable under

(1) Bailey D., Clark J., Colombelli A., Corradini C., De Propriis L., Derudder B., Fratesi U., Fritsch M., Harrison J., Hatfield M., Kemeny T., Kogler D. F., Lagendijk A., Lawton P., Ortega-Argilés R., Iglesias Otero C. and Usai S. (2020) ‘Regions in a time of pandemic’, in *Regional Studies*, 54(9), pp. 1163-1174, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2020.1798611>

(2) Muellera, J. T., McConnell, K., Berne Burow, P. B., Pofahl, Katie, Merdjanoff, A. A. & Farrell, J. (2021) ‘Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural America’, in *PNAS*, 118(1), pp. 1-6, <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/1/2019378118>

(3) Peters, D. J. (2020) ‘Community Susceptibility and Resiliency to COVID-19 Across the Rural-Urban Continuum in the United States’, in *The Journal of Rural Health*, 36(3), pp. 446-456, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32543751/>

(4) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en

(5) Bailey et al., *cit.*

(6) Cotella G., Vitale Brovarone, E. (2020) ‘Questioning urbanisation models in the face of Covid-19’, in *Tema. Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment*, Special Issue. Covid-19 vs City-20, pp. 105-118, <http://www.tema.unina.it/index.php/tema/article/view/6913>

a pandemic threat – the decades old challenges of deterioration in quantity and quality of essential services, namely health and education, limited access to the internet, as well as an increasing dependence on urban nodes where needed basic services can be accessed. Hence, the new COVID-19-related challenges for rural communities further exacerbate the long-term ones. Tackling these long-term challenges must, therefore, be an important ingredient of any strategy to strengthen rural resilience.

It is needless to underline the reasons why **access to health services** has become absolutely crucial these days: proximity to hospitals and the possibility to receive adequate and timely care and assistance in ordinary times has always been a critical aspect when discussing the liveability of rural areas, and it is especially so in an era where epidemics are likely to become more and more frequent. The **school system** as well is, in many cases, a weakness in these areas and needs to be strengthened and innovated, also in terms of digitalisation and technological supports due to the massive home schooling, both for children living there and for potential new residents. In the case of professionals wishing to move to a remote area exploiting the teleworking option, the elements they will consider in their relocation choice will certainly include the quality of local schooling and parenting support services.

There is also a significant **gender component** in the COVID-19 crisis. Its short-run effects have already shown that women have been particularly hit and, if nothing is done, the potential long-term effects of this pandemic are likely to disproportionately affect the female population. The economic sectors most affected in this pandemic were service sectors with frequent face-to-face contacts. These sectors employ more female than male

workers. More importantly, the closure of schools and day care facilities has increased childcare responsibilities, the burden of which traditionally falls more on women, forcing them to forego paid work. This issue might be especially salient in rural areas, where, even in ordinary times, the rates of female employment are lower than in cities. The same holds for the provision of childcare facilities, because of the lack of a sufficient critical mass in low-density areas.

Other **vulnerabilities of the job market** are linked to some

peculiarities of the rural context and of the agricultural sector. First, a higher proportion of jobs cannot be carried out remotely. Second, there is a larger fraction of micro-firms, more likely to default in an economic crisis. Third, informal work, also in response to poorer economic conditions, is more common. Workers in the ‘black’ market cannot receive crisis-related payment relief. Moreover, irregular workers are not detected by official statistics, hence the risk of underestimating the real impact of the COVID-19 crisis – especially in terms of job losses and poverty – is



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‘WORK HARVEST’ WEBSITE FOR JOB PLACEMENT IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR (HUNGARY)

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Hungarian National Rural Network set up a website using Measure 20 – Technical Assistance of the Hungarian Rural Development Programme. The aim of the project was to connect farmers and producers with potential employees. With the aim of saving the 2020 seasonal fruit and vegetable harvest, the website has provided food chain suppliers, food producers and entrepreneurs with support in finding the right workers quickly. The urgency of the situation left little time to conceptualise and implement the platform. Yet almost 350 jobseekers and more than 50 work providers registered on the platform, and almost 500 job offers were posted. The website is constantly updated, and the long-term goal is to keep the website active even after the Coronavirus crisis ends. This demonstrates how an emergency measure can become structural covering a pre-existing gap made more salient by the crisis.

