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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION - SYNOPSIS REPORT

Accompanying the document

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the
European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

**A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient
and prosperous rural areas by 2040**

{COM(2021) 345 final} - {SWD(2021) 166 final}

1. INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVES AND STAKEHOLDERS

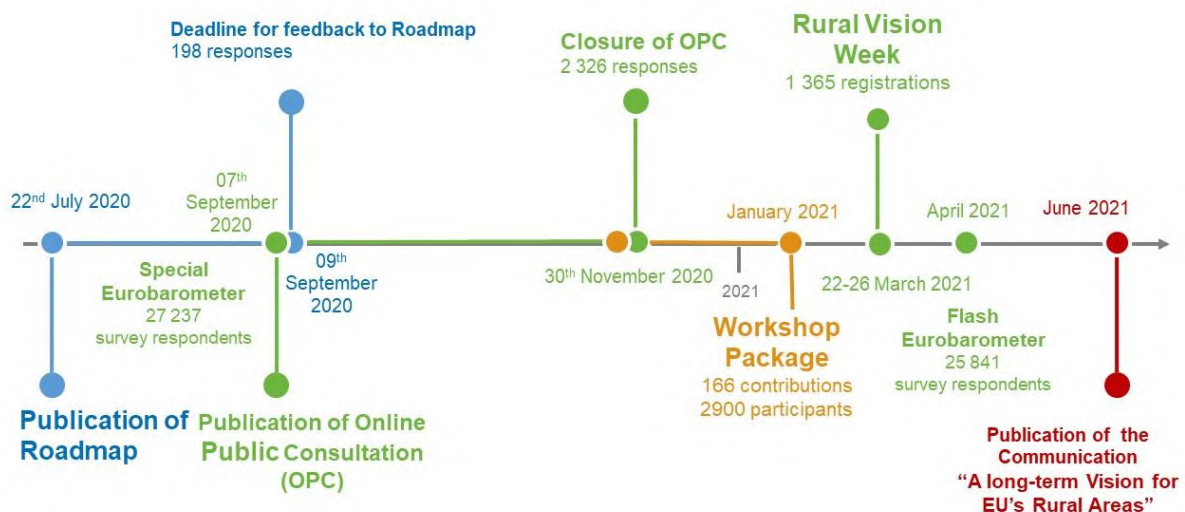
This report presents the outcome of the different strands of consultation conducted in support of the Communication ‘A long-term Vision for EU’s Rural Areas - Towards empowered, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas’. The need for designing a long-term vision for rural areas was underlined in President von der Leyen’s political guidelines and in the mission letters to Vice-President Šuica (Democracy and Demography), Commissioner Wojciechowski (Agriculture) and Commissioner Ferreira (Cohesion and Reforms).

As an integral part of the ‘New Push for European Democracy’ priority under the von der Leyen Commission, the public consultation was geared towards achieving strong participation from citizens and stakeholders to gauge the priorities for (i) rural areas today and (ii) rural areas of the future.

The **consultation strategy** was designed to pay particular attention to people living in rural areas as well as local and regional authorities, as outlined in the mission letter to Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica¹. The consultation process was culminated in the Rural Vision Week, organised online between 22 and 26 March 2021.

The process included the following consultation elements:

Figure 1. Consultation streams for the long-term Vision for EU’s Rural Areas



These consultation steps were planned in order to reach the stakeholders identified through the mapping conducted in the consultation strategy, which had identified the following groups:

- Farmers and their organisations (at the EU, national and local level)
- Consumers and their organisations (at the EU, national and local level)

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/comm-cwt2019/files/commissioner_mission_letters/mission-letter-dubravka-suica_en.pdf

- Private Sector – upstream-downstream (food chain distribution etc.), rural businesses (at the EU, national and local level)
- Member State Authorities (Governments, Parliaments, Public authorities)
- Regional/local authorities
- Environmental NGOs (at the EU, national and local level)
- Other associations, NGOs and civil society organisations (at the EU, national local and level)
- Rural networks (at the EU, national and regional level)
- Academia, experts
- Other interested groups and individuals

The consultation took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most exchanges and consultations were carried out virtually, except a limited number of local events organised by rural networks. All identified stakeholder groups have been reached through the different consultation activities².

2. METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

The Commission gathered feedback on both its **roadmap** and **online public consultation** (OPC) through online questionnaires. The feedback on the roadmap was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to identify challenges, opportunities and priorities for action. The online public consultation combined a mix of closed questions (where respondents replied to a pre-determined selection of answers) and open questions (where they were free to write any response they choose with up to 1000 characters per response). The questionnaire of the OPC focused on three main aspects (i) rural areas today, (ii) rural areas of the future and (iii) governance of rural areas.

Several questions of the **Special Eurobarometer 504**³ referred to the situation of rural areas, to how things have changed from 2009 to 2020, and to the objectives of rural development, second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This survey was carried out in the EU27 between 3 August and 15 September 2020. In total, 27 237 EU citizens from different social and demographic categories were interviewed, in most cases face-to-face in their mother tongue. Given the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent health and safety measures, a face-to-face interview was either not possible or possible only to a certain extent in some countries and was replaced by online interviews. A **dedicated Flash Eurobarometer 491**⁴ was also carried out in the EU27 between 9 and 18 April 2021 assessing the priorities where the long-term Vision for rural areas should focus on. A total of 25 841 EU citizens were interviewed over the telephone. The survey covered the following topics: (1) EU investment in rural areas, (2) transport and connections to rural areas, (3) consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, (4) environmental problems in rural areas, (5) participation of rural residents.

The long-term Vision initiative was also presented in a number of **events** across the EU to get the views from rural stakeholders and regional and local authorities. For each event, the

² See Annex I and the specifics reports for the Online Public Consultation and the Stakeholder package.

³ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2229>

⁴ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2278>

Commission representatives identified the main issues highlighted. Targeted stakeholder consultations took also place with national authorities dealing with rural development through the Rural Development Management Committee and rural development stakeholders through the Civil Dialogue Group on Rural Development, and in governance meetings of the EU Rural Networks. The participative foresight exercise for the development of the Vision, led by the Joint Research Centre, was undertaken within a series of meetings of a Thematic Group on the Long Term Rural Vision, set up under the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD).

