



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the long-term vision as a crucial step towards the sustainable development of rural areas and genuine territorial cohesion throughout the EU and regrets that the publication of this long-term vision comes after the conclusion of negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2021-2027;
- highlights the need for the Conference on the Future of Europe to take people in rural areas into account in order to reflect their ideas, needs and potential and ensure their ownership of the European project;
- stresses the need to ensure that mutually beneficial rural-urban linkages are integrated into all EU policies in line with territorial cohesion objectives by making the most of the strong interdependencies between rural and urban areas;
- highlights the urgency of putting in place a European Rural Agenda that sets out concrete proposals for immediate action to support the long-term vision and recommends that these concrete proposals be accompanied by resources, financial instruments and quantitative targets to ensure the effective implementation of the long-term vision;
- calls on the Member States and LRAs to apply the rural proofing approach to their strategies and investments under the current programming period 2021-2027, for the CAP, cohesion funds and the national recovery and resilience plans;
- confirms the CoR's commitment to working together with the European Commission to launch the Rural Pact this year and to developing a governance model that will allow all stakeholders involved to successfully implement the long-term vision.

Rapporteur

Juan Manuel MORENO BONILLA (ES/EPP), President of the Region of Andalusia

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the long-term vision as a crucial step towards the sustainable development of rural areas and genuine territorial cohesion throughout the EU and regrets that the publication of this long-term vision comes after the conclusion of negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2021-2027, since that policy could have contributed to the implementation of this strategy, in particular through a better financial balance between the first and second pillars of the CAP;
2. regrets, in this regard, that the instruments for convergence between cohesion policy and rural development policy were discarded during the recent reform of the CAP and is particularly disappointed that moves to integrate the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) into the Common Provisions Regulation for Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027 were dropped;
3. highlights the need for the Conference on the Future of Europe to take people in rural areas into account in order to reflect their ideas, needs and potential and ensure their ownership of the European project; recommends incorporating communication and advertising techniques aimed at improving the collective image of rural ways of life, highlighting the cultural and social advantages of rural life;
4. stresses the need to ensure that mutually beneficial rural-urban linkages are integrated into all EU policies in line with territorial cohesion objectives by making the most of the strong interdependencies between rural and urban areas;
5. recommends that the current region-city-based territorial model be changed to one based on a shared and balanced rural-urban relationship. This model should include compensation mechanisms to allow mutual synergies and rebalance the rural-urban relationship. A common urban-rural model will also improve protection of biodiversity and promote biocultural diversity of rural areas;
6. regrets that guidelines for enhanced support action and financing for rural areas at EU level will only be prepared for the 2028-2034 programming period;
7. highlights the urgency of putting in place a European Rural Agenda that sets out concrete proposals for immediate action to support the long-term vision and recommends that these concrete proposals be accompanied by resources, financial instruments and quantitative targets to ensure the effective implementation of the long-term vision;

8. calls, in this respect, for a minimum earmarking of European funds for non-agricultural projects in rural areas to be introduced in both cohesion policy operational programmes and other European direct intervention programmes (Horizon Europe, the Connecting Europe Facility or Creative Europe);
9. welcomes the Commission's ambition of mainstreaming the rural perspective in all EU policies. Territorial impact assessments of joint action at EU level create the conditions for more effective and coherent policies. In this connection, the Committee highlights the need for impact assessments also to take account of biodiversity and of biocultural characteristics;
10. underlines the importance of ensuring adequate funding for the implementation of the vision for the EU's rural areas. EU rural policy should, as far as possible, be integrated into cohesion policy in order to achieve a coherent development policy. Rural development affects more industries than just agriculture, and funding should therefore not be limited to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Specific local circumstances and needs should be the starting point for EU rural policy, just as in cohesion policy;
11. calls on the Member States and LRAs to apply the rural proofing approach to their strategies and investments under the current programming period 2021-2027, for the CAP, cohesion funds and the national recovery and resilience plans;
12. stresses that the rapid and cost-effective development of renewable energies and their related infrastructure and technologies, as required for the Green Deal, can only take place in and with rural areas. There should be a focus here on restrictions on the energy grid and energy storage, particularly across borders. The capacity of the high-voltage grid is (in some places) at its limit and investments are needed to ensure continued transmission of renewable energy. To this end, it is vital that rural areas have a share in economic success;
13. reiterates the importance of dialogue between all parties who have a stake in the future of rural areas, from the various levels of government and administration to the main economic sectors, companies, citizens and the academic world; initiatives such as forums, councils or round tables, where all actors participate, are excellent tools for discussing the main challenges faced by rural areas and finding solutions that take everyone's voice into account;
14. confirms the CoR's commitment to working together with the European Commission to launch the Rural Pact this year and to developing a governance model that will allow all stakeholders involved to successfully implement the long-term vision; reiterates that the involvement of local and regional actors in this governance structure will be key to adapting actions to the needs and requirements of rural areas, with particular regard to those that are depopulated or facing demographic risks;
15. given their potential to curb depopulation and create social and economic opportunities linked to the Green Deal, the CoR is of the view that the most strategic areas in which local and regional cooperation should be developed under the Rural Pact are: bioeconomy and specifically environmentally sustainable agriculture, regional food systems, mobility, digital connectivity, social and cultural vitality as well as innovation in social services of general interest and

