



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas

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

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

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NAT/839

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

Conclusions

- 1.1 The EESC broadly welcomes the European Commission's long-term vision for rural areas. Proposals for an Action Plan, including a Rural Pact for engaging actors at EU, national, regional and local levels to support the vision, are also welcomed, as are those for the establishment of a Rural Observatory and a rural proofing mechanism.
- 1.2 However, it is unclear what the implications of the design and content of the Commission's new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and CAP strategic plans for each Member State will be for the long-term vision, and how the Commission should ensure consistency and added value between the CAP and other policies.
- 1.3 The EESC endorses the Action Plan's priorities of becoming "stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous". The EESC considers that prosperity, defined as a socially and environmentally sustainable way of living, must be the aim for all citizens, wherever they live. If the Action Plan is delivered, there will be real grounds for an optimistic, confident future for rural Europe.
- 1.4 The Commission commits to delivering through the Rural Pact and the Rural Action Plan; however, so much depends on having the buy-in of all Member States, regions and local communities. The EESC considers that the Council of Ministers, each Council presidency, the European Parliament, the Committee of Regions (CoR) and the EESC itself all have roles to play, as do civil society organisations and networks, in order to deliver on the vision. The key to delivering the vision is having a fully-funded Action Plan with clear targets and dates for transparent measurement.
- 1.5 The EESC further welcomes the strengthened rural proofing policy and the establishment of a transparent Observatory for monitoring progress¹. Sharing of information and dialogue with social and civil society partners is essential. The EESC is willing to provide support for this work, for example by contributing to the work of the ENRD's new Thematic Group on Rural Proofing.

Recommendations

- 1.6 The EESC believes that more ongoing engagement with and empowerment for local rural-urban participative organisations and civil society organisations is needed for the vision to be fully understood and inclusive. The European Rural Parliament and other existing networks, as well as the current Conference on the Future of Europe, should play an important role in providing local community views.
- 1.7 The EESC considers that the Commission's rural network and civil dialogue groups, led by various DGs, need to foster two-way, transparent reporting procedures. The EESC also believes that, while appreciating the commitments to rural proofing in the Horizon Research Programme,

¹ EESC Information report on the [Evaluation on the CAP's impact on territorial development of rural areas](#).

more Commission departments should demonstrate their holistic commitment to the vision. In particular, rural proofing should be extended to include Creative Europe and the Erasmus+ Programme.

- 1.8 The EESC believes that the Rural Pact requires the Commission to create a governance model that includes local governments as well as local businesses, both private and not-for-profit, working with local democratic and social partner structures to ensure that local voices are heard and that the long-term vision can be successfully implemented. The Pact should learn from the experience with the best practices of LEADER and CLLD, and each EU Council presidency should promote the Pact concept across the EU. The Commission and the Member States should be active facilitators and funders of pilot projects.
- 1.9 Common priorities should be designed using bottom-up and data-based methods. A reappraisal of the pandemic's effect on the Action Plan should be carried out, looking at the impact of increased demand for rural housing, new business space in villages, better public services, accommodating more travel into rural areas and greater demand for recreational, health-related, green and cultural tourism.
- 1.10 The development of a charter of rural/urban rights and responsibilities may further help citizens understand how their ambitions for well-being can be realised and inspire them to act, while the Pillar of Social Rights must be a guide for all actions.

2. Background

- 2.1 Some 136 million people live in the EU's rural areas, representing almost 30% of the EU's population, and for a long list of reasons, highlighted in previous EESC opinions², there has been a widening gap in economic and social well-being between urban and rural citizens. While rural areas play a crucial role in economic and social cohesion, including sustainable food production, they face the challenge of depopulation, especially of young people.
- 2.2 Historically, rural support has come from a number of different departments and financial instruments, at the EU, national, regional and local levels, in a somewhat fractured, disjointed and frustratingly bureaucratic way. Public intervention has only partially succeeded, particularly in remoter rural areas and islands, in keeping pace with declining economic activity, poor digital accessibility, the exodus of young people and the loss of key public services, rural craft skills, biodiversity and cultural heritage.
- 2.3 This is why the EESC believes in a much more integrated, but equitable, place-based approach to tackling these imbalances. As highlighted in the opinion NAT/820 *Towards a sustainable rural/urban development*¹, a holistic, cross-departmental and streamlined approach is needed that "leaves no one", and no territory, "behind." A partnership of all citizens based on mutual understanding and respect for both rural and urban assets is recommended.

