



RURAL PACT CONFERENCE



Highlights report

From vision to action: Empowering rural areas for the future

Introduction

The [Rural Pact Conference](#) brought together the Rural Pact community for two days of networking, exchange and joint reflection. The event focused on advancing the rural vision 2040, contributing to the update of the Rural Action Plan, and shaping the next steps for Rural Pact actions.

Through interactive sessions, participants reflected on lessons learned from the current Rural Action Plan, co-developed ideas to strengthen its next phase, and explored ways to build capacities for local and national action.

Additionally, the Conference showcased inspiring initiatives from across Europe, demonstrating how rural communities are tackling challenges and seizing new opportunities.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



16-17 September 2025



Pecq, Belgium



250 participants from 27 EU Member States and four non-EU countries, including representatives of EU institutions, public authorities, NGOs, Local Action Groups (LAGs), businesses and researchers



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



If you see this icon, click to watch the recording.

Annexes:

- > [Group discussion outcomes](#)
- > [Networking corner outcomes](#)



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Main highlights from the event

Participants identified and expressed during the conference the following main actions and messages as needed to improve the future of rural areas.

Shaping the post-2027 rural policy framework

- > **Secure a visible and guaranteed rural dimension in the post-2027 policy framework**, embedding rural objectives and vision in the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP), with relevant indicators and monitoring systems to track how spending matches real rural needs.
- > **Ring-fence funding for rural areas, LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages**, ensuring continuity of support for rural development and EU policies' contribution to achieving the ambitions of the long-term vision for rural areas by 2040.
- > **Simplify rules and procedures for small rural projects** by reducing the administrative burden for local actors and enhancing access to and management of EU funds.
- > **Strengthen data availability and evidence on rural territories** by enhancing rural statistics and strengthening the Rural Observatory to better inform policy design.
- > **Guarantee genuine multi-level partnership** by formalising the role of regional and local authorities, civil society, youth and community organisations in the design, implementation and monitoring of future rural policies.

Enabling vibrant and resilient rural territories

- > **Recognise that rural areas are part of the solution to Europe's competitiveness, sustainability and resilience challenges** by harnessing their potential for innovation, the green and digital transitions, the bioeconomy and social cohesion. Rural challenges and opportunities are broad and deserve support from all public administrations.
- > **Anchor the 'right to stay' within the long-term vision for rural areas** as an operational strategy to invest in services, infrastructure, housing, mobility, health, entrepreneurship and economic development in order to make rural areas viable for families and businesses.
- > **Empower rural communities, youth and civil society as co-creators of solutions** by providing small-scale funding, participatory governance tools and capacity building for locally led innovation.
- > **Strengthen the Rural Pact as a permanent mechanism for dialogue and coordination** by establishing national and regional Rural Pacts across Member States, which mirror the European one.



Day 1: High-level opening interventions



Mr Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, European Commission



Rural areas play a central role in the Europe's future. They are vital for food, energy, natural resources, cultural heritage, and Europe's overall resilience. At a time of geopolitical, demographic and economic challenges, supporting rural areas through action and partnership across all levels of governance, and ensuring coherence between policy areas is a high priority for the European Commission. This work will be guided by the Rural Action Plan to make rural areas stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous.

The '**right to stay**' concept – understood as the right of every European to live and work in their home region – is essential to sustain places where young families want to build their future, and where people of all generations can find quality jobs, access services and enjoy a good quality of life. Ensuring this right requires modern infrastructure, essential services and vibrant local economies, particularly to attract and retain younger generations.

To achieve this, the Commission is preparing a dedicated **strategy on the 'right to stay'**, with a focus on rural areas. Cohesion policy, complementing the CAP, contributes significantly to rural development and, following its mid-term review, provides already now greater flexibility to address urgent needs such as housing, water resilience, energy transition, competitiveness and defence.

Additionally, lessons from the [Talent Booster Mechanism](#), which has supported 89 regions and cities in tackling demographic decline, underline the need for policies that reflect diverse demographic realities, holistic strategies to retain talent, and stronger cooperation between regions, rather than competition.

These insights will guide reflections on a successor mechanism and inform the design of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), centred on simplification, flexibility and more effective use of funds. The Commission's multi-annual financial framework (MFF) proposal is ambitious and should be seen as offering opportunities to find positive solutions for Europe's rural areas.



Mr Christophe Hansen, Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, European Commission

Rural areas are essential to Europe's identity and resilience – providing food, energy, natural resources and cultural heritage – while also offering opportunities for business, innovation, and quality of life. They are at the heart of the bioeconomy and hold nearly 80% of Europe's untapped renewable energy potential, making them key to both sustainability and security. Thriving rural areas require viable agriculture and forestry, but also adequate services and infrastructure to attract and retain people, particularly the younger generation. Examples such as childcare, medical care and broadband connectivity illustrate the challenges faced by rural residents. Generational renewal in agriculture has been identified as a top priority, alongside improving living conditions, to make rural areas attractive places to build a future.



The CAP plays a central role, with Member States programming EUR 25 billion to support rural areas beyond farming under the 2023–2027 CAP Strategic Plans, including investments in services, rural businesses, start-ups and Community-led Local Development through LEADER.

The new proposals for MFF and National and regional partnership plans (NRPP) bring opportunities to integrate support for rural areas across CAP, cohesion and other EU funds. Rural needs must be addressed comprehensively, through synergies between policies and engagement of local stakeholders in planning and implementation.