Additionally, the Commission prepared, with the support of the ENRD, a **workshop package**⁵ “Welcome to our Rural”, provided in 22 EU languages and available online where national rural networks (NRNs) and other rural stakeholders could download material allowing them to organise local participatory events focussing on their own local area and its likely and desired developments from now until 2040. Outcomes were reported back to the Commission in “harvesting sheets” synthesising the results of the workshop discussions. The NRNs adapted the material to their local conditions and the time and resources they had available. Some groups adhered to the templates very closely; some used them more loosely; and others developed additional and imaginative means to capture rural voices regarding their vision of the future of rural Europe in 2040. Because of the COVID 19 pandemic, almost all workshops took place virtually rather than face to face. Further details of the outcomes can be found in the ENRD report “*Rural Voices: A qualitative analysis of the findings from stakeholder workshops contributing to the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas*”⁶.

Finally at the “**Rural Vision Week: Imagining the future of Europe’s rural areas**”, a large-scale participatory conference organised online by the ENRD in close cooperation with the Commission between 22 and 26 March 2021, the results of the different consultation strands were presented, discussed with stakeholders and further developed. Dedicated workshops on key topics were also organised (this included 8 participative workshops, working plenaries, 11 fringe events, the ENRD Rural Inspiration Awards ceremony, a market place where different stakeholders and networks presented their activities and initiatives linked to the Vision). The intention was to provide maximum opportunities for exchanges between participants, drawing out collective views on stakeholders’ aspirations for the rural Vision. All presentations and information from the event are available on the ENRD⁷.

3. CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES

a. Consultation on the Commission roadmap

The **roadmap consultation** for the Vision was open for feedback from 22 July to the 9 September 2020. It has been answered by a total of **198 stakeholders** including regional interest representations, thematic networks, international organisations, public (national, regional and local) authorities, citizens’ organizations, academia and individual citizens.

⁵ Available at: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/long-term-vision-rural-areas-workshop-package-nrns-and-other-rural-stakeholders_en

⁶ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-voices_en

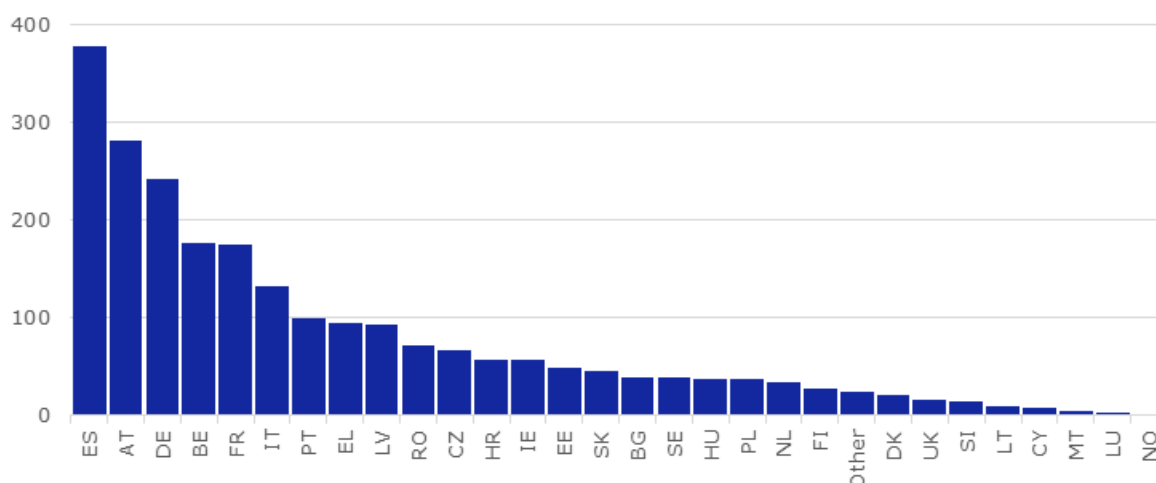
⁷ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en

The vast majority of position papers provided pertained to the content of the initiative as opposed to the roadmap itself (which focused on the process)⁸. In any case, the stakeholders' contributions for this exercise have also been taken into account during the analysis of the outcomes of the online public consultation (OPC).

b. Online public consultation (OPC)

The public consultation, open from 7 September to 30 November 2020, collected a total of **2 326 responses** from all 27 Member States and 87 position papers from different stakeholders.

Figure 2 Number of respondents to the public consultation by country of origin



When it comes to the categories of stakeholder replying, 62% were citizens (52% of which identified as living in a rural area and 9% in a remote rural area), 9% businesses and associations, 5% academic and research institutions, 9% public authorities, 7% NGOs, 5% rural development networks and 2% other respondents.

A flash Eurobarometer survey was conducted in April 2021 to complement the results of the OPC with a representative sample of EU population.

The results of the OPC can be consulted in the “**Factual Summary on the public consultation on the long/term vision for rural areas**”⁹ and in the “Synthesis of the online public consultation on the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas”.