² EESC own-initiative opinion, [Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development](#), OJ C 105, 4.3.2022, p. 49; EESC information report on the [Evaluation on the CAP's impact on territorial development of rural areas](#); EESC own initiative opinion on [An integrated approach for the EU's rural areas, with particular emphasis on vulnerable regions](#), OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 60

network (which will become the future CAP network) **and civil dialogue groups**, led by various DGs, need to foster two-way, transparent reporting procedures. The ENRD will contribute with two new thematic groups focusing on rural revitalisation and on rural proofing, particularly at national and regional level. The EESC is looking forward to hearing about the outcomes of their work in the months ahead.

- 3.6 The EESC also believes that **more Commission departments**, including those with responsibility for culture, research and innovation, education and training, mobility and transport, youth, employment, social affairs and inclusion, climate action, energy, the environment, and other relevant areas, should demonstrate their holistic commitment to the vision. However, decisions on the 2021-2027 funding period were taken before its publication. In this period, the responsibility for including rural needs in the relevant programmes lies, primarily, with national, regional and local governments. There is still a risk of confusion and a lack of understanding unless policy and funding, at all levels, are streamlined and coordinated. The European institutions must also ensure that the multiannual financial framework (MFF) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) are in line with the European Green Deal and its legislative instruments, and can finance the implementation of the rural vision.
- 3.7 Dates for the beginning of the Action Plan and some mid-term review dates are listed, but **completion dates** for individual programmes are not. Some slippages on dates are likely, while the new CAP, with its contribution to the vision, will not be ready until 2023. Some confusion is also possible unless a reference is made to global climate and other target dates.
- 3.8 To be inspirational, the vision needs to be underpinned, as recommended in NAT/820, by a **charter of rural/urban rights and responsibilities**, which is widely disseminated and explained, so that all citizens understand how their ambitions for well-being can be realised. The EESC believes that being inspired to act and make a difference depends on having a well-rounded understanding of the challenges and a sense of shared ownership and trust.
- 3.9 The Commission commits to **delivering through the Pact and the Action Plan**; however, so much depends on having the buy-in of all Member States, regions and local communities. The setting of targets for delivery at Commission level is one challenge, while setting targets and achieving delivery at state, regional and local level is much more difficult. The EESC considers that the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, the CoR and the EESC itself all have roles to play, as do civil society organisations and networks, in order to deliver on this vision. Otherwise, inconsistent delivery could lead to further imbalances, with some localities benefiting from the Action Plan and others missing out.
- 3.10 The EESC further believes that the Commission could also learn from, and share learning with, **non-EU states and regions**, as different areas of the world tackle similar rural/urban challenges and opportunities. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission presented the Rural Vision Communication to our Western Balkan and Turkish partners.