renewable energies; considers that rural areas are in a position to actively drive the sustainable European green transition that is needed;

16. considers that further progress is needed on utilising natural ecosystem services (water, nutrients, aquifers, temperature regulation, biodiversity, etc.), the benefits of which could be allocated in part to rural municipalities, to support the organisation and development of their local areas;
17. urges the Commission to make it easier for public funding for rural areas to supplement private initiatives where the provision of public goods is not commercially viable, and to consider state aid and tax incentives where appropriate;
18. notes that the Communication recognises the specific status of the outermost regions, as laid down in Article 349 TFEU, and agrees there is a need to provide services of general interest in rural areas of the outermost regions which are of comparable quality to those in urban areas.
19. draws attention to the particular challenges faced by rural regions impacted by structural change or the transformation processes needed for the green transition, such as in energy production or the automotive industry; these include rural tourist regions that have to cope with changing travel patterns due to COVID-19 and climate change;
20. suggests developing transparent criteria, benchmarks and targets against which to monitor the impact of actions and progress made on implementing the vision;
21. finally, calls for the establishment of indicators particularly relevant to rural areas - for example, in terms of the percentage of the population that has access to public transport, and digital, employment, health and cultural services - in the context of the European semester, to ensure that the vision for the future of the EU's rural areas, particularly in sparsely populated areas, is part of all instruments set up by the EU for the periodic economic review of objectives and targets;
22. stresses that for the rural agenda to be successful, it cannot be built on a one-size-fits-all approach; considers, therefore, that there is a need for precise categorisation of local areas and recognition of local specificities, underpinned by transparent and objective parameters and indicators that give real value to rural development;
23. notes that the objectives of Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund include supporting urban and rural areas with geographical or demographic handicaps. It also provides for Member States to allocate EU financial support to projects promoting environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive economic development in the regions concerned;
24. stresses, in this regard, that special support should be given to NUTS level 3 areas or very sparsely populated areas, or those with an average population decrease of more than 1% between 2007 and 2017;

25. calls on the European Commission, in agreement with the Member States and local and regional authorities, to guarantee that the initiative on the long-term vision for rural areas includes practical solutions and means of support to deal with demographic changes faced by rural areas, and reiterates the need to implement integrated projects based on the operational programmes under cohesion policy, the CAP national strategic plans and instruments laid down in the national strategic recovery plans. Lastly, European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) projects are developing cross-border best practices to come up with innovative approaches and pilot projects for the integrated territorial development of urban-rural functional areas;
26. calls for simpler implementing rules for European funds and State aid in rural areas, improvements in the way that they are combined and a shift to multi-fund model that ensures rural areas are integrated into all policies;
27. considers that the guidelines to improve support and funding for rural areas, to be published by the Commission in its 2024 report, should cover a longer programming period and should not be limited to the 2028-2034 framework;
28. draws the Commission's attention to the need to incorporate system methodologies in the future design of rural areas, to ensure systemic rather than partial or linear visions of development;
29. notes the importance of a comprehensive analysis of the problems of rural areas at the outset, as this will form the basis for the areas for action in the future Plan. In this regard, further economic problems should be added to those already examined, such as external competition, price instability and the distribution of gross value added between the different players in the production and marketing chain in the agricultural and agri-food sector;
30. in terms of opportunities, considers that there is insufficient mention of and only an indirect reference to sectors such as sustainable rural tourism or leisure and cultural activities, despite the fact that they play a very important role in building diversified strong and sustainable rural economies. There are many potential additional activities linked to rural areas other than the agricultural sector, such as cycling tourism, hunting, hiking, mycology, wellness tourism, gastronomy, community-based arts or arts workshops and exhibition centres, etc.;
31. would like to stress the importance of sound and balanced economic development with a focus on new business models. Some parts of the countryside, and specifically border areas marked by falling populations and vacant homes and premises, are increasingly vulnerable to destabilising criminal activity. This leads to a blurring of norms and reduces the sense of safety and quality of life;
32. in this regard, reiterates that the future of rural areas is dependent on retaining and attracting young people to rural areas to pursue their life goals here; in seeking solutions to the challenges faced by rural areas it is therefore vital to actively engage young people, develop forums where they can share their ideas and support youth initiatives in rural areas;
33. stresses that, in the current context, with ageing populations, there is an urgent need to develop an economy of essential services that ensures universal accessibility to all goods and services in