The European Rural Pact has grown into a vibrant community of over 3 500 members, which has already inspired Member States and regions to take action for rural areas with dedicated strategies, governance structures and projects. The Pact is continuously encouraging stakeholders to actively share their perspectives and recommendations, ensuring rural voices are fully reflected in future EU policies. Rural Pact community members should take their full part in the policy dialogue on the MFF and NRPPs.

Living in Europe's rural areas today: A citizen perspective

Ms Lina Noreikaitė-Rimkienė, Member of the Rural Pact Community, Lithuania

Ms Lina Noreikaitė-Rimkienė shared her personal experience of returning to live in a small village in central Lithuania, where she runs a hospitality business rooted in local traditions and creativity. With support from a LEADER Local Action Group, she developed Panekelpių kaimas, an initiative centred on beetroot, which combines food, education, and community spirit.

She underlined how small-scale support like the one offered under LEADER can empower rural residents to turn ideas into reality, while excessive bureaucracy risks discouraging many potential entrepreneurs.

Ms Noreikaitė-Rimkienė outlined the daily challenges faced by rural families, from limited healthcare and education services to the lack of public transport, broadband, shops and cultural opportunities. These gaps make it difficult to retain young people and families.

Her message was clear: rural areas are not only asking for support, but also offering solutions – from food and business innovation to resilience against climate change and crises. She called on policymakers to ensure that rural areas become true places of opportunity, with basic services guaranteed and policies reflecting the diversity of rural residents. She concluded that “without strong rural areas, there will be no strong Europe.”



Setting the scene: Integrating EU policies at EU and Member State levels



Advancing with the Rural Vision and Rural Pact in Member States

Ms Sari Essayah, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland

Finland is strongly committed to rural development and the EU's long-term vision for rural areas. The relationship between vibrant rural communities and viable farming is symbiotic: agriculture cannot thrive without rural services and infrastructure, while rural vitality depends on farming which employs between 9% and 15% of the rural workforce, depending on the area.

Generational renewal in agriculture therefore requires a holistic rural development strategy that guarantees access to services, connectivity, housing and cultural life. Comprehensive rural development funding must remain a priority in the next programming cycle of EU policies.

The Finnish rural policy has been [coordinated](#) through a cross-ministerial Rural Policy Council since 1988, bringing 40 members from various Ministries, researcher institutions, civil society organisations



and the private sector. The national report on rural policies – to be published shortly – will specify the cross-administrative objectives for the future of rural areas, tackling housing, entrepreneurship, infrastructure or essential services among other topics. It defines the governments long-term vision for rural areas. Finland also implements a national rural parliament, an important space to connect with all rural actors in Finland.

The minister stated that rural proofing of EU and national policies needs to be mainstreamed and supported by robust, granular data and participatory approaches to ensure that rural realities are properly addressed in key policy areas. She stressed that rural areas must not be seen only as resource providers, but as places where people, communities and businesses can build sustainable futures, supported through rural proofing and place-based approaches as essential tools for inclusive policymaking.



Key challenges and opportunities ahead for the future of rural areas – Reinforcing Rural Resilience in OECD countries

Ms Dorothée Allain-Dupré, Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division, Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and cities, OECD ([PPT](#))

The EU's long-term vision for rural areas, the Rural Pact and the Rural Action Plan are internationally recognised as leading examples of rural policy. Nonetheless, myths about rural areas persist – and debunking them is essential to change the narrative and frame rural areas as places of opportunity. Examples of such myths include: 'rural areas are uniformly declining' – while many outperform national averages in income growth; and 'climate action is mainly urban' – while rural areas produce 63% of renewable energy across OECD countries and hold massive untapped potential.



Debunking the myths by revealing the realities demonstrates that rural areas should not be seen as a problem, but rather as part of the solution for competitiveness, resilience and the green transition. Six pathways can help unlock rural potential: leveraging rural comparative advantages; investing in digital connectivity; improving access to services; adopting place-based and rural-proofed policies; building the capacity of rural administrations to access funds; and engaging rural communities in policymaking. Preventing a widening 'geography of discontent' requires stronger focus on rural well-being and the OECD remains committed to supporting the EU in advancing the rural agenda.



Amplifying rural voices through the Rural Pact

Mr Radim Sršeň, Member of the Committee of the Regions and Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group ([PPT](#))

There is growing momentum around the Rural Pact as a collective force uniting public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens to strengthen Europe's rural voice. Rural areas are vibrant, innovative territories that require visibility, coordination and unity. It is important for the Rural Pact community to act with "one strong voice", building connections across all levels of governance.

The Rural Pact Coordination Group [Declaration](#), developed jointly with EU institutions and stakeholders, is a shared roadmap for future rural policies. It calls for a sustainable management of rural resources, recognition of rural diversity and tailored interventions, effective policy responses through instruments such as LEADER, CLLD and Smart Villages, and dedicated envelopes for rural areas in future EU funding frameworks.

Additionally, community-led and place-based approaches, local capacities, peer learning and innovation, and access to funding need to be supported and reinforced. All members of the Rural Pact are encouraged to act as ambassadors for rural areas and to work together. "Europe starts in its rural areas" he said.

Key priorities for the future of rural areas



Towards impactful and efficient action for rural areas for long-lasting results

Ms Iliana Ivanova, European Court of Auditors

All efforts and investments under the EU's long-term vision for rural areas need to lead to tangible results for rural residents. Strategies must reflect the diversity of rural needs and effectively address depopulation, access to services, and digital connectivity – areas where significant gaps remain. The Court's audits reveal that financing models based on pre-agreed objectives risk diverting investments from real needs, thus reducing impact and eroding trust. A rural development policy needs to be durable in order to achieve its objectives. Spending needs to be better targeted towards viable and durable projects that deliver results. Learning from past mistakes while seizing the new opportunities offered by the forthcoming MFF will ensure that EU policies truly deliver for all rural communities.