c. Eurobarometers

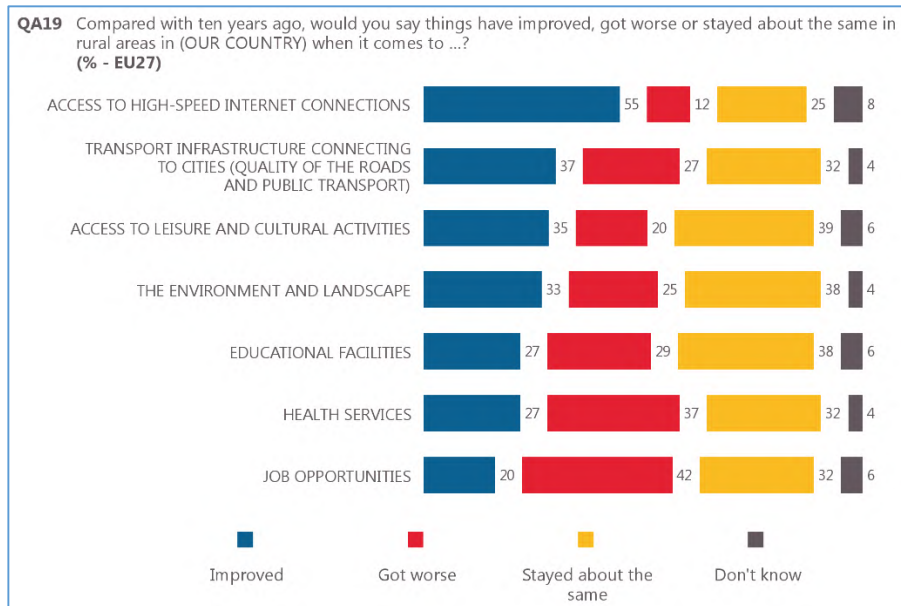
Nearly all respondents of the Special Eurobarometer 504 (95%, +3 percentage points since 2017) think that agriculture and rural areas are important for the future. Looking at the longer trend, the proportion has increased by five percentage points since 2009.

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/better-regulation-guidelines.pdf>

⁹ Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12525-Long-term-vision-for-rural-areas/public-consultation>

Respondents were asked whether things in rural areas in their country have improved, got worse or stayed about the same compared with ten years ago. A larger share of respondents think that things have improved when it comes to access to high-speed internet connections and transport infrastructure connecting to cities. Conversely, a relative majority have answered that things have got worse for job opportunities and health services (figure 3).

Figure 3 QA19 of Special Eurobarometer 504 on changes in rural areas in the last decade



The key findings of the Flash Eurobarometer 491 can be summarized as follows; a majority (79%) of EU citizens support the EU giving consideration to rural areas in public spending decisions. Besides, 65% of EU citizens think that the local area or province should be able to decide how the EU investment in rural is spent. The most mentioned key need of rural areas (44%) is transport infrastructure and connections. Regarding the transport connections, remote rural areas respondents consider difficult or not possible to reach different services by public transport in their area (ranging between 52% and 59% depending on the service). Rural area respondents would like to have access to more local bus services. Citizens living in large towns and cities (61%) will be more likely to visit rural areas compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the environment, a majority of respondents reply that environmental problems are an immediate problem for rural areas (ranging between 52% and 65% depending on the environmental problem). While, EU citizens, are divided when asked whether they can influence decisions affecting their local area, all respondents would like to be more involved by taking part in citizen consultations (63%), attending meetings or events organised in their local area or get involved in community-led projects (56%) and being more involved through social media feeds (42%).¹⁰

¹⁰ Categories for the analysis: (1) a remote rural area, (2) a rural area or village, (3) a small or medium-sized town and (4) a large town/city.

d. Targeted consultations through meetings, conferences and events

The Commission used this stage to explore the issues in more depth and detail. Despite the qualitative nature of the targeted stakeholder consultations, there were surprising levels of consistency across the groups in their views. Key issues highlighted include the importance of depopulation and generational renewal challenge, the need to ensure access to infrastructure and services, in particular, mobility and connectivity, and the need for job opportunities.

A detailed list of meetings, conferences and events and key issues highlighted is included in annex 1.

e. Workshop Package

As indicated in section 2, the European Commission, with the support of the ENRD, provided a pack of materials to support the organisation of participatory workshops with rural stakeholders. National Rural Networks (NRNs), Local Action Groups (LAGs), Europe Direct Centres, local authorities, citizens and community groups have contributed to the European Commission's development of a Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) via this consultation stream.

The package was available from November 2020, and in order to meet the legislative timetable, the workshops had to be completed by the first week of February 2021. Despite this very short time frame, there was an impressive response from local stakeholders, with workshops organised in **19 Member States** and **170 contributions received**, involving more than **3 000 rural citizens as active participants**.

An overview produced by the ENRD of key messages which emerged from the stakeholder workshops on the Rural Vision is included in annex 2.

f. Rural Vision Week

The participatory week-long conference (organised by ENRD in close cooperation with the European Commission): ***“Rural Vision Week: Imagining the future of Europe’s rural areas”*** took place as an online event from **22-26 March 2021**.

The participatory discussions throughout the event were organised around two key questions:

- a. *What are the key ideas that should be in the vision; and*
- b. *What are the key changes/conditions needed to get to the vision from where we are today.*

Rural Vision Week attracted a high level of interest with a total 1 365 registrations received and 600 different participants “live”. Participants from the 27 MSs and 8 non-EU countries attended. The event involved over 60 speakers, over 3 000 visits to the market-place, and over 6 000 views of the event web-page. The event also got a high level of social media coverage engaging over 13 000 people via Facebook. The diffusion of the event can also be illustrated by the Rural Innovation Awards, which recognised EAFRD supported projects in a number of

thematic areas around *'Our Rural Future'*, linking to the Vision, which had over 10 000 votes in the Popular Vote category.

Presentations, recordings of plenary sessions and key messages from Rural Vision Week are available online on the ENRD website¹¹.

g. Engagement with the European Parliament

On the 29 January 2021 Robert Lins, member of the European Parliament (MEP) and chair of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, submitted **an oral question** on behalf of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development to the Commission regarding the Long-term vision for rural areas¹². The main issues raised in the oral question refer to the coordination between the different EU policies involved; the involvement of regional and local rural authorities; the harmonisation of the CAP Strategic Plans and adaptations to the CAP instruments with the Vision; and to the funding for rural areas under the CAP and cohesion policy. Commissioner Wojciechowski provided a reply on behalf of the Commission.