rural environments, with a particular focus on older people; also welcomes the European Year of the Youth 2022 as a chance to provide opportunities and support rural youth in becoming active citizens and actors of positive change;

34. urges the Commission to consider among its proposals in this area the contribution that distributed service delivery systems can make, in areas such as childcare, care centres for older people, schools and after-schools, shops, and health and social care (an area in which technologies such as telemedicine and telecare can make key contributions) and calls on the European Commission in that regard to set targets for the Member States in order to improve accessibility to services in general and basic public services in particular in rural areas;
35. stresses the need to include all data on systems, both social, health and socio-health, in the proposed harmonised approach to the use of geospatial information systems, as well as the need to boost the interoperability of the social services system, and of it with other social protection systems;
36. similarly, stresses the importance of incorporating indicators on ease of access to social care services and local social protection services;
37. stresses the importance of making the most of rural-urban interdependencies within a framework of territorial equity. Inter-municipal investments should benefit all local and regional authorities, so that in the best case scenario both urban and rural areas benefit equally;
38. urges that this positive effect be properly reflected in the per capita investment calculations per type of region (urban, intermediate, rural) and therefore calls for a review of the mechanisms for establishing profit indicators for these investments, with particular focus on small towns and villages in rural areas;
39. stresses that renewable energy production is an opportunity for rural areas to combat energy poverty and generate energy self-sufficiency in functional areas (including rural-urban areas in their sphere of influence). Furthermore, the Committee stresses that greater acceptance of renewable energy production facilities can be achieved by keeping part of the revenues generated within rural communities;
40. proposes to consider, where appropriate, the possibilities for promotion of reshoring, which creates opportunities for rural synergies between agriculture, manufacturing and commerce, therefore help strengthen local economy by creating jobs and reducing unemployment.
41. highlights the importance of the framework offered by the vision for developing physical infrastructure to improve the connectivity of rural areas, and to facilitate their socio-economic rejuvenation, and suggests including urban agendas in it;
42. notes the importance of improving transport connections with peri-urban and rural areas, primarily through regional authorities and their operational programmes, in order to guarantee

coordinated, effective and efficient action. To this end, rural and peri-urban areas should be fully interwoven into urban transport strategies¹;