Panel debate: High-level representatives from EU institutions/organisations

The main messages emerging from the panel include:

1) How to best respond to rural needs and opportunities through EU policies in the next policy cycle

- > **Secure a visible rural dimension in the post-2027 framework:** embed rural objectives in the NRPP (with territorial chapters), and ring-fence funding for rural development, LEADER/CLLD, and Smart Villages to ensure support in the future, striking a better balance between flexibility and predictability.
- > **Apply mandatory rural proofing and territorial impact assessment across all EU policies and funds** (CAP, cohesion, Competitiveness Fund), with clear indicators and monitoring for spending to match real rural needs such as services, connectivity, diversification.
- > **Keep rules simple and consistent:** aim for one common set of rules where possible, make greater use of simplified cost options, and ensure performance systems do not disadvantage small rural projects.
- > **Guarantee partnership and subsidiarity:** formalise the role of rural regional/local authorities and organised civil society (youth, SMEs, women, social economy) in design, implementation and monitoring of the future national and regional plans – not just box-ticking consultation.

Panellists

- > **Ms Emma Toledano**, Director, DG REGIO, European Commission
- > **Mr Hans Peter Olsen**, Deputy Permanent Secretary of State, Ministry of Urban, Rural and Ecclesiastical Affairs of Denmark, representing the Council of the European Union
- > **Mr Radim Sršeň**, Member of the Committee of the Regions
- > **Ms Lidija Pavić-Rogošić**, Member, Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section of the European Economic and Social Committee)
- > **Ms Edina Ocsko**, Vice-Chair, Rural Pact Coordination Group

2) Advancing with integrated policies and the 'right to stay'

- > **Secure support for place-based, community-led tools:** earmark minimum funding for LEADER/CLLD, expand Smart Villages, and support local facilitators so communities have the capacity to access funds and implement integrated local strategies.
- > **Invest in key enabling conditions for rural life:** prioritise investments in essential services such as broadband, transport, healthcare, childcare and skills, as well as in economic development in programmes to make rural areas attractive and viable for families and businesses. This is essential to ensure generational renewal and the 'right to stay'.

- > **Strengthen the Rural Pact:** deepen engagement to support national and regional Rural Pacts and empower the Rural Pact Coordination Group to channel community recommendations directly into policymaking.
- > **Resource local capacity:** provide technical assistance and small grants to enhance the capacities of Local Action Groups (LAGs), municipalities and civil society organisations to generate ideas and projects, access funds and deliver tangible results.

Networking session: the Rural Pact community committing to act

A dedicated networking session offered an opportunity to engage in focused exchanges, build partnerships and plan joint actions on key topics relevant to the Rural Pact. The session was organised through a series of 'thematic corners', each led by a key organisation within the Rural Pact community.

- > **Bringing the Rural Pact to the local level through LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs)** – led by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)
- > **Implementing the rural vision in Member States and regions** – led by the Ministry of Agriculture of Hungary
- > **Village vibes: Smart Villages for a rural future** – led by the Smart Villages Network
- > **Rural Youth: Together for the present and the future of rural development** – led by Rural Youth Europe; European Rural Youth Observatory and Meridaunia LAG (Italy)
- > **Rural research and evidence-based policymaking for the long-term vision for rural areas** – led by University College Dublin (UCD, Ireland); Natural Resources Institute (LUKE, Finland); and the European Rural Development Network (ERDN)
- > **Bottom-up village plans: Communities building their own future** – led by the Rural Pact Netherlands
- > **Sustainable rural development in mountain areas** – led by Euromontana
- > **Environmental actions for community-led transition** – led by the European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE)
- > **Community-led innovation in action** – led by the PREPARE Network
- > **Rural tourism** – led by the European Federation of Rural Tourism (Ruraltour)

The session enabled participants to share experiences, identify synergies, and co-develop ideas for future cooperation and projects. Main results from the networking corners, including key ideas, proposed initiatives, and examples of ongoing actions collected through 64 'action cards' are available in the [Annex](#).



Day 2: High-level opening



Acting for rural areas under a new political landscape

Ms Elisabeth Werner, Director-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission

Europe cannot achieve its goals on competitiveness, sustainability, innovation and resilience without strong rural areas. Rural communities are not only asking for support, but also offering solutions – here, the updated EU Rural Action Plan, expected in early 2026, is a key step in advancing the long-term vision for rural areas, aligning with new political priorities and building on this conference results.

There is notable progress on the 30 actions of the current Plan, including: networking for LEADER, Smart Villages, energy communities and rural mobility; initiatives supporting the social economy and bioeconomy; the Rural Observatory for accessible data; and EUR 280 million allocated to rural research and innovation through Horizon Europe. But it is needed to continue the journey together to achieve the shared goals.

The Commission's proposed MFF seeks simplification and flexibility while ensuring continuity of key tools, such as LEADER as a central pillar for bottom-up development. A focus on resilience, the digital and green transitions, economic diversification, and access to services is the basis of the 'right to stay'.

The Commission will keep facilitating the Rural Pact, with increased resources in 2026-2027 and a focus on how the Pact can further strengthen governance at national and regional levels, and how its 12 thematic Community Groups can better support rural proofing and stakeholder engagement. The Rural Pact community needs to remain engaged in shaping future EU policies and National and Regional Partnership Plans for rural areas. Meanwhile, rural networks are encouraged to play an active role in promoting trust, digital literacy and democratic resilience to counter the risks of disinformation.



A closer look at Europe



Better rural statistics for evidence-based policymaking

Ms Teodora Brandmueller, Team Leader, Eurostat, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The progress made under the Rural Action Plan in advancing rural statistics allows to better capture the realities of rural life. Geographical precision adds value, as illustrated by the 2021 European Population and housing census that provides population data at a 1 km² grid level, offering unprecedented detail on where people live and how services are distributed. This enables policymakers to identify trends such as depopulation, ageing, mobility and migration patterns with far greater accuracy.

The European Statistical System has adopted a harmonised approach to define rural areas which was updated in the context of the Rural Action Plan, and which enables meaningful international comparisons. New indicators on access to services, such as healthcare, poverty and social exclusion, demonstrate diverse realities across Member States, from rural disadvantage in some to rural advantage in others. Statistics are not abstract, they are about real people and communities.

Future priorities include: tapping into new data sources such as geospatial and earth observation; ensuring consistent definitions; and expanding indicators to better reflect the diversity of rural life. Better statistics mean better-informed policies and stronger visibility for rural communities.

Group discussions: Actions and recommendations to strengthen the rural society, economy and way of living

This session boosted the exchange of experiences and lessons from the Rural Action Plan, while co-creating ideas with the Rural Pact community on advancing towards stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas through an updated Rural Action Plan and future EU policies.

This section outlines the inspirational examples shared across the eight group discussions, as well as the main recommendations captured by keynote listeners which emerged from the exchanges.

Group discussion keynote listeners

- > Mr Spyros Papadatos, Rural Youth Europe, Greece
- > Ms Karen Keaveney, University College Dublin, Ireland
- > Ms Jone Fernandez, Hazi Foundation, Spain
- > Ms Simone Sterly, Institute for Rural Development Research, Germany

All results from the group discussions are further detailed in the [Annex](#) to this Highlights report.

Group 1: Rural society in the digital era



Shaping rural futures with '3C Networks' – Connectivity, Cloud, and Computing

Mr Franco Accordino, DG CNECT, European Commission ([PPT](#))

Competitiveness and innovation must also be rural, not just urban. Local demand and EU technological supply need to be better aligned to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty. Innovation can emerge in small communities, rich in talent and data, provided they have reliable connectivity and access to trustworthy European-made technologies.

Rural areas can be laboratories for digital use cases such as smart agriculture and telemedicine, and the EU must ensure that connectivity, cloud and computing infrastructures reach them to drive both inclusion and competitiveness.



5G for water supply management and emergency response and recovery for Ilirska Bistrica smart municipality

Mr Goran Živec, Vahta, (Slovenia) ([PPT](#))

This project demonstrates how advanced connectivity can address concrete local needs such as water management and emergency response in remote areas. Using fixed and mobile 5G networks, portable base stations, and drones, the project enables real-time detection of leaks, optimised energy use, and faster rescue operations.

The 5% of EU population living in the most remote areas – equivalent to 25% of EU territory – risk being left without 5G coverage due to limited operator obligations and fragmented national frequency policies. Policymakers need to act urgently to reserve a harmonised spectrum for local rural networks to unlock Europe's full smart rural potential.



ELLINOGERMANIKI AGOGI

Rural schools boosting digital skills: 'Rural Wings' Academy

Mr Nikos Zygouritsas, Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece) ([PPT](#))

The 'Rural Wings' Academy is a network of rural schools across Europe, which help to bridge the digital skills gap between rural and urban areas. It is the predecessor of the project 'Learning from the Extremes', through which 123 schools in ten countries received digital tools, training and opportunities for collaboration, turning schools into community learning hubs that foster innovation, inclusion and intergenerational exchange.

Improving rural education is not only about infrastructure, but also about empowering teachers, addressing shortages, and enabling communities to create digital content. Strengthening schools as innovation centres is key to making rural areas attractive and future oriented.

Koknese – local communities embracing new technologies

Ms Ieva Ūtēna, Koknese community member (Latvia) ([PPT](#))

The Koknese community embraces digital technologies to preserve cultural heritage and engage young people. Through initiatives such as storytelling apps, virtual and augmented reality reconstructions, and youth summer schools, Koknese connects generations while revitalising its identity as a Smart Rural community.

Digital tools have been used to recreate lost landscapes, animate local history and strengthen local pride, while encouraging young people to explore engineering, robotics and digital design. Cooperation among civil society organisations, citizens, municipalities and entrepreneurs – and investment in young talent – can turn even small rural projects into powerful engines of innovation and belonging.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Reserve part of the 5G spectrum for local rural use, ensuring that rural areas can deploy their own networks and fully benefit from digital innovation such as precision farming and smart services.
- > Recognise connectivity as a 'service of general interest', addressing the persistent 'last mile' challenge and guaranteeing equal access to high-quality digital infrastructure across all territories.
- > Designate 5G networks as essential public infrastructure for rural areas, particularly for 'last-mile' connectivity, to enable fair and open access to next-generation digital services.
- > Launch an EU pilot initiative testing a voucher scheme for rural municipalities, aimed at receiving support to strengthening local digital skills and accelerating the deployment of digital tools for public service delivery.

Group 2: Rural areas as key players in the energy transition



Supporting energy communities in rural areas

Mr Achille Hannoset, DG ENER, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The EU framework to empower energy communities – from renewable and citizen energy community definitions, to concrete rights under the 'Fit-for-55' package – enables farmers, citizens, SMEs and municipalities to pool investments, generate and supply energy (solar, wind, district heating), and re-invest benefits locally.