On 4 February 2021 a “**Joint meeting of the Committee of the Regions Natural Resources Commission and the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee on a long-term vision for rural areas**” took place. Members of both institutions discussed ways to boost recovery in Europe's rural areas and to enable regions to continue to play their role in the preparation and management of future CAP. MEPs and local leaders agreed that the EU's future rural development policy must be more ambitious and contain a concrete policy framework that will be monitored and evaluated.

h. Engagement with the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and with the Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

The EESC adopted an opinion “**An integrated approach for the EU's rural areas, with particular emphasis on vulnerable regions**” on September 2020. The CoR has also adopted an opinion on the necessary action to undertake for rural areas on December 2020, “**EU Strategy for Rural Revival**”. The European Commission referred to the Long term vision for rural areas as a way to implement a number of their requests. Besides, the European Commission has engaged in several occasions with both committees on the specific needs of rural areas and the necessary policy answer.

i. Meetings of Vice-President Šuica and Commissioner Wojciechowski with key stakeholders

Since September 2020, Vice-President Šuica and Commissioner Wojciechowski began meeting with key stakeholders engaged on the long term vision. These stakeholders' positions echoed those expressed above.

¹¹ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week_en

¹² [Question for oral answer O-000005/2021](#)

4. INTERDEPENDENCIES AND CONSISTENCIES IN THE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

There is a high degree of consistency between the stakeholder contributions across the different groups and between the findings emerging from each of the consultation strands. The primary concerns of stakeholder groups are listed below.

(i) Urgent needs and challenges for rural areas:

- **Infrastructure**; transport infrastructure and connectivity infrastructure.
- **Lack of basic services and amenities**; poor quality public services (schools, health and social care, public transport), quality education and training opportunities, quality connectivity, banks, post offices and problems related to water management.
- **Lack from quality jobs and quality jobs opportunities.**
- Low-income levels.
- Limited generational renewal in agriculture.
- **Population ageing and especially dramatic population decline** in some rural areas.
- Insufficient and inappropriate housing for certain member states.
- Threats to the **environment**.
- **Capacity building**: need for development of community leadership, support for community activities and networking.
- **Lack of participation in decision-making**: promotion of inclusion and engagement, clarified governance framework incorporating vertical and horizontal linkages.

(ii) Opportunities for rural areas:

Economic opportunities:

- **Implementing and embracing innovation** (economic innovation and social innovation, including networking to build scale).
- The **green transition** and **green economy** (including Sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, value of ecosystem services).

Attractiveness:

- Higher quality of life (proximity to nature).
- The **feeling of belonging**.
- **Inclusion and engagement**.

5. MAIN MESSAGES FROM THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

After analysing the results of consultation process listed above, it is possible to categorise the input in (i) Urgent needs and challenges for rural areas, (ii) Opportunities for rural areas, (iii) Key elements for developing the strategy and (iv) Specific actions proposed.

(i) Urgent needs and challenges for rural areas:

Stakeholders have shown a high level of unanimity when speaking about **infrastructure in the rural areas**. There is a generalised perception of lack of good quality infrastructure for several rural areas; transport infrastructure and connectivity infrastructure.

Regarding **connectivity**, the inadequate and sometimes very poor access to digital infrastructure in a number of rural areas was highlighted. Besides, stakeholders have signalled

the weak digital skills of the rural population and the low level of digital innovation in rural SMEs. These three elements affect negatively rural areas to adhere the digital transformation.

Lack of basic services and amenities. In several rural regions key public services are deficient, services such as public transport, quality education and training opportunities, banks, post offices and problems related to water management. Most of the consultation streams have highlighted the problem of poor quality public services, schools, health and social care, problems that intensify in the more remote is the rural area.

In certain Member States, stakeholders have also mentioned the **insufficient and inappropriate housing** situation in rural areas to meet the current needs. For example, the lack of affordable house renting or the difficulty to find properties for sale.

EU citizens consider **threats to the environment** among the needs to address in rural areas. The most mentioned issue is the anthropogenic impact on biodiversity, water quality and climate change.

Stakeholders consistently expressed the need for **capacity building** to develop community leadership and support community organisations and activities. There is much existing capacity for mutual social support, but it needs support to develop, especially in areas where population is declining.

There is a need for more **participation of rural communities in the decision making** that affects them. This requires active measures to reach and engage all members of community, including the young and the recently arrived, and an appropriate governance framework.

Economic needs and economic opportunities are key for supporting the population in rural areas. People living in rural areas lack quality jobs and **quality job opportunities**. Certain stakeholders have highlighted that in rural areas exploitation of regional value added is limited, including through tourism. In certain rural areas, the lack of economic diversification and economic activity creates fewer job opportunities contributing to the vicious circle. **Lower-income levels**, such as in the agricultural sector, do not favour the settlement of people in rural areas, besides, they play a negative role in the lack of investment capacity of potential entrepreneurs. Efforts are needed to retain business decision making and value-added in rural areas, rather than exporting both power and profit.

Agriculture keeps being considered as a sector ensuring the sustainability of rural areas, as well as the wider agri-food sector. However, agriculture suffers from limited **generational renewal** and is endangered by the viability of small farms. There is a recognised need for agriculture to become more sustainable.

Rural areas suffer from demographic changes such as **population ageing and especially dramatic population decline** in some rural areas. Regions at risk should be identified and measures that look for territorial rebalancing should be adopted. Some stakeholders support positive discrimination measures for regions suffering from depopulation. Innovative approaches to service provision are required, particularly in these areas.

It should be highlighted that **more than 40% of the respondents of the OPC living in rural areas feel left behind** by society; the share is higher among citizens living in remote rural

areas. The reasons for this perception from rural citizens refer to: deteriorated infrastructure and services; lack of economic opportunities; no consideration of specific needs in political decision-making.

(ii) Opportunities for rural areas:

Economic opportunities:

- **Agriculture is seen as ensuring sustainability** through job creation, access to affordable high-quality food and maintenance of rural landscapes. While rural areas are more than agriculture, agriculture still plays a key role in the rural fabric. **Sustainable agriculture** plays an important role in the transition to the green economy, and in ensuring resilience in rural areas. In the future, agriculture should be more sustainable, have stronger local connections (short supply chains) and diverse value chains. Besides, there is a need to keep investing in the training of the next generation of farmers and experts in 'geographical indications' (GIs) that can take over the activities since generational renewal is at risk.
- **Implementing and embracing innovation** in all aspects is key for the future of rural areas – digital, production, social, community-led – is essential. Social innovations – community-led and community-based – are particularly relevant for rural areas, and need to be re-enforced and fostered for the future. Access to economic opportunities is seen as one of the main factors for attractive areas in the long term.