43. points out that the availability of commercial areas plays an important role in the sound and sustainable development of the regional economy and in the establishment or expansion of rural businesses; this is particularly true of regions undergoing structural change; local authorities need support for the proactive identification, designation or repurposing of suitable areas; the scope and cost of the planning services to be provided are often an issue;
44. points out that particular attention should be paid to infrastructure and cross-border cooperation in rural border regions; emphasises the need to improve the public transport infrastructure and service system in rural areas, ensuring the development of sustainable mobility solutions that reduce travel times and of the number of connections between urban and peri-urban and rural areas;
45. stresses that the primary objective of spatial and transport policy should be maximising the possibilities to meet needs, with a minimum of transport; rationalisation is important in this regard;
46. recommends that multimodal mobility solutions should also take into account the contribution that "mobility as a service" (MaaS) models can make in transitioning towards more energy and climate sustainable physical connectivity; for example, on-demand services and shared mobility connecting rural communities with transport hubs, particularly bus and rail stations, can boost the use of sustainable transport;
47. agrees with the Commission that digitalisation plays a key role in the development of rural areas, enabling them to use innovative solutions to improve their resilience and harness their potential; calls, therefore, for particular attention to be paid to promoting frameworks that allow public action to be supplemented by private financing for digital infrastructure. While the latter are not competitive enough from the point of view of private investment, they are nevertheless highly competitive from a social and regional perspective. Broadband is vital for rural areas to access different services and to resolve the issues arising from the digital gaps several communities face;
48. stresses that investment in digital infrastructure is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by sufficient digital training and up-skilling, especially in rural areas. This is also very important in the light of increasing global cybercrime and, in particular, in view of the need to ensure that local businesses that are part of the food chain are sufficiently cyber-secure;
49. notes that rural areas have been particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the fact that their economies are much less diversified, many workers in these areas are key workers and they have poor internet infrastructure; however, the effects of the pandemic in terms of increasing teleworking offers opportunities to counter rural depopulation and generate

¹ COM(2021) 811 – Communication from the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on "The new EU urban mobility framework".

innovative rural social and economic activities in the long term; therefore suggests considering, among other measures, promoting high-quality co-working spaces in rural communities, or creating tax incentives, to encourage private companies to allow employees to work in geographical locations of their choice;

50. considers that, in the spirit of President von der Leyen's thinking of "leaving no one behind", we need tools to ensure that there are "innovation ecosystems" in each territory that offer opportunities for all entrepreneurs and all rural micro-enterprises and SMEs, boosting these small rural businesses; there must also be a sufficient provision of training, including in digital skills and other soft skills relating to open innovation, interregional and international cooperation, and intercultural communication;
51. welcomes the increased support for bottom-up initiatives such as LEADER/CLLD – which defines the role of local action groups – and "smart villages", and encourages further use of the lessons learned from these programmes and approaches; draws attention, in this context, to the benefits of innovation-based regional development, focussed on local skills and engagement; competent bodies at regional and national level should be alert to innovative ideas from local stakeholders and support them where possible;
52. calls for the inclusion of the contribution made by cultural heritage and cultural, artistic and creative professionals to building a sustainable and prosperous future and to improve the touristic attractiveness of rural areas, that will also improve the economic well-being of these settlements;
53. considers the Communication's recognition of the role of sustainable agricultural and forestry management in terms of resilience to the climate emergency and its associated risks, and in protecting biodiversity, to be of great value;
54. highlights that the green and digital transitions should also ensure more resilient and fair societies that take into account the needs of all members of the rural community, including those of disadvantaged groups and of those living in less developed areas and in deep poverty. Emphasis should therefore be placed on making the digital and green transitions just and inclusive;
55. considers that agriculture should be able to keep playing a central role in rural areas; calls on the Commission to ensure that the strategic plans that each Member State will have to develop under the new common agricultural policy (CAP) are properly drawn up, with the aim of ensuring that the European primary sector heads in the direction indicated in the Green Deal, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy, and that they allow for local strategies based on the characteristics of each region and the promotion of typical local products;
56. stresses the need to promote self-sufficiency and food security processes based on local, quality and organic products, as part of innovative value chains that encourage regional organisation; notes the introduction of a 25% share of organic farming in the coming years; considers, in this regard, that there will be a need for support and accompanying measures, as well as consumer incentive policies in line with this objective;

