

Anton SCHRAG

European Commission, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy

Territorial cohesion is at the heart of EU policies. It supports strengthening rural and coastal communities to build resilient societies everywhere in the EU.

Three months ago the Commission proposed a [new multiannual budget](#). In it there is a chapter on preparedness and crisis management. It focusses on rapid anticipation, response and management of natural and human induced disasters. A strengthened [Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#) with strong funding shall help to protect people.

Financially, close to 11 billion EUR are for civil protection and health emergency preparedness. National partnership plans shall finance investments for preparedness, solidarity support after a disaster, flexible reserve of 5% of the total budget for rapid reaction. The EU level is geared towards reaction and resilience in times of crisis. To underline this new focus on the EU. I also recall the title of the newest Strategic Foresight Report of the Commission published a week ago, which is named "[Resilience 2.0](#)". Add to this the report by the OECD on rural resilience, mentioned yesterday ([Reinforcing Rural Resilience | OECD](#)).

But already in 2021 when the [long term vision for rural areas](#) was launched, one of its four pillars was named "resilience". When the vision was adopted, the most recent crisis was the Covid 19 pandemic.

Another challenge for rural resilience which the vision highlighted was related to climate change and natural disasters. The EU has created a number of instruments to enhance resilience in diverse domains. Let me pick some examples:

The [European Energy Communities Facility](#) was launched in March 2025 and is co-funded by the LIFE Programme and designed to empower and support local energy communities. It aims to assist at least 140 energy community projects in their early stages by providing lump sum grants to develop robust business plans. Beyond financial support, it offers specialized training and resources to shape innovative, long-lasting business models.

Since June 2022, 27 rural energy communities benefitted from technical assistance via the rural energy communities advisory hub (RECAH), integrated in the newly founded energy communities facility.

Another aspect is social resilience for rural and coastal communities. Indeed, The implementation of the [European care strategy](#) goes in this sense. The Commission also cast the spotlight on gender equality in dedicated EU CAP network [workshops](#) in the last years and published in 2025 a [study](#) on the working conditions of agricultural workers.

The [European Child Guarantee](#) aims to ensure that socially excluded rural children have access to essential services and opportunities. Besides, EU-funded research projects aim to enhance knowledge on [migrants' integration in rural areas](#), and measures are taken to ensure actual access to facilities to people with disabilities living in rural areas were put in place.

In 2021-2027, cohesion policy provides support to rural areas through its mission to reduce disparities between the levels of development of regions. ERDF support is concentrated on the less developed regions, which happen to be very often rural areas with small towns. This support is wide-ranging, spans across all policy objectives (POs) and the areas of action of the rural vision and goes well beyond interventions physically based in rural areas. Support is channelled through **integrated territorial development strategies** designed and implemented by respective territorial authorities, strengthening the economic and social fabric of rural areas.

Under the European Regional Development Fund, a specific investment objective for “integrated development in rural and coastal regions” is available, for which 18 Member States have programmed allocations. **“Resilient rural areas”** receive support not only under policy objective 4 but also under policy objective 2, for example by support in renewable energies and biodiversity conservation or social infrastructure. To name one example I look to Italy, where, the “national strategy for inner areas” identified pilot areas (mostly rural), defined bottom-up their local strategy and funded interventions linked to energy efficiency, social infrastructure, sustainable mobility and digitalisation.

And there is LEADER, the longest established tool under the CAP for rural development. The added value of LEADER goes beyond a granting mechanism – it is social capital building. The LEADER networks now count 120 000 private and public, social and economic actors and 27,000

members are directly involved in decision making. Its networking approach allows to build links, relations, trust among local actors in a territory. It has enabled projects in social inclusion, for youth, digital literacy, allowing access to services and having smart village strategies and projects.

30 years ago the first few hundred LEADER groups started and they were financed mainly by the rural development fund. Over the years the model reached more and more people. Now there are approximately 3000 Local Action Groups (LAGs), including 300 fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) and also the Community-Led Local Development initiatives financed by the European Regional Development Fund, and the European Social Fund+, all created bottom-up, place-based and working in partnership, and able to make use multi fund support. An example of multifunded CLLD will be presented during this session by my colleague Renata Kučerová from the Czech ministry of Labour and social affairs. Also colleagues from different Directorate Generals of the European Commission – DG AGRI, DG EMPL and DG MARE – are present in the room, so please do not hesitate to approach them if you have any question.

What the rural vision in 2021 could not foresee were man-made disasters, more concretely the Russian aggression in Ukraine, with its severe impact on the EU and in particular the eastern regions. This aggression highlights the pivotal role of rural areas for Europe's **resilience**. The EU has reacted to mitigate the effects of this additional crisis with modification of its programmes over the past three years, the [mid term review of cohesion policy](#) being only the last move.

Money is a means, but there must be people and organisations to make use of it. Local actors are needed. This is why we are here.

I look forward to hearing these local actors, how they are strengthening resilience at local level, so we do not need to make recourse to the disaster reactions mechanisms available under the EU budget after disaster strikes. Prevention and preparedness are better than cleaning up and limiting damage.