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/covid19-work-harvest-website-job-placement-agricultural-sector_en

greater in rural areas. The EAFRD-funded project “COVID19: the ‘Work Harvest’ website for job placement in the agricultural sector in Hungary (see box page 24) effectively tackles this issue by matching

agricultural companies offering work with jobseekers.

Finally, the **specialised economic structure** of rural regions make them particularly exposed to COVID-19-

related economic shocks. There is a heavy reliance on industries that are highly susceptible to pandemic-related mobility restrictions, such as outdoor recreation and tourism.

BUILDING ON RURAL STRENGTHS

On the other hand, containment measures might also open up new prospects for more remote areas as they are perceived as facilitating social distancing and being accessible by car thus avoiding public transport.⁽⁷⁾ This might result in an increase in the short-term demand for close natural amenities and a rise in the numbers of domestic visitors. Some small rural villages have developed place branding strategies aimed at grasping the opportunities coming from a more or less voluntary change in consumer preferences in the tourism and working fields. An example comes from Tuscany where the small municipality of Santa Fiora promotes itself as the first Smart Working Village in Italy (see box on this page), providing incentives for teleworkers who temporarily settle there.

The community spirit that exists in many rural areas and the tradition of volunteering has also resulted in many inspiring examples of grass roots responses to the pandemic.⁽⁸⁾

Working from home might make non-urban areas more appealing as long as less frequent commuting makes occasional longer commuting more acceptable. The question is then: are rural areas equipped for this? An essential pre-requisite, and an absolute priority policy-wise, is **to reduce the digital divide** (both in terms of infrastructure and competencies – see article on ‘digital’ page 11)

and **to reduce the dependency on cars**. To promote sustainable travel-to-work, or mobility flows in general – ultimately contributing to a just

ecological transition – innovative, environmentally friendly solutions for regional mobility systems should be considered.



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THE SMART WORKING VILLAGE OF SANTA FIORA SUL MONTE AMIATA (ITALY)

More and more villages across Europe are promoting initiatives to attract new teleworkers. Among them, the small Tuscan village of Santa Fiora sul Monte Amiata (province of Grosseto), which aims to become the first Smart Working Village in Italy, stands out.

The village, having recently been provided with ultra-fast broadband, offers people the opportunity to move there and work and live in the tranquillity of the Tuscan mountains. The Smart Working Village is open to all workers, public and private employees, as well as self-employed workers such as freelancers and artisans. The new territorial marketing strategy includes a series of incentives. For example, the municipality covers part of the rent for those who decide to stay in Santa Fiora for more than two months. It also created the website ‘Live in the village’, which provides information on rentals in the area, but also information on services such as restaurants, pharmacies, babysitting, tourist offices, etc.

<https://santafioraturismo.it/santa-fiora-lancia-lo-smart-working-village-incentivi-sullaffitto-per-i-lavoratori-che-scelgono-il-paese/>