57. stresses that generational agricultural renewal remains urgent and therefore support for the inclusion of young people and rural women in agriculture and farm ownership is important; therefore agrees with the Commission that special attention should be paid to the needs of young people, in order to encourage them to stay in rural areas. Considers it essential to boost public policies which promote the modernisation of farms that encourage young farmers to join the profession in order to tackle the problem of generational renewal. To this end, their access to social and labour market integration programmes as well as to education and upskilling and retraining options offered at local level and cultural activities, needs to be facilitated; also agrees on the importance of focusing specifically on women, by broadening labour and training opportunities and promoting measures to promote work-life balance;
58. highlights the fact that a significant number of skilled workforce had to face changes in working conditions and regulations since Brexit and the EU should consider support frameworks for these categories of migrant workers. Also, most importantly, the EU should consider launching programs that help and motivate the emigrated skilled workforce to return home, to their homeland.
59. considers fair prices and incomes for those working in agriculture to be essential. Any market development that is ruinous for businesses should therefore be counteracted. The EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) should counteract this in times of crisis with tools such as the general adaptation of production volumes to market needs and rules on qualified market access;
60. notes that a significant proportion of work in the EU's agricultural and food sector is carried out by migrant workers. This population group often lives in vulnerable conditions. The EU's social agenda therefore needs to be strengthened to achieve higher minimum wages, good working conditions and social integration;
61. underlines that the green transition will pose many challenges for many of Europe's farmers and breeders. In order to successfully harness the arising opportunities, a special effort is required in terms of communication, awareness-raising and training both to spread the word about new sustainable and green agriculture and to impart the new skills to put it into practice;
62. emphasises the importance of preventing land abandonment and facilitating access to land. This requires the development of an appropriate regulatory framework, the creation of new land management tools and the provision of necessary fiscal incentives and funding;
63. notes that the increasing prevalence of large predators and the associated increase in the killing of farm animals on mountain pastures are causing growing problems for mountain farming, and that in many cases mountain pasture farming is being abandoned, which in mountainous regions plays an important role in ensuring that entire regions do not become overrun with forests and thus makes a significant contribution to environmental protection and erosion control and to the priceless capital of landscape protection in rural areas; therefore calls on the European Commission to:
 - establish a common European wolf and large carnivores, especially bears management system;

- explore an amendment to the annexes to the Habitats Directive in order to adapt more rapidly to the development of particular populations and to relax or strengthen the protection status by country or territorial unit where justified by a positive or negative development of the populations of the protected species and the threat to pastoral activities;
 - broaden the scope for adapting European legislation and the necessary measures to local conditions so that populations of predators, in particular those of wolves and bears, can be better managed;
64. stresses the important role played by agricultural infrastructure in the organisation and cohesion of rural areas; calls on the Commission to include in its proposals measures to ensure that this infrastructure is preserved and that it remains largely as permeable (unpaved) roads;
65. calls for flood zones to be included with regard to flagship initiatives on resilient areas, given their huge contribution to increasing climate resilience developing low-carbon agriculture and supporting flood protection and flood management. Many rivers and flood zones cross borders (which poses a challenge) and are part of the wider issue of water. There is therefore a need for international cooperation;
66. stresses that a long-term vision for rural areas should strengthen the regions' role in identifying their priorities; is of the view, in this regard, that when drawing up the legislation on the CAP, its national strategic plans and the national recovery plans an opportunity was missed to ensure future investment projects in rural areas are genuinely anchored in the needs of each local area, as identified by its own stakeholders;
67. calls for existing regional smart specialisation strategies in each EU region, developed through a multi-stakeholder participation process, to be better taken into account in future when developing planning processes with an impact on rural areas;
68. calls for consideration to be given to sufficient technical support for capacity building for rural authorities, which are in a weaker position in terms of their planning competences – particularly with regard to long-term strategies – and the spending of EU funds; also calls for support, simpler conditions or specific initiatives to allow municipalities with smaller populations and fewer administrative staff to also take part in European projects;

69. highlights the importance of the social economy as an essential tool for the current and future development of the EU's rural areas, playing a strategic role in dealing with the demographic challenge and an ageing population – through the creation of companies that are more resilient and have strong ties with their communities, anchoring the population to the local area – and stimulating the creation of quality jobs, training for its workforce, female entrepreneurship, the integration of young people into the labour market and generational renewal.

Brussels, 26 January 2022

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

II. PROCEDURE

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| Title | Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas |
| Reference(s) | Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the 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 |
| Legal basis | Article 307(4) TFEU |
| Procedural basis | Own-initiative opinion |
| Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter | |
| Date of Bureau/President's decision | 12/07/2021 |
| Commission responsible | Commission for Natural Resources (NAT) |
| Rapporteur | Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla (ES/EPP) |
| Analysis | 23/07/2021 |
| Discussed in commission | 27/9/2021 |
| Date adopted by commission | 22/11/2021 |
| Result of the vote in commission (majority/unanimity) | Unanimously |
| Date adopted in plenary | 26 January 2022 |
| Previous Committee opinions | |
| Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation | |