



GOVERNANCE MEETING



Highlights report

Third meeting of the Rural Pact Coordination Group

Introduction

The third meeting of the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG) discussed how the Rural Pact and the Vision can be moved forward across EU countries and regions. Participants exchanged on recent EU-level reports, including the [long-term vision: key achievements and ways forward](#), the [ninth cohesion policy report](#), and the [high-level group report on the Future of Cohesion Policy](#).

They took stock of the actions implemented by RPCG members, as well as of those by the European Commission and the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO) and prepared next steps, including actions of the RPCG members at all governance levels in 2024.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



16 April 2024



In person



65 participants (RPCG members and affiliates, DG AGRI and DG REGIO, RPSO national experts, RPSO core team)



https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/rural-pact-coordination-group-third-meeting_en

Welcome and introduction to the day

Radim Sršen, RPCG Chair and Mihail Dumitru, DG AGRI



The future of rural areas is a central subject in the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and in the preparation of the policies for the next programming period, in particular the Common Agriculture Policy and Cohesion Policy.



The ongoing processes of collecting ideas and proposals from stakeholders aims to valorise all participatory instruments, including the RPCG as a steering group contributing to discussions on the needs of rural areas.

The rural vision: looking back and looking forward

Public report on the LTVRA 'Key achievements and ways forward'

Mario Milouchev and Wallis Vandebrock-Goelen, DG AGRI & DG REGIO



The [report](#) on the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA) takes stock of the actions that have been carried out since the publication of the Commission Communication in June 2021. It provides an overview of new evidence and indicators, and latest data on rural areas (Eurostat and JRC), looks back at 30 months of implementation of the rural vision, and outlines possible ways forward for the EU Rural Action Plan and the Rural Pact.

The report further lists ideas on support for rural areas raised by other EU institutions and stakeholders. It raises lessons from the stocktaking of the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy contributions to rural areas in the 2021-2027 programming period. It is accompanied by two staff working documents, providing detailed information on the 30 actions of the EU Rural Action Plan and its updated version.

This **report will inform the reflection on the proposals for EU policies for the post-2027 programming period, including the MFF**. It contains **nine key questions for the next period**, which will be explored further in the coming months by the RPCG members and other RP Community stakeholders.

European Commission Communication on 9th Cohesion Report

Florent Guerin, DG REGIO



The 9th Cohesion report reveals that Cohesion Policy continues to narrow the gaps in EU Member States and regions by driving sustainable economic development, implementing the digital and green transitions on the ground and delivering in times of crises.

While highlighting significant achievements, the report points out that **some challenges remain**. These include sub-national disparities between large metropolitan areas and those regions that are lagging behind. It highlights the necessity for more tailored support to regional needs, faster implementation, simplification, and stronger linkage to reforms and performance while enhancing the territorial dimension.

Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy

Sari Rautio, Member of the High level group



Cohesion Policy is the prime investment policy of the EU. Cohesion is needed to tackle economic problems as well as addressing poverty and social exclusion in less developed and vulnerable regions.

The policy is a systemic and dynamic one, tapping into the EU's economic potential, especially in less developed and vulnerable areas, addressing the main structural challenges. According to the High-Level Group, it should **evolve towards a place-based and transformative policy, with future-oriented investments, sensitive to the unique strengths, challenges and needs of regions**, regional cooperation, rural areas and cities.

It should also be a **simplified, performance-based policy that builds synergies** with other EU and national initiatives to ensure that all policies deliver on their goals. The policy is vital in guaranteeing an effective future integration of new Member States, but it should not compromise investment in current EU regions.

Discussion

Participants highlighted the **need for a dedicated budget for investments in rural areas within Cohesion Policy and national budgets**. A holistic approach has to be encouraged through coordination and synergies between the different EU policies. There are challenges in accessing funding and, therefore, a call for **better integration of existing funding**, used in a more strategic way, such as a one-stop shop for rural development.

There is a frustration on the ground due to the fragmentation of different funding streams and the complexity to access them. In that perspective, the RP and the LTVRA would need to be programmed into the next funding period in a more strategic way.

Risk management could have a more prominent place in policy and **existing tools and capacity building** should be further developed to enhance good projects.

Taking stock of the RPCG priority actions

RPSO AWP and actions taken by the European Commission

Pascale Van Doren, Rural Pact Support Office and Antonia Gámez Moreno, DG AGRI

RURAL PACT Past RPSO activities and actions planned for 2024 focus on the key themes of the year, including 'Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States', 'Getting the Rural Pact down to the local level' and 'Encouraging and promoting commitments from governments to citizens'.



The primary activities by DG AGRI are outlined in the LTVRA report, demonstrating numerous initiatives supported within the Rural Action Plan. These include in particular improving and valorising rural data and the rural observatory, consolidating rural proofing, guiding stakeholders on how to use EU funds, etc.

Looking ahead involves:

- > strengthening the implementation of the RP at national and regional levels;
- > encouraging increased participation of local stakeholders in the Rural Pact;
- > sustaining collaboration with international organisations and the RPCG members; and
- > organising the RP conference expected in spring 2025, with a specific focus on post-2027 policies.



Templates to contact governments and candidate MEPs

Radim Sršen and Edina Ocsko, RPCG Chair and Vice-Chair



Responding to the significant challenge of informing stakeholders about the LTVRA and the Rural Pact, the RPCG has taken on the responsibility of reaching out to national governments and candidate MEPs, leveraging the political momentum of the upcoming elections in the aim of increasing their engagement with rural issues in the future.

The Commission and the RPCG Chair and Vice-Chair prepared dedicated letters and translated them into all EU languages. Such letters can also enhance grassroots involvement in raising awareness among policymakers at all levels.

Recent activities of RPCG member organisations that have a link with the Rural Pact:

- > **Study on ‘[Rural areas and the geography of discontent](#)’ (2024)**, Klaus Boele, Committee of the Regions (CoR), NAT secretariat
- > **Strategic dialogue on the future of EU agriculture: ELARD and Rural Youth Europe (RYE) involvement** – ELARD participates in a working group on the standard of living, and RYE – in the working group on food systems, Thibaut Guignard (ELARD) and Anja Fortuna (RYE)
- > **Project on start-ups in mountain areas:** invitation to northern EU MS and countries outside the EU to join the project proposal to be submitted to Interreg in June 2024, Laura Gascón Herrero, Euromontana
- > **Setting up a Rural Pact community group on rural tourism:** RPCG members are invited to help prepare the expression of interest, Klaus Ehrlich, RuralTour
- > **Ecolise action programme ‘[Communities for Future](#)’**, Mieke Elzenga, Ecolise

Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States: Building synergies between the RPCG and RPSO national experts

This interactive session provided an opportunity to exchange on how the Rural Pact is implemented at national and regional levels in individual Member States.

Introductory intervention

Dr. Karen Keaveney, University College Dublin



The Rural Pact is one of the six horizontal actions of the rural vision. Yet, **limited awareness, understanding and communication** persist at Member State and local levels as to what it actually means. These challenges impede its implementation, despite the good levels of engagement and presence of some of the ingredients in some countries.

The Pact has been relatively top-down since its establishment. More action is needed at Member State level, including support for local groups and networks and linkages to LEADER/CLLD to coordinate mechanisms for funding and cooperation.

Group discussions

There are **different levels of actor engagement** in the implementation of the Pact at Member State level. Recommendations to address this can be classified under:

Fostering political commitment

- > Inform and engage **high-level politicians to embrace and communicate on the rural vision and Pact, and to make a commitment** – the upcoming EU, regional and local elections provide a good opportunity for this;
- > The rural vision and Pact need to be **put on political agendas** - continuous efforts and political will are needed. High-level events (such as the upcoming meeting of the Visegrad group) could be a good opportunity;
- > Further **clarify the concept of the Pact through the letters** – organisations sending them could find ways to make the concept clearer, e.g. by including a chart; the letters could be reinforced by having them signed by both the chair and the local partner;
- > Send **additional letters** to 1. EU Commissioners to encourage improved coordination; 2. relevant ministries to set up a dedicated body in charge of coordinating Pact-related actions that are happening; 3. key social actors involved in agenda setting.

Cooperation with key actors

- > Use the **Commission as a high-level leverage** to lead by example and encourage the national level;
- > **Cooperate with established structures and networks** – such as Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their networks, or the CAP networks – to communicate and engage;
- > **Joint awareness-raising campaigns** (as in the Dutch example of involving all national actors who are already members the Pact) and meetings on specific topics (such as rural data);
- > Certain NGOs can write their **own recommendations** to push for changes in future EU policies – rural vision and Pact objectives to be integrated in those recommendations.

Practical actions

- > Link awareness raising with existing activities, for example by having a **Rural Pact stand** at big events or making presentations;
- > Create Rural Pacts, including dedicated **support offices at the national or regional level** to lobby for the rural idea and animate actions and stakeholders.

Getting the Rural Pact down to the local level

Another opportunity for exchange among participants, in national and geographical groups, focusing on what it might involve having a Rural Pact at the local level.

Introductory interventions

Isabel Carvalhais, European Parliament



Translating the Rural Pact ingredients at the local level requires **going there and listening** – many communities are implementing relevant initiatives, but these cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. However, two main factors hinder local action: 1. **lack of critical mass of people locally** makes it difficult to implement projects and initiatives; and 2. **no straightforward answer on how the local can influence the national level** – it depends on the political and administrative situation in each country.

Laura Gascón Herrero, Euromontana



Raising awareness about the Rural Pact at the local level needs to **use the energy and structures that already exist** – in depopulated areas not many people are actively engaged, but they are used to facing and solving a wide range of challenges. The RP needs to **valorise**

local good practices – they not only highlight good examples, but also point out what is not working in order to learn from mistakes and imperfect approaches.

Ben van Essen, ERCA



A strong **infrastructure already exists to reach the local level**: through LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs), Smart Villages, and rural movements – local people are involved and connected. These organisations can be partners in promoting the Rural Pact.

Why not **bring the Pact all the way down to the village level**? Villages can develop plans outlining their priorities, which would be taken up by public authorities who will put them into action.

Group discussions

Despite diverging situations across Member States in terms of **opportunities for establishing the Rural Pact at the local level**, some common recommendations emerged:

- > **LAGS could be a strong force** to support or lead local Pacts due to their capacity to mobilise stakeholders and funds, and coordinate the numerous initiatives; they can also disseminate information; and articulate the needs and desired actions.
- > The Pact should **add value to structures that already exist** and use them to engage local actors in national policymaking (e.g. Rural Parliaments and other mechanisms in place).
- > **Capacity building and peer learning** are needed for local actors to design and implement joint actions.
- > Local people need to **define necessary actions and commit to implementing them** – the rural vision should not remain ‘just another local strategy’, but follow the logic of the [Rural Pact commitments to act](#).
- > Different **sources of funding should be combined** to support local Rural Pacts, not only EU, but also national and regional. It is important that the rules of such calls for funding are not designed in a top-down way.
- > Local people should be able to define at which level they wish to articulate their priorities (village, municipal or supra-municipal) and **interpret the Rural Pact in their own words and through their own perspectives**.
- > The fact that the EU recognises the importance of its rural areas needs to be communicated to the local level to enable actors to articulate the Rural Pact and organise around it.

Planning future actions: Upcoming tasks and communication between RPCG members

Communication tools and processes between RPCG members

Julie de Galard, Rural Pact Support Office

RURAL PACT Tools prepared by the RPSO for RPCG exchanges include a shared calendar of events and an upcoming tool to follow up on RPCG actions.

The two working environment options for collaboration and communication within the RPCG are: a Microsoft Teams channel and the existing [RPCG Community Group](#) of the Rural Pact Community Platform. The Teams channel provides a space to share resources and keep members informed of events and activities; it can serve as a repository for meeting reports and presentations; and enable collaborative work and discussion.

The online RPCG Community Group allows discussions to be initiated on key topics, facilitates information sharing and supports joint actions within the wider Rural Pact community. However, this online space does not allow the upload and sharing of documents.

Most participants agreed that the Teams channel could be a good solution, but they would also like to find out more about the practical experience of facilitating and working in the online Community Groups.

Next steps & end of the meeting

Follow-up actions to the third RPCG meeting

Radim Sršen, RPCG Chair and Mihail Dumitru, DG AGRI

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- > The translated letters to governments and note to candidate MEPs promoting the Rural Pact and action for rural areas to be sent to RPCG members and national experts shortly.
- > When communicating with targeted recipients, **RPCG members and national experts will invite them to make political commitments to the Rural Pact.** This would give them recognition and visibility as it would be published on a dedicated webpage of the Rural Pact Community Platform.
- > The Chair and Co-Chair, together with DG AGRI and RPSO, will explore **possible options for communication tools** for RPCG members.
- > RPCG members are invited to share their **planned events** for further promotion by the RPSO (e.g. to be featured in the [upcoming events section](#) of the Rural Pact Community Platform), as well **other actions** they intend to implement in the coming weeks.
- > DG AGRI, together with the RPCG Chair and Vice-Chair, will reflect on how to continue the **collaboration that was initiated among the RPCG members and National Experts at the meeting**, beyond their involvement in the implementation of certain RPSO tasks.

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform

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