4. **Specific comments**

- 4.1 The EESC believes that the Rural Pact requires the Commission to create a governance model that includes local governments as well as local businesses, both private and not-for-profit, working with local democratic and social partner structures to ensure that local voices are heard and that the long-term vision could be successfully implemented. Greater use of hybrid interaction tools may increase participation, while the contribution of local communities will have to be clearly demonstrated. The Commission and the Member States should be active facilitators and funders of pilot projects.
- 4.2 The Pact should learn from the experiences with the best of **LEADER and CLLD**, and each **EU Council presidency** should promote the Pact concept during their presidencies.
- 4.3 The EESC believes that rural development should be an integral part of regional development policy. LEADER/CLLD should be an important component of territorial development. The EESC acknowledges that post-2020 cohesion policy introduces a new cross-cutting policy objective for integrated and sustainable territorial and local development with the aim of leaving no place and nobody behind. It also provides a flexible framework for Member States to support rural areas, addressing their specific challenges.
- 4.4 The key to delivering the vision is having a **fully-funded Action Plan with clear targets and dates for transparent measurement** for all EU institutions and Member States. The EESC is looking forward to seeing, by mid-2023, the result of the Commission's work, which will take stock of what actions are planned for rural areas – under the CAP and cohesion policy funds – for the 2021-2027 programming period. This should clearly identify any gaps to be addressed.
- 4.5 The EESC is also looking forward to seeing the Commission's public **report** by the first quarter of 2024, based on the implementation of the EU Rural Action Plan, which should contain reflections on possible re-orientation for enhanced support action and financing for rural areas, which would support preparations for the 2028-2034 period.
- 4.6 The EESC endorses the Action Plan's priorities of becoming "stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous" as well as the emphasis on specific action on each priority.
- 4.7 For the "stronger" priority, the Commission highlights community decision-making frameworks, with full gender and other socially inclusive opportunities for innovative responses. The coordinated voices of **rural young people** need to be heard and should be involved in decision-making at all levels of government. There should be specific opportunities under the Erasmus+ Programme to develop leadership skills and greater understanding between rural and urban young people. Specific attention should also be paid to **women**, by broadening the range of work and training available to them and promoting measures to ensure work-life balance.
- 4.8 The EESC believes that **business support** should target not just agricultural but also wider, sustainable rural activity, building on local added value, the circular economy and the potential for meeting global targets in renewable energy, health and cultural tourism. Emphasising the

role of fair food quality schemes (e.g. geographical indications, avoid unfair trading practices, promotion programmes for certified products) and financing alternative heating solutions are concrete examples. **Decent job creation, especially of quality employment**, is essential for the sustainable development of rural areas. Special measures may be required to improve the living and working conditions of seasonal workers. Further innovative measures, including tax incentives⁶, are also required to enable young people to return to rural areas.

- 4.9 Streamlined **financial support**, also including through adapted taxation, **in particular for SMEs**, from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, InvestEU and the European Investment Bank, among other sources, all of which should be rural proofed, should be readily available. The contribution of volunteer time to match the funding of social enterprises should be promoted.
- 4.10 For the "connected" priority, the EESC strongly recommends that the Commission's "**digital decade**" initiative be accelerated and made universal, so that all rural communities can innovate, develop business links, and tackle health, education and social deprivation.
- 4.11 **Sustainable transport systems** are necessary for an inclusive society and the need to shift from a carbon fuel-based system to a renewable one will create both problems and opportunities for remote rural areas. In this context, easily accessible and affordable public transport systems are the key drivers for addressing demographic change and halting depopulation.
- 4.12 For the "resilience" priority, the Commission recognises, in the European Green Deal, the immense contribution that sustainable agriculture, forestry and other land and water resources can make to tackling wider, global climate change, and proposes the provision of ecosystem services, preserving and restoring biodiversity, greener farming and the promotion of cultural landscapes as rural opportunities to build economic resilience and well-being. The "Soil Deal for Europe" will improve reporting across the Member States.
- 4.13 The EESC endorses this approach, but believes that resilience is also about **community cohesion, intergenerational relationships, training, education and the transfer of skills**. The EESC points out that the focus on **social resilience** should be more strongly emphasised, taking a broader approach.
- 4.14 The Pillar of Social Rights should be observed by seeking support for quality, rural employment, decent work and decent working conditions. The social partners need to be formally engaged in formulating economic and social policies through social dialogue at local and regional level. The European Green Deal should also be an inclusive *social* deal.
- 4.15 For the "prosperous" priority, the Commission recognises the need for rural areas to diversify and to be based on "sustainable local economic strategies". The EESC supports this call, while recognising that peri-urban and remote areas may have different expectations.