The green transition:

- The green transition should be seen as a benefit, not a burden. Rural areas are well-placed to build on their natural assets with the increased focus on mitigating/adapting to climate change. This requires better recognition of eco-system services, and an inclusive approach that supports a fair transition.

Services and connectivity:

- The **attractiveness of rural areas is conditioned by multiple factors**, especially by the provision of (e-)services (health and education), a better internet connectivity and more people living in rural areas. Access to **care facilities** is seen as one of the main factors for attractive areas in the long term.
- **Innovative and alternative mobility approaches** can reduce costs and climate impact, and improve accessibility.

Attractiveness:

- Higher quality of life, proximity to nature and sense of belonging are among the **multiple reasons so stay or settle in a rural areas**.
- The importance of the **feeling of belonging** is a key element of attractiveness for rural areas. Rural areas in 2040 should be open and making everyone feel included whatever their ethnic group, gender, age, disability, origin. This requires working on the needs of both newcomers and current residents.
- The importance of preserving the “rural” character was also highlighted (*“the rural should stay rural”*).
- The appreciation of rural areas further to the pandemic (less crowded, less contamination; teleworking allowing to work from the countryside)

Further to the analysis of the opportunities and needs highlighted, a key element for rural areas is to **enhance their resilience**, which means rural areas have to go towards a fair, green and inclusive transition. Being resilient includes social, green and economic elements. Stakeholders consider that smart specialisation can add value, however much emphasis is placed on diversity. Diversification and cooperation are important key elements of rural resilience.

(iii) Key elements for the strategy:

The different consultation processes have stressed the need of **a long-term holistic strategy, at the appropriate scale, developed through bottom-up processes that engage local communities**: with a holistic, inclusive, flexible and place-based approach. The participants in the consultation streams have signalled the following elements to be addressed by the Vision:

- **Improving access to infrastructure and services.** Some stakeholders supported the establishment of a basic minimum (benchmark) for the availability of infrastructure/services in rural areas.
- **Job creation and support to rural entrepreneurship and innovation.** The importance to support innovation, **implementing and embracing innovation in all aspects** – digital, production, social, community-led – is essential. Social innovations – community-led and community-based – are particularly relevant for rural areas, and need to be re-enforced and fostered for the future.
- **Improve connectivity and digital solutions** supporting smart villages to emerge and develop. Broadband is a basic infrastructure, on equal footing with water and electricity. To make the best of digitalization, there is a need to develop skills and applications tailored to rural needs through digital ecosystems. Infrastructure, skills and applications should be available, affordable and accessible. Appropriate training and support to develop digital literacy is crucial.
- **Achieve climate, energy and biodiversity targets.** Build on the natural assets of rural areas to contribute to national targets, within an appropriate policy and regulatory framework which retains ownership, control and value in rural communities.
- **Addressing demographic challenges** including depopulation, generational renewal and gender inequality.

Employment and innovation, access to infrastructure and services, as well as **digital connectivity** are identified as the main priorities for the EU's long-term Vision and Rural Action Plan.

The different consultation process have stressed **the importance of a bottom up approach that can account for the diversity of rural areas and engage rural communities**. The vision needs to **promote inclusion and engagement of the full range of different groups** (youth, migrants, elderly, women, minorities etc.). Vibrant areas in the future depend on bridges built, trust, diversity and the ownership of any policy. With bottom-up approaches, flexibility and real ownership of activities, many win/win/win opportunities are created – bringing social, economic and environmental benefits to the local community and beyond. **Besides, there is a need to cooperate at all levels**, Exchanges, working together and creating links (open communication) are crucial at all levels, and for all types of activity (economic, social and environmental), as can bring in experiences, enable support and bring the communities together. As “Small cannot do it alone”, the building of common agendas is very important.

- Many participants stressed scope to use existing instruments, notably LEADER, to help design and deliver the future vision at local level. Participants highlighted **the importance to empower local communities** by strengthening existing initiatives such as Local Action Groups (LAG) and LEADER methodology for designing rural development actions and stimulate their active contribution to EU policy-making.
- **Participatory approaches** are also seen as ensuring active and direct contribution of rural people to policy-making processes.
- **Cooperation and networking**, engaging at local level, as an alternative to the traditional route of consolidation. Networks can operate across distances, and do not have to involve geographical proximity.
- **Rural-urban linkages** need to be governed by balanced partnerships that ensure a level-playing field. Rural-rural links also should be promoted.

(iv) Specific actions proposed:

The actors have proposed a number of specific measures to tackle the outlined challenges and to make the most of the highlighted opportunities proposing specific instruments and tools. To support rural development, EU policy and other levels of governments could:

- Improve the access and provide **economic and financial support**, including support to local projects and access to financing, either EU funding or private investment to rural actors. Besides, several stakeholders have brought attention to the need **to facilitate the combination of different instruments for territorial development** (e.g. multi-funding between ERDF or ESF+ and the EAFRD). On the topic of funding, stakeholders have also mentioned the need to reduce bureaucracy that often makes it difficult to develop positive bottom-up initiatives - lifting these obstacles will unlock rural initiatives' potential.
- **Further improve the targeting of policies to local needs.** There is a need for flexible policy or regulatory frameworks to enable and support local actions, with strong political commitment and responsibility to follow-up at all levels – EU, national, regional and local. A **rural proofing mechanism** could screen different policies (including State Aid and fiscal policies) through a “rural lens”. Stakeholders stressed that this mechanism should start immediately and encompass funding programmes.
- **Empower local communities by strengthening existing initiatives** (such as LAG and LEADER) and stimulate their active contribution to policy-making. There is a strong need to foster and support capacity building, engaging local actors and easing access to knowledge and solutions to unlock the potential for innovation, that in rural areas is often collective (social innovation). This requires development of community leadership and support for community activities and networking. Local innovation brokers/animators are needed to create the seeds of change. LEADER plays a role in this respect. The potential of **rural hubs** was strongly highlighted.
- **Data should be available** to support creation of economic models focused not on growth, but quality of life/well-being. Data needs to be created, communicated and shared/used, as is necessary to value the contribution of rural areas and follow-up implementation of any action. Analytical models and data are needed to be ready for the future. In this context, the idea of **rural observatory** was suggested as a possible mechanism to be set up.