(7) Bailey et al., *cit.*

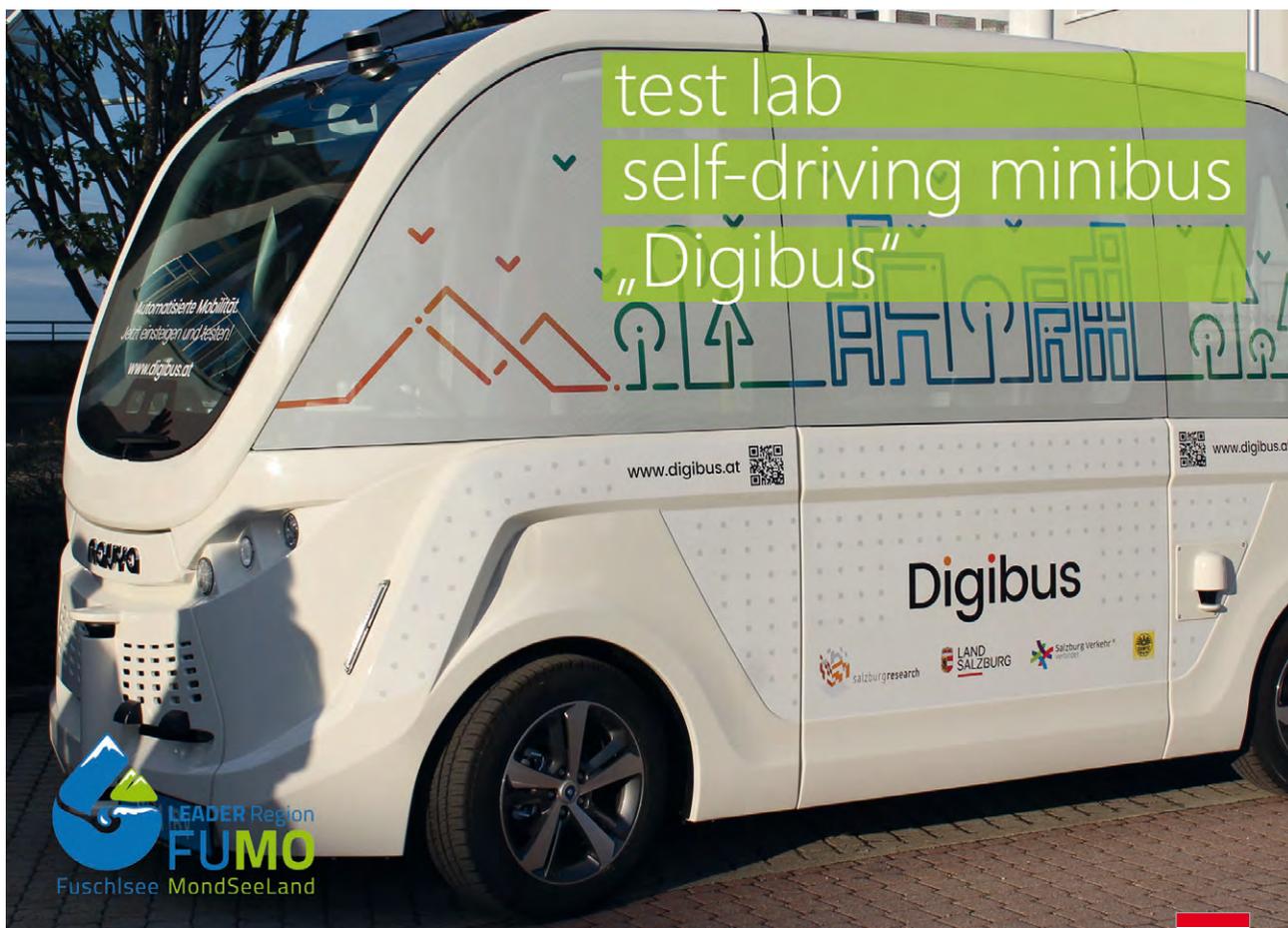
(8) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/rural-responses-covid-19-crisis_en

The project 'FUMOBil – regional masterplan for the future of mobility' (see box on this page) has showed, by rethinking the public transport offer in an Austrian rural region, how coordination and inclusion can decrease the use of individual motorised vehicles, thus improving the well-being of vulnerable

populations. Moreover, this might also increase the appeal of the area among teleworkers, particularly the environmentally-aware ones.

One last crucial question is: How much of our 'current status' is here to stay? We cannot predict thus far whether the COVID-19-induced changes in individual preferences will become

structural, sustaining a long-term demand. What we can tell is that even if we assume that for rural areas to be sustainable – or even, in some respects, benefit from – the current situation, the structural problems mentioned above need to be solved to compete with urban centres, especially in a post-pandemic world.



© FUMOBil

FUMOBIL – REGIONAL MASTERPLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF MOBILITY (AUSTRIA)

In many rural areas, essential services, including mobility, are often inadequate due to a lack of critical mass. This was the case of the public transport offer in Lakes Fuschlsee and Mondsee ('FUMO region') in Austria. Work and leisure facilities were difficult to access by public transport due to infrequent bus stops and long waiting times for residents. As a result, for reasons of convenience and accessibility, private motorised transport use was increasing thereby contributing to transport emissions and an unsustainable, non-inclusive mobility system.

Part of the LEADER project 'FUMOBil – regional masterplan for the future of mobility' – was to develop, over the course of 2016 and 2017, a master plan for a sustainable, environmentally friendly mobility system for 17 communities around the FUMO region. The project led to the creation of a regionally specific, data-informed sustainable transport plan that improves coordination and targets vulnerable populations with mobility limitations. A key aspect of the success of the project was citizens' participation. They were not only involved in providing data on gaps and needs to be addressed by the new mobility system, but also in how the new system should be designed.

The project won the Rural Inspiration Awards 2020 in the category 'Climate change mitigation'.

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/fumobil-regional-masterplan-future-mobility_en

TOWARDS RURAL RESILIENCE

To adapt to change and resist the present crisis and possible future crises, rural areas have to speed up addressing the old, long-standing issues mentioned above – the ones which underlie their marginalisation and have led to population loss – and counteract centrifugal forces. In essence, for rural environments to be resilient in the face of this shock, the new challenge is to address the old challenges once and for all. To improve living conditions in remote areas, policies are required to counter the forces pushing people out of rural areas and those pulling people into cities through a virtuous cycle of urban-rural interaction. Rural areas are uniquely vulnerable to the pandemic's impact. As stressed by Enrique Garcilazo of the OECD in his summary of the key messages from Rural Vision Week,⁽⁹⁾ rural resilience will require tailor-made

holistic policies. To this end, there is a clear need for data and evidence-based knowledge. If left unaddressed, the knowledge gap on the specificities of the effects of the pandemic on rural environments, because of the urban bias, could result in the creation of ill-informed and ineffective recovery policies for rural areas.

An insightful reflection coming from the Rural Vision Week event is that rural resilience and place-sensitive strategies aiming at it need diversity: of people; of economic activities; of voices. Inclusiveness, diversification of the economy, and a broad participation in policy agenda-setting and empowerment of rural communities, often absent from decision-making networks, are fundamental elements for rural places to adapt to change and thrive.

Rural Vision Week

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP ON RESILIENT RURAL FUTURES DURING RURAL VISION WEEK

- Avoid over specialisation and dependence on a small number of activities and strengthen rural diversity and diversification
- Continuous investment is needed to prepare rural communities for adapting to change and improving connectivity and networking at all levels (local, regional, national and EU)
- Retaining youth and an inclusive attitude to welcoming newcomers can help re-energise rural communities

(9) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1-joseenrique-garcilazo-ppt1-pl2-day5_0.pdf



5. Fair and inclusive rural futures

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INTRODUCTION

FROM POVERTY TO EXCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL AREAS

ACCESS TO SERVICES AND MOBILITY

WOMEN

MIGRANTS

TOWARDS A FAIRER AND MORE INCLUSIVE RURAL FUTURE

BY SALLY SHORTALL

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Sally was twice elected President of the European Society for Rural Sociology and is currently President-Elect of the International Rural Sociology Association, as well as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

The EU, in many ways, is exemplary in its commitment to trying to ensure a fair and inclusive rural future. It has been a commitment that emerged in the 1990s. The commitment to combating social exclusion is written into the Maastricht Treaty and the objectives of the European Structural and Investment Funds. The

Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion has oversight responsibility for poverty and social inclusion. Since 2007, the EU Rural Development Programmes have also included a priority relating to the promotion of social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. In practice across Europe almost every

rural development partnership since the 1990s refers to social exclusion, and a desire to foster social inclusion. The emergence of a commitment to rural social inclusion at EU and national levels is not unrelated, and the influence of the EU in putting rural social inclusion onto national agendas should not be underestimated.

FROM POVERTY TO EXCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL AREAS

When the term ‘social exclusion’ emerged in the 1990s, there was a debate about how it related to poverty, and whether it simply confused the idea of poverty. Social exclusion referred to the lack of access to, or denial of, a range of citizen rights, such as adequate health care or educational success, and also a lack of societal integration, through limited power, or the ability to participate in political decision-making. The ‘problem’ is usually seen as political and governance structures which are insufficiently open to allow for participation. This is particularly significant for rural areas.

It is unsurprising that the concept first emerged in France. The French were uncomfortable with the Anglo-Saxon approach to studying poverty, which primarily focuses on distributional issues, that is the lack of resources at the disposal of the individual or household. Social exclusion is understood as focusing primarily on ‘relational issues’, or in other words, low social integration, lack of participation, and powerlessness, with its roots in the French Republican idea of universal rights. With time, there is a growing realisation that poverty is

often at the root of social exclusion for many. However, in the case of rural areas, their remoteness, demography and restricted access to essential services (which are key enablers for social inclusion, e.g. social services, healthcare) and labour markets can also impact on particular groups and

limit their options for inclusion.

The access that rural citizens have to a range of basic rights is restricted in a number of ways. All of these need to be addressed to build an inclusive rural future.



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ACCESS TO SERVICES AND MOBILITY

Pressures to reduce public spending and smaller and more dispersed numbers of users in rural areas have led to the concentration of many basic public and private services in the larger centres of population. As a result, many rural residents find that access to a car is necessary to reach services and this can be a barrier to

participation in social and cultural activities for young people who cannot afford a car, or elderly people who have driving difficulties, which might increase their isolation. Rural development initiatives continue to provide innovative solutions to enhance inclusion by creating the enabling conditions for the provision of affordable accessible services in

rural areas and also new mobility solutions to help them get to the services elsewhere. The car-sharing initiative in Villerouge-Termenès in France presented below is an excellent example of community collaboration addressing issues of access to a car and ensuring environmental sustainability.



© Mairie de Villerouge-Termenès

MUNICIPAL ELECTRIC CAR-SHARING SERVICE – FRANCE

Villerouge-Termenès is a small village with 140 inhabitants, located in the centre of the Corbières massif, in southern France. Considering on the one hand the geographical remoteness and the distance from small food shops and supermarkets, and on the other hand the coexistence of a young population with modest income and an ageing population with driving difficulties, the municipality decided to launch a citizens' initiative to buy an electric vehicle for its inhabitants. The village already had an electrical charging point, but it was far from being fully used. In 2017, municipality representatives sought financial support.

Measure 19 – LEADER/CLLD of the Midi-Pyrénées Rural Development Programme supported 63% of the investment in the car and three years of operating costs, local and regional government funding covered another 15%, and the remainder was financed by the village. The electric car became available for rent during the summer of 2018. The initiative has proved very successful with the car booked 10 half-days per week and travelling up to 30 000 km a year, with half the inhabitants benefitting from the service. A person is employed to clean and maintain the car. It has had a positive environmental impact. Pooling this electric vehicle and high use compensates for the ecological impact of the battery. A similar initiative was launched in Ploëuc-L'Hermitage, a small town in the Region of Brittany in France, which now has three shared electric cars.

The project was a finalist of the Rural Inspiration Awards 2021.

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/municipal-electric-cars-sharing-service-france_en



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FROM FLEECE TO DRESS (SPAIN)

FADEMUR ÁVILA is a Spanish association which looks after rural women's rights and interests. The association's core activity is to provide training that will improve women's economic and professional situation. It organises a variety of courses, mainly related to agriculture and animal farming in different locations across the province of Ávila (central Spain). The association also offers courses in new technologies.

The association detected that there was a local interest for wool processing, a traditional activity in the area but currently in decline. With support from the EAFRD, the project aimed at stimulating a new economic activity through training in an area suffering from depopulation.

The training was very successful with 44 participants. As a result of the training several participants have embarked on further training to set up their own businesses. The project continues as there was a request made for more specific training on the processing of fleece, wool spinning techniques, horizontal and vertical looms. There is a great potential for generating added value by using the by-products of the primary sector (in this case wool) to achieve a sustainable economy.

The project demonstrates the importance of training as a basis for stimulating female entrepreneurship which helps maintain the population in rural areas.

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/fleece-dress-workshop-using-product-livestock_en

WOMEN

There are particular issues experienced more frequently by women in rural areas. Women are very underrepresented in the agriculture industry and rarely inherit land, have access to financial credit, or receive agricultural training. To reach a fairer and inclusive rural future for these women will require

multiple measures including policies to question unconscious bias and cultural barriers as well as local initiatives supporting women's role in the industry, and supporting more women to have decision making roles. Women in some parts of Europe also experience higher levels of unemployment and consequently

lower levels of pay and pensions compared to rural men or urban women and this leads to less economic independence. The Spanish project illustrated above is a good example of how small associations can effectively provide training for women and stimulate new economic activities in rural areas.

MIGRANTS

In many parts of Europe, rural areas have become more diverse with a surge of migrants from third countries seeking agricultural jobs. Often migrants are not treated fairly by employers or included in rural community life. A fairer and inclusive

rural future will require policies and laws that protect migrant workers' rights, and regulations that punish employers who abuse these rights. It also requires active initiatives by rural communities to embrace diversity and foster inclusion. The

imaginative 'World City' initiative undertaken by residents of the Luxembourg-France-Germany tri-border area Miselerland is an excellent example of how to share cultural awareness and foster inclusion (see box below).



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WORLD CITY – MISELERLAND (LUXEMBOURG-FRANCE-GERMANY)

The LEADER area of Miselerland is part of the Luxembourg-France-Germany tri-border area and is world famous for its town-centre of Schengen where the first European agreement on a common visa policy was signed in 1985. The region is an attractive immigration destination. In rural Miselerland, 40% of the population comes from other countries and more than 120 nationalities are represented. This high diversity among a rural community of 40 000 inhabitants represents both a challenge and an opportunity for peaceful, open and respectful cohabitation.

'World City' is a sub-project of a wider social inclusion scheme called 'Moselle Diversity'. The overarching objective of 'World City' was to promote the benefits of cultural diversity among children aged 7 to 12 by inviting children from refugees' families to participate in recreational activities. Over two weeks in the summer, a recreational centre was arranged as a 'World City', a free multi-cultural hub for several hundred children of the area. The World City was organised in continents, countries and regions reflecting the various origins of the children. While playing together, the children gained experience and knowledge in many different domains. Travelling from one continent to another with their workshop and thematic areas, a role play allowed them to become in turn a local resident, a tourist, a refugee, a diplomat, etc.

About 300 children from the different municipalities of the Miselerland region participated every day, with an average of 10% of refugee children. For the local kids, it was an opportunity to better understand the challenges relating to diversity, migration and inclusion.

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/world-city-miselerland-promoting-social-inclusion_en

TOWARDS A FAIRER AND MORE INCLUSIVE RURAL FUTURE

A fair and inclusive rural future will require policies, laws, regulations, and addressing cultural barriers. This will require action at community, national and EU level. An excellent model already exists, with EU commitment to inclusion stated in policy documents and LEADER through the Local Action Groups, having an important role at the community level. Local Action Groups will play an important role in continuing to shape the future we want for Europe.

It will also be important when looking at groups who need support to be included to ensure we do not essentialise or standardise people. To classify a group in a uniform way, presuming they all have the same characteristics – as policy language can sometimes do – can lead to

discrimination and also suggest that as a group they are simply less capable. We must ensure we see individuals as well as categories.

We have also learned over the years that simply having a numerical head count represented is not sufficient evidence of inclusion on its own. People must feel able to participate fully and not be excluded by different power relations. Achieving a fair and inclusive rural future is a messy and complex goal, but if we adopt a holistic strategic approach which tackles all the issues above, we are more likely to succeed. We must ensure fair policies, protection of human rights, strategies to tackle cultural barriers and ensure we maintain the LEADER approach which allows communities to identify and respond to their local needs.

Rural Vision Week

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP ON FAIR AND INCLUSIVE RURAL FUTURES DURING RURAL VISION WEEK

Participants argued that there was a need for:

- Accessible services, flexible community spaces, animation and facilitation, changing mindsets, legislation and institutional cultures at all levels that enable innovative solutions.
- Supportive and responsive governance, awareness raising, skills development and accessible information to enable citizens participation and public-private cooperation.
- Networking, collecting and sharing evidence, data, information and examples of good practice.



6. Final reflections

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BY BILL SLEE

Bill Slee is a researcher in rural development and a community activist in rural Aberdeenshire, Scotland. He has worked on rural economic diversification, policy evaluation, social innovation and has a particular interest in renewable energy, sustainable food systems and the green transition and has published extensively in these fields. In recent years, the emphasis of his work has shifted from theory to practice.

After some 40 years working in academia, research, consultancy and third-sector activities, I applaud the European Commission's initiative to seek a long-term vision through a variety of participation means, as described in article 1 (page 6). Recognising the challenges of a fraught and uncertain future and seeking to build greater resilience need to be embedded in policy design. If that design were just a top-down procedure its implementation would be compromised from the outset.

Taking a long view, over the last 200 years, the European economy has been transformed by the technological innovations to create modern industrial market economies, but that economic progress has come at a high cost. We are now living through the sixth great extinction of biodiversity in earths' history, and, for the first time, the extinction agent is human. The economic surge which has created great wealth and massive urban expansion has been underpinned by fossil carbon, the burning of which is creating an existential threat to humankind through a fast-changing climate and its multiple adverse impacts. Our marine and fresh waters are polluted to an unprecedented degree. Put simply, our existing models of resource use and consumption habits are threatening the planet's life support system and regulatory regimes and public and corporate behaviours are adapting far too slowly to remediate the situation.

Beyond the environmental crisis, there are parallel crises relating to the social consequences of demographic change, the residual poverty of many areas and deep-seated and enduring spatial and social inequalities. Further, there is little evidence of these spatial inequalities narrowing and in fact the

OECD argues that they widened during the last recession.⁽¹⁾ The spatial and social inequalities that exist are not so much a sign of market failure as a reflection of both agglomeration economies and the legacy of structural decline in less advantaged spaces, combined with specific cultural norms that reinforce mechanisms of social exclusion, as explained in article 5 (page 28).

Policy makers are now much more aware of the magnitude of the environmental crisis, as evidenced by the European Green Deal which must become the centrepiece of European policy architecture in the coming decades and is 'a transformative agenda for Europe at all levels' (see article 3 page 16). Bedding rural Europe into the Green Deal will still be a challenge. During the late 20th century, the broader rural economy has been somewhat neglected in European policy, apart from the strong commitment to food security evidenced in the CAP. The mid-21st century will surely become a time when the vitality of rural spaces will be reasserted but as far more than a place for food and fibre production alone. The COVID-19 pandemic has perhaps given us glimpses of some of the components of that necessary reappraisal. It has also made clear that to adapt to change and resist the present crisis and possible future crises, rural areas need to address old, long-standing challenges once and for all (article 4 page 22).

The urban hubs will not only be fed by rural Europe: much of their renewable energy will come from rural Europe; water supplies will almost all come from rural Europe, in particular the 'water towers' of the big mountain ranges; many of the recreational and tourist activities of the population

will take place in rural Europe; and sustainable production of biomaterials will come from rural Europe as the hydrocarbon-based economy is replaced by carbon neutral production systems. Transformational change of how the whole economy presently works is not optional. It is a necessity. The existential threat of the climate crisis must be addressed. Twenty years ago, what are now mainstream views about the unsustainability of the current economic model were considered marginal; now they are espoused by the world's leading bankers, such as Mark Carney⁽²⁾, who is now UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance. But there is a huge amount of inertia in the socio-technical system we have, even though, as many prescient voices have noted, the long-term cost of delayed action is likely to be great.

These observations form the backdrop to the work of developing the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. They reinforce the central importance of rural areas in building a world where the realisation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals can become a reality.

Twenty years into the future, imagine someone looking back on our current policy responses to the challenges we now face. Would they think that our priorities were broadly right in the Green Deal, and the Pillar 1 and the Pillar 2 policies that frame the European response for rural areas? My hunch is that that person will look back on the European Green Deal as an important turning point that began to point policy towards the building blocks of a sustainable future, but maybe wonder what all that fuss about the absence of broadband was about, because of its ubiquity. They may wonder why we worried

(1) OECD (2020) *Rural well-being: geography of opportunities*, <https://www.oecd.org/regional/rural-well-being-d25cef80-en.htm>

(2) Carney M. (2021) *Value(s): Building a Better World for All*, HarperCollins Publishers

about availability of services when autonomous electrically powered vehicles drop off our key supplies. They may also wonder why more was not done to empower and enable people with energy and skills who were developing novel solutions to problems as diverse as elderly people's social care, renewable energy, local food systems in ways that enhanced environmental and social justice, but somehow the established corporate interests too often managed to draw down public subsidy, rather than nurture these green shoots.

We cannot deny the legitimate frustrations of those facing significant service decline and absent or poor internet connectivity. These service deficiencies undoubtedly make some rural spaces both less liveable and less economically viable and article 2 (page 11) illustrates clearly how human-centric digital technologies can enhance the quality of public and private services and improve service delivery across a range of sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw that working from home became the norm for many and maybe a longer-term shift has been triggered. Accessible and attractive rural places have ceased to be just dormitories, and this creates opportunities for local services tailored to these new demands. For those currently without internet connections, a tax on the global IT firms' incomes or sales could solve the internet connectivity issue within a few years if allocated to such purposes. This should not be a task for rural development programmes but a matter of citizens' rights.

What are the crucial changes needed to make rural Europe more resilient by the mid-21st century? At the apex of concerns is the necessity to not only

mitigate climate change but also to enhance strategies for adaptation to floods, droughts and temperature extremes. Biodiversity loss and other forms of environmental damage such as water pollution also compromise resilience. Europe can lead by example but there remains a need for punishing environmental offenders by green border taxes.⁽³⁾

Resilience will not be delivered by environmental policy alone. If high levels of social or spatial inequality are tolerated by public policy makers, this will stoke the hard-to-control fires of populism. In the responses of rural Europe to the consultation on the Long-Term Vision, we can see evidence of rural communities piloting new models of community-based economic and social development that promote social inclusion. These diverse and often hybrid models of place-based partnership activity are offering prototypes for a wider

transformational change. The ENRD has collected plenty of examples of projects funded by Rural Development Programmes⁽⁴⁾ that are pioneering change and can inspire further initiatives.⁽⁵⁾ Mainstreaming them would be to everyone's advantage but the blockages to scaling them up need to be removed. These vary from Member State to Member State from over-complex administrative procedures to insufficient funds.

Rural Europe is on the threshold of changes that could massively enhance its prosperity and resilience as the world turns to biomaterials to replace hydrocarbon-based materials, more local food systems and more renewable energy. Rural Europe has almost all of the necessary ingredients for building a vibrant and more resilient future. We hope to soon have a clearly defined collective European vision of the adaptive pathways we need to follow.



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(3) If imported goods have a higher embodied carbon content than European produce, a border carbon tax would stimulate cleaner production

(4) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice_en

(5) See the projects shortlisted for the three editions of the ENRD's Rural Inspiration Awards (2019, 2020 and 2021), https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/_en?f%5B0%5D=im_field_enrd_prj_keywords%3A20655

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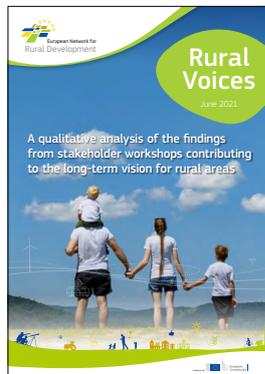
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