⁶ Examples of such tax incentives exist in several Member States (e.g. [The Castilla-La-Mancha region in Spain\(jccm.es\)](https://bit.ly/3Llp0hb), <https://bit.ly/3Llp0hb>)

- 4.16 The EESC recognises that the pandemic has accelerated different activities related to sustainable food production, employment, new jobs, remote and new forms of working, and the need for a new approach to ensure improved **quality of life in rural areas**, so that rural people can continue to work in decent conditions. With further digitalisation of working life, easily accessible co-working spaces could be promoted as a public service, if necessary, to utilise vacant village and local centres.
- 4.17 In remote and less-developed rural areas, a lower quality of life is attributed to a lack of easy access to public services and to poorer public services more generally. Comprehensive improved educational, health and social care provision for all ages is needed, as is more and better social housing. As the EESC has already stressed in its opinion SOC/628⁷ on *Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities*, safeguarding families' living standards, including the promotion of child educational services, would be one of the key measures to fight the depopulation of rural areas and small and medium-sized towns.
- 4.18 Common priorities should be designed using bottom-up and data-based methods. A **reappraisal of the pandemic's effect on the Action Plan** should be carried out, looking at the impact of increased demand for rural housing, new business spaces in villages, more public services, accommodating more travel into rural areas and greater demand for recreational, health-related, green and cultural tourism. The EESC considers that increased migration from cities to peri-urban and perhaps rural areas in general may create tensions between traditional rural economic activity and a tranquillity-based recreational expectation, requiring some mediation activities.
- 4.19 The Commission needs to fast-track and mainstream many of the valuable lessons learnt from its Horizon **research projects**. The Life Programme⁸, Robust⁹, Rubizmo¹⁰, Sherpa¹¹, Smart Villages¹², Farmwell¹³ and many others, have provided the guidance needed to help deliver the vision.
- 4.20 The EESC further considers that **prosperity**, defined as a socially and environmentally sustainable way of living, must be the aim for all citizens, wherever they live. Prosperity should not be thought of exclusively in economic terms, but must be complemented by community-based approaches focusing on social and environmental sustainability.
- 4.21 The EESC welcomes the **flagship initiatives** proposed in the Action Plan, as they prioritise the consultation responses. The EESC considers that the challenge is for the combined resources of the Commission, in partnership with the Member States and regions, to be aligned, seamlessly

⁷ EESC opinion on *Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities*, [OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, p. 1](#)

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/strategy/hydrogen/funding-guide/eu-programmes-funds/life-programme_en

⁹ <https://rural-urban.eu/>

¹⁰ <https://rubizmo.eu/>

¹¹ <https://rural-interfaces.eu/what-is-sherpa/>

¹² https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en

¹³ <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/>

and with sufficient funding, in order to create a positive impact for local communities of people and places. The proposed one-stop-shop concept for support, and the funding toolkit, when available, are to be welcomed; however, a clear timeline is required.

- 4.22 The **New European Bauhaus**, aimed at helping deliver the Green Deal, demonstrates the Commission's trend towards more inclusive and joined-up policy-making and delivery.
- 4.23 The EESC further welcomes the **strengthened rural proofing policy** and the establishment of a transparent **Observatory for monitoring progress**.
- 4.24 While the concept of rural proofing is not new (see the Cork 2.0 Declaration¹⁴), the EESC is yet to be persuaded that there is sufficient determination in the Commission as a whole, and in the Member States and regions, for it to make a lasting difference. The concept is flawed, since many budgets are allocated on a per capita basis, which works against sparsely populated communities. Experience has shown that creating policies based on urban needs and then seeking to make them suitable to addressing rural areas is a problem of suitability and timeliness, while establishing a swift, transparent accounting process and ensuring that all relevant departments agree to rural proof is challenging.
- 4.25 However, the EESC recognises the efforts of the Commission to deliver better rural proofing and hopes that a **holistic rural/urban design** of policies and allocation of resources can deliver for the vision. The EESC encourages the Commission to publish an **annual report** detailing which departments, which policies and which Member States and regions have delivered rural proofing and how. Good examples of rural proofing should be highlighted. The EESC supports integrating rural proofing into the **Better Regulation Agenda**, and also calls for the Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at the national, regional and local level.
- 4.26 The EESC welcomes the intention to establish an Observatory within the Commission to improve data collection and analysis, while supporting the overall implementation of the Action Plan, but recommends transparency, clear working dates, budgets and purposes, and **external scrutiny from civil society representatives** on its workings.

Brussels, 23 March 2022

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¹⁴ EESC own initiative opinion *From Cork 2.0 Declaration to concrete actions*, [OJ C 345, 13.10.2017, p. 37](#)