- Other suggested actions concerned various social, **cultural**, **economic**, and **environmental aspects**.

Overall, there is very strong support across the EU for a long term Vision for rural areas with an action plan.

6. HOW FEEDBACK WAS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

Stakeholder views on the long term vision and the actions needed were analysed and taken into account as much as possible. Thus, the long term vision Communication includes an EU Rural Action Plan with concrete actions addressing challenges and opportunities highlighted in the public consultation and presented above. The Vision addresses 4 blocks referring to stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas. The Commission has noted the strong call to address governance related issues and in the Communication also proposes to put forward an EU participatory process, linking with the Committee of the Regions, involving local levels of governance to examine the path towards the Vision.

A number of actions proposed by stakeholders in the consultation touch upon – or are the exclusive competence of – Member States. Implementing these actions will therefore depend on Member States' engagement through the proposed Rural Pact. The Commission is prepared to support and complement Member State actions in this area.

Annex 1. Events in the context of the consultation activities of the Long Term Vision for EU's Rural Areas.

Date	Event	Organiser	Key highlights of the discussion
26/05/2020	13th Rural Networks' Steering Group (SG) meeting	DG AGRI	<p>The meeting served to inform SG members of the purposes and process for the long term Vision for rural areas (LTVRA).</p> <p>Target group: members of EU Rural Networks governance (public authorities, civil society, LEADER LAGs, networks advisors/researchers etc).</p>
02/09/2021	DESIRA review meeting	Research Executive Agency (REA)	<p>DESIRA presented its brief for LTVRA on digital game changers in agriculture, forestry and rural areas.</p> <p>Target group: Scientists and European Commission experts.</p>
22-23/09/2020	1st Thematic Group (TG) meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision	ENRD	<p>The meeting served to set the scene for the work on the LTVRA, start the work on the Foresight exercise and discussed the steps for encouraging stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>Target group: rural development experts and practitioners.</p>
06/10/2020	Rural Development Committee	DG AGRI	<p>Information about the state of play and about the report on the impact of demographic change – no comments.</p> <p>Target group: national authorities dealing with rural development.</p>
08/10/2020	14th Rural Networks' Steering Group meeting	DG AGRI	<p>Information on steps planned for developing the LTVRA. Exchange on the role that they and rural networks could play to engage stakeholders in this process.</p> <p>Target group: members of EU</p>

			Rural Networks governance (public authorities, civil society, LEADER LAGs, networks advisors/researchers etc).
11/10/2020	Reto “España Vacuada”	DG COMM	Very worried about depopulation and generational renewal. Need to support digital skills for people in rural areas, in particular the senior. Target group: rural stakeholders from areas affected by depopulation.
12/10/2020	3rd Citizen Engagement and Deliberative Democracy Festival	JRC	Presentation of LTVRA focussing on stakeholder workshop package and scope for use in other policy settings.
13/10/2020	EWRC ESPON ESCAPE	REGIO/ESPON ESCAPE	Responding to presentation of research project, informing about LTVRA and illustrating linkages/policy relevance of project.
13/10/2020	EWRC - Young people's vision for rural areas and digitilisation	BCO Network Support Facility	Presentation of the LTVRA and debate with youth organizations. Target group: rural youth.
20/10/2020	Interim TG meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision	ENRD	The meeting continued the work carried out during the 1st TG Meeting on the Foresight exercise with the JRC. Target group: rural development experts and practioners.
22/10/2020	18 th National Rural Network (NRN) Meeting	ENRD	The meeting informed NRNs about the LTVRA and encouraged them to engage stakeholders in their respective countries. It included a presentation by DG AGRI and a brief exchange on the Stakeholder Workshop Toolkit to

			engage rural stakeholders. Target group: Support Units of National Rural Networks.
12/11/2020	Rural research & policy workshop	REA and AGRI	Presentation of LTVRA to 19 rural research and innovation projects funded under Horizon 2020 and discussion on their results and potential inputs. Target groups: Scientists and European Commission experts.
23/11/2020	Policy seminar	RELOCAL consortium	Perceptions of spatial injustice. Responding to project findings. Informing about Rural Vision. Target group: scientists and policy makers.
24/11/2020	Meeting with rural women - Castellón, Extremadura) and Albacete (ES)	Europe Direct Extremadura	EU recovery needs the recovery of rural areas. Generational renewal should pay particular attention to gender. CAP needs to improve gender equality. Important to take also into account the situation of old women in rural areas. Target group: rural women.
24/11/2020	ENRD Workshop for National Rural Networks on Valorising and Communicating Successful Projects	ENRD	The workshop informed NRNs about the LTVRA, relevant sources of information such as the ENRD Rural Vision Portal, and shared feedback on planned NRN activities to engage stakeholders in LTVRA process. Target group: Support Units of National Rural Networks.
26/11/2020	Reto demográfico - Next Generation EU27	Europe Direct Castellón	Need to ensure basic services, support small municipalities and address demographic challenges in a demographic strategy. Target group: rural people from

			areas affected by depopulation.
27/11/2020	Webinar : "A European Rural Agenda needed after COVID crisis"	Committee of the Regions	The ENRD CP presented the work and results on rural responses to COVID and the links to the LTVRA. Target group: Committee of the Regions, EP Intergroups, stakeholders.
02-03/12/2020	2nd Thematic Group (TG) meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision	ENRD	The meeting continued the work on the Foresight exercise to further develop the scenarios. There was also a session to discuss activities for stakeholder involvement in the LTVRA. Target group: rural development experts and practioners.
04/12/2020	7th meeting of the EU Rural Networks Assembly	DG AGRI	The Assembly served to inform members of the steps being taken for developing the LTVRA (inputs from DG AGRI) and discussed the role that they could play in stakeholder engagement. Target group: members of EU Rural Networks governance (public authorities, civil society, LEADER LAGs, networks advisors/researchers etc).
11/1/2021	RURALIZATION review meeting	REA	Ruralization presented work on trends and rural dreams of the young as important inputs. Target group: Scientists and European Commission experts.
27/01/2021	3rd Thematic Group (TG) meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision	ENRD	The meeting took stock of the main messages emerging from the work carried out so far by stakeholders and projects around the EU, and exchanged about the common strands and the step changes needed to ensure the

			<p>future LTVRA becomes a reality for rural communities across Europe.</p> <p>Target group: rural development experts and practitioners.</p>
28/01/2021	French NRN Meeting (regions)	NRN France (Regions)	<p>Meeting with RED, ANCT, LEADER France and regional NRNs and ENRD with a brief presentation describing the LTVRA process and next steps.</p> <p>Target group: members of French rural networks.</p>
11/02/2021	19 th NRN meeting	ENRD	<p>The meeting shared the initial results of the respective NRN organised stakeholder discussions and discussed their involvement in the forthcoming Rural Vision Week.</p> <p>Target group: Support Units of National Rural Networks.</p>
11/2/2021	Civil dialogue group on rural development	AGRI	<p>Importance of youth and digital ("no fiber, no youth; no youth, no vibrant rural areas")</p> <p>Importance of agriculture beyond economy and jobs - landscape, environment, quality of life; impact of COVID (new eyes for rural areas). Presentation of lessons from research.</p> <p>Target group: stakeholders dealing with rural development.</p>
22-26/03/2021	Rural Vision Week: <i>Imagining the future of Europe's rural areas</i>	ENRD	<p>Large-scale participatory online event around the Long Term Vision – details in pt. 3(f).</p> <p>Target group: a wide range of rural development stakeholders including NGO's/associations, National Rural Networks, LEADER LAGs, Managing Authorities and bodies</p>

			representing regional and local administration, researchers, EU institutions etc.
05/05/2021	4 th Thematic Group (TG) meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision	ENRD	<p>The meeting took stock of the main messages which emerged from Rural Vision Week, shared experiences from MS that have developed their own integrated rural strategies or agendas, and considered how stakeholders can help make the future Vision a reality at local level and how networks can best provide support.</p> <p>Target group: rural development experts and practioners.</p>
Various	OECD Rural Working Party	OECD	<p>Informing about the rural vision initiative, highlighting links to OECD activities.</p> <p>Experts on rural development from OECD countries.</p>

Annex 2 – “Rural Voices”: Overview of key thematic messages from stakeholder workshops on the Rural (source: ENRD)

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Infrastructure and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor quality public services, schools, health and social care and infrastructure. • An overly urban-centric transport and mobility system. • The lack of vitality of village and town centres and hubs. • Neglect of heritage of historic and industrial buildings. • Insufficient and inappropriate housing to meet current needs. • Inadequate water supply, water treatment and flood and drought management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope for digital innovation, service hubs and rural schools for the provision of rural services • Growing demand for wider sustainable rural mobility approaches building on developing links between different modes of transport, on-demand services and new technologies. • Revitalisation of rural centres and abandoned buildings to build a new rural identity. • A growing stock of rural housing which needs to be managed to support demands from existing and newcomers to rural areas. • The potential of improved water management infrastructure to tackle drought and floods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a base level of infrastructure to support the functioning of the rural welfare state comprising a basic minimum of services that can be considered a right (e.g. internet, access to public services, etc). • Invest in a modal shift from private cars to public transport and alternative mobility and from hydrocarbon to post carbon transport systems. • Remodel settlement centres and target investment on historic and traditional buildings to transform those that are no longer fit for purpose into vibrant community and business uses. • Enhance water infrastructure resilience, adapted to and with increased resilience to changing climate with respect to drinking water supplies, sewerage, flood management, storm water, drought and irrigation needs. • Capacity building and support for community/volunteer services
Digital and technological change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor access to digital infrastructure in rural areas. • Weak digital skills of the rural population. • Low level of digital innovation in rural SMEs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence of the digital era, with new models for the provision of basic of rural services, jobs, work practices and market access. • Growing demand for digital services and technological innovation at local level (in towns and farms). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide affordable digital infrastructure as a basic right, sufficient for business activity, e-service provision and social life. • Enhance digital literacy of rural citizens via inclusive training, education programmes and information campaigns, and to enhance e-service provision and use. • Extend innovation partnerships and advisors into the wider rural domain and promote innovation activity more vigorously at local levels.
Basic goods/food/energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An over-globalised food/energy system which ignores local potential and means that value is not retained in the local area. • The absence of succession plans and questionable viability of many small farms. • Inadequate advisory services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing movement around the relocalisation of shorter food systems and wood product systems. • Emergence of technological developments that will enhance the professionalisation of farming and the connection to the bioeconomy. • Demand for niche and high-quality crops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural production. Two alternative approaches emerge: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) Relocalise production, shorten supply chains and introduce regenerative and or organic farming practices based on traditional varieties and breeds; and ii) Harness the fruits of technology to reduce costs, environmental impact, raise productivity and produce crops suitable for the wider bioeconomy. • Reduce red tape and enhance processing opportunities both for local food

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill shortage in regenerative/ organic agriculture. • Low levels of involvement of rural communities in renewable energy production. • Weak recognition of the role of land use in carbon capture in rural land use (dealt with in the chapter on climate change). • A failure to embrace models for transformational change and sustainability transitions in basic industries, (farming, coal mining and coal-using communities) including addressing red tape/regulation. 	<p>breeds and products based on local biodiversity/identity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing recognition of regenerative agriculture as a sustainable farming practice. • Growing interest and awareness of community-based renewable energy production. • Scope to access new markets via digital tech • Availability of instruments for integrated transformational change such as Smart Villages, Energy Communities, LEADER, local food policies etc. • Growing political interest to support ‘just and green transition’ in rural communities with stranded hydrocarbon or carbon-based industries. 	<p>and for food to be exported out of the region.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the entry of young adults into the land-based industries. • Target investments to induce environmentally friendly practices at the individual (small-scale, self-consumption) level (e.g. permaculture) and strengthening of other local and organic food initiatives. • Encourage modern technology in the land-based sector and development of the bioeconomy (e.g. vertical farming, genome editing methods). • Enhance lifelong learning in the land-based sector which embraces sustainability and circular economy principles. • Foster wide territorial planning approaches (which go beyond farming and forestry) that support the transition to a rural economy based on sustainability and circular economy principles. • Support systems/regulatory framework that encourage regional/community renewable energy action and a post-carbon transition in coal dependent communities.
<p>Income, work and jobs in the wider economy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited exploitation/retention of regional value added, including through tourism. • Poor development and value given to local crafts. • Low take up of circular economy principles. • Limited recognition and support to innovative models of enterprise and lack of value/recognition of the provision of ecosystem services (ESS). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence and reinvigoration of traditional and new sectors (e.g. social farming, craft work) and professionals contributing to rural diversification. • Emergence of new models for supporting entrepreneurship and innovation (e.g. incubators, hubs, networks, etc.). • Growing market recognition of the value of regional identity and bio-based goods and services, including ESS, based on principles of sustainability and circularity. • Value added through processing and marketing centres, shorter supply chains and gastronomic, social and cultural tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a good digital infrastructure as a prerequisite for a diversified modern economy in rural areas. • Create appropriate conditions for local entrepreneurship, to keep people in the countryside and develop creative approaches to promoting entrepreneurship such as teleworking centres, incubators, minimising red tape etc. • Support new models of collective and community entrepreneurship. • Support both commercial private sector entrepreneurship and social enterprises and be open to nurturing new models of work. • Support sustainable tourism which is better linked to the specific offer of the wider components of rural economies (e.g. linked to speciality foods, crafts and reinvigorating local culture).
<p>Social inclusion and vitality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic change especially dramatic population decline in some rural areas. • Divergent identities and differing sense of belonging of rural residents. • Gaps in inclusiveness and diversity in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing interest in moving to rural areas and Working From Home - all of which have been intensified by the COVID pandemic. • Growth of a new shared sense of community and new rurality with existing residents, new arrivals and non-permanent residents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish policy of incentives to encourage young people and professionals to settle in the countryside (e.g. tax incentives, adequate services) and support systems to find jobs, houses, etc. • Implement an activation programme for rural youth to support them to be professionally active in rural areas. • Support social inclusion actions for Roma and migrants via the RDP (e.g.

	<p>some rural areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited civil society engagement and partnership in some areas, and need for support for community & volunteer organisations. • Limited territorial collaboration with third sector agencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of strong rural identities which slow down the rural exodus. • Recognition of inclusiveness and diversity as a value to bring positive change in the countryside integrating refugees and migrants. • Increasing demand for community social services for people in unfavourable life situations. 	<p>training and skills acquisitions for agriculture).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building/support for community organisations e.g. investigate digital forms of creating a sense of community and participating in local development including 'banks of volunteers'. • Enhance networking, cooperation and partnership building and ensure rural citizen participation in decision-making e.g. through LEADER. • Promote a change in values in society, valorising rural life.
<p>Environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental damage from human sources, including rural production systems impacting biodiversity, water quality and climate change. • Deterioration in the condition and loss of cultural landscapes and historic buildings. • The lack of a culture of caring for the environment among rural people, including land managers. • Excessive waste and an absence of effective waste management. • The lack of a coherent vision or mechanisms to guide change in integrated territorial plans that could guide both productive and environmental functions of rural land, including adequate mechanisms to reward provision of ESS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further scope for action to reduce the adverse impacts of intensive land use systems on biodiversity and water quality. • Recognition of the positive effects of targeted and integrated approaches at a landscape scale through partnerships involving all key stakeholders. • Considerable potential for valorising both cultural landscapes and traditional buildings in ways that support tourism and other social activities. • Potential to change societal attitudes in the direction of more sustainable behaviours. • Availability of tools and instruments to develop wider integrated sustainability strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure farm policy and all rural sectors comply with the European Green Deal imperatives. • Consider rural land use needs much more centrally in the context of much broader land use planning and not as a separate entity. • Support collaborative management to address environmental damage at landscape scale in the farm and forest sector. • Bring together the different facets of sustainability planning in territorial plans that protect heritage land and buildings, engender restorative ecology, enhance water management and nurture sustainable behaviours. • Provide environmental education for all citizens as a public responsibility. Support training to farmers in regenerative agriculture practices. • Establish partnerships between Universities and agricultural education centres with their hinterlands to ensure that place-sensitive sustainability innovations are developed. • Support greater citizen involvement in shaping and managing greenspace on publicly owned land. • Ensure that the public goods associated with heritage landscapes and heritage buildings are maintained through support measures.
<p>Climate change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of awareness of climate change impacts. • Low levels of development and community engagement with renewable energy in rural Europe. • Limited engagement of land managers and others with climate mitigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low carbon footprint in some rural areas, especially some of the least developed. • Increasing demand for renewable energy including the creation of renewable energy communities based on solar, wind or biomass systems and more self-consumption. • Growing societal interest to transition to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move from planning for development to planning for local resilience. • Deepen the responses to climate change at national level and reassess the legal framework for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures and their implementation in strategies, plans and projects. • Promote innovative and smart low carbon planning and programming strategies and link them with regional and national strategies, programmes and projects.

	<p>and developing the bioeconomy, even when solutions are known, due in part to lack of incentives/skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate adaptation to new climate realities. • The need to decarbonise beyond the energy sector. 	<p>climate friendly production methods, enhanced farm and forest management and the bioeconomy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide scope for action in enhancing the energy efficiency of buildings, decarbonising transport, and improving water management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support activities targeted at decreasing GHG emissions. • Support measures and activities which retain water in the countryside (where needed), through e.g. smart water management and management of rainwater, grey water, reconstruction of irrigation systems, green roofs, etc. • Build awareness and support education and training of professionals and experts in climate change mitigation and adaptation measures as well as citizens (including youth).
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