The forthcoming [Citizens' Energy Package](#) will include measures on financing, capacity building and enabling frameworks. Hands-on support includes the new [Citizen Energy Advisory Hub](#) (technical assistance to be launched in the winter of 2025); and the [Energy Communities Facility](#) (lump-sum grants up to EUR 45 000 for business plans).

Additionally, links between the [Energy Poverty Advisory Hub](#) and the [Covenant of Mayors](#) aim to ensure the participation of vulnerable households in relevant EU initiatives.



Energy poverty and potential for rural areas

Ms Clara Hormigos, Joint Research Centre, European Commission ([PPT](#))

[Rural Observatory](#) data shows that energy poverty is often more pronounced in rural areas: rural households spend a higher share of their income on energy (7% EU-wide; over 12% in some Member States). A composite index reveals that in countries where energy poverty is high overall, rural territories are typically most affected, notably in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.

Structural factors contributing to higher energy needs in rural areas include older, less-insulated, and larger detached homes, as well as colder climates. However, high-resolution modelling shows that rural areas already generate over 70% of the EU's renewable energy and hold about 80% of its untapped potential, even under conservative assumptions. Rooftop solar power is especially promising in these areas, as greater roof space and higher home ownership could allow many communities to meet their own electricity needs.



Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans in rural areas

Ms Alison De Luise, Covenant of Mayors ([PPT](#))

Around 11 000 local authorities use Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) to cut emissions, adapt to climate risks and tackle energy poverty, while joint SECAPs enable smaller rural municipalities to pool capacity (267 groupings, more than 1 000 authorities).

Two inspiring rural energy actions include Campi Salentina (Italy), EUR 1.5 million in European Investment Bank (EIB) support helped unlock EUR 60 million for building retrofits, upgrading 22 000 streetlights, and creating energy performance contracts across 23 municipalities. The project also set up community 'energy info points' to help residents tackle energy poverty.

In Chalki (Greece), a citizen energy community was formed using solar photovoltaic and funding from national sources and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The initiative cut electricity bills by nearly 55% for 250 residents, showing how local renewable projects can deliver direct benefits to vulnerable households.



Development of rural energy efficiency roadmaps

Ms Valerija Vrček Habazin, North-West Croatia Regional Energy and Climate Agency (REGEA) (Croatia) and Ms Kristina Eisfeld, Climate Alliance (Germany) ([PPT](#))

The [RENOVERTY](#) project creates Energy Efficiency Roadmaps for rural areas – tailored, building-level guides that connect technical audits with social factors to plan deep renovations and attract investment. Developed in collaboration with over 70 stakeholders, the roadmaps recommend co-financing mechanisms, rural-specific subsidy schemes, and energy communities to help finance upgrades. At a broader level, RENOVERTY identifies financial, geographical, and regulatory barriers to renovation and addresses them through a four-pillar approach — combining technical, financial, community, and policy solutions to make large-scale rural renovation achievable.

In Croatia, for example, pilot projects in Žumberak and Samobor found that many uninsulated homes built in the 1960s face serious challenges, such as illegal construction status, which prevents owners from accessing subsidies. Croatia's LAG Sava has already launched the country's first renewable energy community, including participation from energy-poor citizens.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Empower local action on climate and energy by raising awareness of climate risks, providing guidance and mobile one-stop-shops, and building local capacities and networks.
- > Remove regulatory and fiscal barriers by simplifying procedures, reforming unfavourable tax systems, and creating an EU-wide framework that enables community energy markets and fair grid access.
- > Ensure fair and inclusive policies through systematic rural proofing of all energy-related measures and social proofing of rural development policies.
- > Foster knowledge exchange and partnerships by promoting peer learning, engaging a wider range of rural actors (e.g. craftspeople and SMEs), and supporting local Rural Pact events that connect communities with regional and EU initiatives.

Group 3: Making rural areas attractive places for young generations



European
Commission

Rural youth in the European Union: findings and future

Mr Charampoulos Papaioannou, DG EAC, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The EU framework for rural youth includes the [EU Youth Strategy](#) (2019–2027) and [Youth Goal 6](#) ('Moving rural youth forward'), operationalised mainly through Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, with an inclusion and diversity lens.

A Council Conclusion from 2024 calls for easier access (less bureaucracy), stronger research/participation via the EU–Council of Europe (CoE) [Youth Partnership](#), and higher visibility of

rural youth across programmes. A forthcoming EU–CoE study of 14 countries identifies policy gaps, project-by-project fragmentation, and the need for quality jobs. While at the same time, the study reveals a strong intention among youth to stay or return provided rural conditions improve. The study findings (to be launched in October 2025) will inform the forthcoming EU Youth Strategy (2028–2034).



The European Youth Village Programme

Mr Victor Cătălin, Active Development Association (Romania) ([PPT](#))

In a context of weak infrastructure, school closures, and few safe youth spaces, the [European Youth Village programme](#) transforms villages into youth ecosystems. Piloted by four Romanian NGOs, the initiative gives local youth a public mandate, mentoring, and tools to co-create action plans with mayors through an annual competition for the European Youth Village title.

Since 2018, 22 Romanian villages gave youth this public mandate; youth-led groups have mobilised resources (through European Solidarity Corps funding, for instance), opened youth centres, improved transport, and normalised dialogue with authorities. The model – now expanding to Slovakia – reframes rural youth from ‘beneficiaries’ to co-creators, using summits, a rural youth charter, an alumni network, and a ‘National Day of Rural Youth’ to boost visibility, funding access, and policy influence.



Changemaker #Nature: Supporting youth-led projects that protect rural nature conservation and boost innovation

Mr Ronald Würflinger, Blühendes Österreich (Austria) ([PPT](#))

The Blühendes Österreich is a biodiversity and nature conservation foundation that set up a youth-led micro-grant scheme where boards of under-27-year-olds decide funding, bridging climate and biodiversity groups with farmers, industry, and local leaders. With around EUR 600 000 (incl. EU NextGeneration funds), they backed around 50 rural projects that restored about 100 hectares of natural habitats and rural land, seeded new associations, and powered campaigns (e.g., supporting the Nature Restoration Law).

The initiative demonstrates that seed money, expert mentoring, and media support can unlock big local impact. The takeaway: trust youth with decisions and small, flexible pots – especially young female leaders – to generate lasting rural biodiversity action and democratic engagement.



Rural volunteer programme: engaging young people in voluntary civic services that support rural development

Ms Marélie Arrighi and Mr Baptiste Dubreil, In Site organisation (France) ([PPT](#))

The organisation called ‘In Site’ places 18–25-year-olds (in pairs) in small villages for six months to work on culture/heritage, social cohesion, and environmental projects, with civic-service allowance and locally arranged housing. Since 2020, more than 430 volunteers have supported 500 projects across 250 villages. Their involvement has had lasting impact – 17% of volunteers chose to settle in rural areas afterwards, and 29 new jobs were created. The results show that hands-on rural experience can strengthen both local capacity and long-term commitment to rural life.

Beyond youth placements, In Site runs the ‘Communauté des artisans de territoire’ and a rural national coalition to share tools, counter polarisation, and scale-up bottom-up rural innovation. The organisation is currently exploring European spin-offs of its volunteering model.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Create permanent spaces and mechanisms for rural youth participation at local, national, and European levels, ensuring their voices influence decision-making.
- > Develop a dedicated European Strategy for rural youth, with coordinated action from EU to local level to address their specific needs and opportunities.
- > Invest in cross-sectoral and long-term funding programmes that make rural areas attractive for young people to stay, work, and build their futures.

Group 4: Empowering local communities to enhance resilience



EU territorial approaches for rural and coastal communities to build resilient societies

Mr Anton Schrag, DG REGIO, European Commission ([Speaking note](#))

Cohesion policy strengthens rural and coastal resilience through integrated, place-based investments. Under the proposed post-2027 EU budget, a new Preparedness and Crisis Management chapter (EUR 11 billion) will reinforce civil protection, rapid response, and health preparedness.

Cohesion policy continues to target less-developed, often rural, regions through European regional development (ERDF) and social funding (ESF+), supporting renewable energy, biodiversity, social infrastructure, and local services. Combining financial tools (e.g. energy communities facility, rural energy hubs) with social resilience initiatives (care, education, gender equality, child guarantee) is essential for local actors and CLLD partnerships to transform EU funding into real preparedness and community strength.



MINISTERSTVO PRÁCE
A SOCIÁLNÍCH VĚCÍ

Implementing multi-funded CLLD in Czechia to foster rural resilience

Ms Renata Kučerová, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Czechia) ([PPT](#))

In Czechia, multi-funded CLLD (under ERDF and ESF+) has become a driver of rural resilience and social inclusion by empowering Local Action Groups to design tailor-made solutions for small and remote municipalities. LAGs now act as knowledge-based partners for ministries, providing data and expertise that shape national and regional policy.

This integrated, multi-sector approach boosts both efficiency and impact, but simpler procedures and enhanced EU capacity building for managing authorities remain crucial. Looking ahead, Czech authorities call for territorial and community-led approaches to be firmly embedded in post-2027 EU legislation as key instruments for sustainable rural development.



Fostering informed decisions about climate change

Mr Dariusz Piechowiak, Barycz Valley LAG/FLAG (Poland) ([PPT](#))

Across eight municipalities in Poland's Barycz valley, local actors prepared a joint climate adaptation plan, showing how small rural communities can act collectively on climate resilience. Initially met with scepticism, the process succeeded thanks to local education, workshops, and awareness campaigns explaining the importance of biodiversity, water retention, and renewable energy.

The plan's adoption by all municipal councils led to practical actions – rain gardens, wetland restoration, and greener public spaces – demonstrating how cooperation and information sharing can transform climate hesitancy into collective action.



Community mobilisation for collaborative projects

Mr Carlo Ricci, LAG Maiella Verde (Italy) ([PPT](#))

An innovative 'project community' model in central Italy has demonstrated how rural resilience can grow through collective ownership and cooperation. Local stakeholders – farmers, mayors, artisans, and NGOs – co-design small projects under a LAG-managed framework, which removes bureaucracy while encouraging initiative.

Starting with the revival of a forgotten red pepper variety in Alino, the approach now covers 27 communities working on agri-food, tourism, and local regeneration. By linking micro-initiatives under a common strategy, the model proves that bottom-up collaboration and shared vision can deliver tangible economic and social renewal.



Combining CLLD and ITI to enhance rural resilience

Ms Sandra Rosario, Associação In Loco (Portugal) ([PPT](#))

In Portugal's Algarve region, the combination of CLLD and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) has helped communities become more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. The local development

association In Loco empowers citizens to combat unemployment, exclusion, and depopulation through entrepreneurship support, training, and participatory planning.

Managing CLLD and actively engage in the ITI enables a better coordination between rural, coastal, and urban territories, unlocking new synergies and funding streams. This integrated governance ensures that development strategies are built by local people, for local people, reinforcing community preparedness and cohesion.



Communities getting ready for crises in a bottom-up way

Ms Sofia Skörde, Leader Västra Småland (Sweden) and Ms Åsa Westström, Leader Linné Småland (Sweden) ([PPT](#))

In rural Sweden, LEADER networks are transforming local cooperation into crisis preparedness. By uniting municipalities, emergency services, and volunteers, Local Action Groups develop preparedness plans and local response training tailored to each community.

Grounded in trust and long-standing partnerships, this bottom-up model has created a grassroots safety net capable of responding to environmental, social, or geopolitical shocks – demonstrating how community-led organisation can turn cooperation into resilience.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Strengthen local capacities through on-the-ground 'one-stop-shop' support for local authorities, communities and volunteers, building on the core principles of LEADER, CLLD and the New European Bauhaus.
- > Equip rural actors with practical skills by training them to use existing EU toolkits, applying community self-assessment methods, and fostering peer learning through networking, experience exchange and 'Rural Erasmus' initiatives.
- > Promote a positive and evidence-based rural narrative by sharing both good and bad practices, ensuring rural voices are heard in national and EU policymaking.
- > Secure dedicated, ring-fenced funding for functional rural areas and border regions, with systematic bottom-up, multi-annual planning and accessible small-scale and scale-up financing instruments.

Group 5: Boosting innovative and competitive rural economies and businesses



Enabling rural businesses to thrive

Mr Crispin Waymouth, DG GROW, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The EU's SME support engines – [Enterprise Europe Network](#), [Euroclusters/ECCP](#), and [Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs](#) – offer rural firms hands-on help to innovate, find partners, go cross-border, raise finance, digitise and decarbonise, with new services on risk and resilience. Delivered locally by support entities such as chambers and cluster organisations, these tools consistently lift SME revenues and jobs, giving rural entrepreneurs pathways to scale in the single market rather than hitting a growth ceiling at home.



Industrial and craft geographical indications fostering business development in rural areas

Ms Audrey Aubard, Fédération Française des Indications Géographiques Industrielles et Artisanales (France) ([PPT](#))

A new EU Geographical Indications (GIs) regime for craft and industrial products (in force as from December 2025) will protect origin-based know-how, fight counterfeits, and boost 'made-in-Europe' value – from porcelain to stonework – especially in rural areas. Beyond consumer trust, the GI label can unlock public procurement, attract relocalised production, sustain training in disappearing trades, and tie craftsmanship to tourism and circular economy benefits for place-based development.



Rural Tourism EuroCluster supporting small-scale enterprises



Mr Maurizio Malè, Venetian Cluster (Italy) and Ms Frosso Dimitrakopoulou, Ecoclub (Greece) ([PPT](#))

The [Rural Tourism EuroCluster](#) shows how micro-enterprises can level up through small grants and expert coaching: 188 rural businesses in multiple countries implemented digital upgrades, greener operations, accessibility measures, and local networking, often for the first time. A shared methodology, vetted consultants, and a public repository of cases turned EUR 5 000 of micro-tickets into tangible improvements (new itineraries, e-shops, apps, collaborations), proving clusters can translate EU funding into feasible, business-led change.



Academy of social entrepreneurship for the rural areas

Mr Márton Balogh, Civitas Foundation for Civil Society Cluj (Romania) ([PPT](#))

An Academy of Social Entrepreneurship in Romania demonstrates a full-stack model – training, mentoring, business-plan competitions, and start-up grants of EUR 61 000 – to seed 35 social enterprises and 136 jobs across less developed rural regions. By pairing capital with long-term coaching and reporting support, the programme builds services where markets are thin, integrates vulnerable groups, and anchors local value chains, offering a replicable pathway for social economy growth in lagging areas.



Rural innovation ecosystems to foster business innovation

Mr Simone Sasso, Joint Research Centre, European Commission ([PPT](#))

Emerging rural innovation ecosystems – mapped through the Startup Village Forum – reveal that while only around 6% of EU start-ups are rural, these areas show comparative advantages in a wide range of sectors beyond agri-food, including robotics and semiconductors, where space and resources matter. New JRC metrics and studies (on venture capital, crowdfunding, sector relatedness) aim to inform place-based policy and investment, while an open call invites municipalities to join a pan-EU learning network to turn rural potential into start-up traction and scale.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Strengthen data and evidence on rural businesses – including crafts, creative industries, and the social economy – to design more effective and tailored support systems.
- > Boost networking and collaboration through thematic platforms, mentoring schemes, and cross-border exchanges of good practices among rural entrepreneurs.
- > Adopt a holistic approach to craft and industrial geographical indications (GIs) within rural development, mapping local potential, and raising awareness of new legislative opportunities.

Group 6: Ensuring the 'right to stay' in rural areas: addressing demographic challenges through place-based approaches and access to services



Cohesion policy as a powerful engine to ensure the 'right to stay'

Ms Diletta Zonta, DG REGIO, European Commission ([PPT](#))

Framed by the EU's 'right to stay' ambition and the [Talent Booster Mechanism](#), the approach links demographic evidence (negative natural change, shrinking working-age cohorts, rising old-age dependency) to place-based action. Eighty-nine regions and cities (46 of which already in a 'talent trap') receive targeted assistance to build integrated, bottom-up strategies that improve quality of life and access to essential services alongside jobs.

Lessons include embedding granular data and skills-mapping in policy, aligning education with labour demand, strengthening multi-level governance, and using interregional cooperation to retain, attract and circulate talent – with a future focus on essential services as a core pillar of territorial attractiveness.



Functional rural areas to deliver essential and other enabling services in 30 minutes

Mr Cristian Garcia, Ministry of ecological transition and demographic challenge (Spain) ([PPT](#))

Centred on Spain's vision of a '30-minute country', functional rural areas are mapped to guarantee access to health, education and other enabling services within 30 minutes, irrespective of administrative borders. The tool supports policy monitoring, exposes functionality gaps, and drives coordination across national, regional and municipal tiers, reframing depopulation as a territorial cohesion and equity challenge while guiding investments to where they close the service gap the fastest.



Turning village shops into multiservice hubs

Ms Antonia Husberg, Ministry Agriculture and Forestry (Finland) and Ms Nina Nilson, Rautio village (Finland) ([PPT](#))

Built around Finland's village-shop grant (typically EUR 10 000-15 000), rural grocery stores are turned into multi-service hubs – a critical lifeline in sparsely populated areas where travel times are long and populations older.

One cooperative-run shop in Rautio was revived by 90 volunteers, now owned by 207 members, employing six people, and generating EUR 1.5 million turnover while offering postal and pharmacy services, fuel, café/community meals, home delivery, rentals and youth jobs. Small, reliable grants help cover basic equipment and upkeep, keeping community-run hubs strong and sustainable.



Attracting health professionals to rural areas in Alentejo, Portugal

Mr Tiago Teotónio, Managing Authority of the Alentejo 2030 Regional Programme (Portugal) ([PPT](#))

Rooted in Portugal's Alentejo 2030 programme, a combined talent and health strategy turns analysis into action. The Alentejo Talent Observatory tracks population trends, job needs and training gaps to better match skills, services and investment. Health has been made a regional priority, supported under EU cohesion funds that finance a new central hospital and a medical school campus.

At the same time, local 'innovation villages' and ageing-in-place projects are being tested, showing how coordinated investment and skills development can attract professionals, strengthen key services and help people remain in their communities.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Transform the long-term vision for rural areas into a concrete 'right to stay' strategy centred on quality jobs, essential services and sustainability – building on existing initiatives rather than reinventing the wheel.
- > Create enabling conditions for innovation and collaboration through experimental spaces and sandboxes where rural actors can test new ideas and partnerships.
- > Develop inclusive and functional spaces – such as youth hubs, multi-service centres and community renovation schemes – to simplify access to funding and improve the liveability of rural areas.
- > Strengthen health and care provision via e-health solutions and better access for rural health professionals to research, innovation and training infrastructure.



Group 7: Building inclusive rural communities



European Social Fund for social inclusion in rural areas

Mr Aurélien Mornon Afonso, DG EMPL, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) remains the EU's main instrument to invest in people, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and tackling poverty, exclusion, and inequality, including in rural areas. With EUR 95 billion of EU budget (2021–2027) and national co-financing bringing it over EUR 140 billion, ESF+ dedicates at least 25% in each Member State to social inclusion and supports local employment, training, and access to services.

Around 1.4 million rural residents have already benefitted, with strong results in countries where CLLD and ITI integrate ESF+ actions. New mechanisms such as Social Innovation+ scale up promising initiatives – such as rural women's empowerment projects – showing how social policy can drive cohesion, equality, and vitality in rural Europe.



New trails: Social orientation and integration of newcomers in rural areas

Ms Irene Almazán, Fundación Cepaim (Spain) ([PPT](#))

In Spain, a long-running NGO initiative 'New Trails' (*es. 'Nuevos Senderos'*) helps migrants and refugees relocate voluntarily from cities to rural areas through a structured process of orientation, training on rural life and employability, job-and-housing matching, and local integration. Operating across 16 provinces in eight regions, the programme has supported over 1 000 family units of 70 nationalities in more than 350 municipalities (mostly under 5 000 inhabitants).

The programme has built bridges between shrinking villages and newcomers, with every participant receiving relocation support, and follow-up mediation. By involving municipalities from the start and coupling jobs with housing offers, it enables informed, sustainable decisions – turning migration into a mutually beneficial revitalisation tool for depopulated regions.



Social farming as a community-driven tool for social inclusion and rural sustainability

Mr Brian Smyth, Social Faring Ireland (Ireland) ([PPT](#))

Ireland's 'Social Farming' network demonstrates how ordinary family farms can become inclusive community hubs, offering therapeutic, skills-based placements for people with disabilities, mental-health challenges, long-term unemployment, and other forms of exclusion.

Over 200 farms now provide eco-based, person-centred placements co-funded by the Department of Agriculture, ESF+, and Peace+. Each participant sets personal goals supported by trained farmers under strong safeguarding standards. Outcomes include improved well-being, confidence, social ties, and pathways to employment, while diversifying farm income and strengthening social capital and rural sustainability through community participation and care.



Women-led innovation for rural transformation: insights from the GRASS CEILING project

Ms Blanca Casares, AEIDL (Belgium) ([PPT](#))

Women-led innovation is reshaping rural futures through projects like GRASS CEILING, a Horizon Europe initiative fostering socio-ecological innovation driven by women across nine living labs and 72 rural innovators. Using participatory research, it highlights how rural women innovate in agriculture, culture, childcare, creative industries and regenerative practices, yet face persistent barriers – unequal land access, weak networks, and limited finance.

The project roadmap urges gender-responsive CAP guidance, mentoring schemes, and integration of gender indicators in the EU Rural Observatory. By mainstreaming gender in rural policy and supporting local women entrepreneurs, these initiatives help build inclusive, resilient and future-ready rural communities.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Develop place-based and community-led strategies to integrate newcomers and vulnerable groups, ensuring local ownership and tailored solutions.
- > Promote sustainable, community-based care and mental-health initiatives for all vulnerable rural citizens, tackling stigma through awareness campaigns and inclusive local services.
- > Empower rural women through accessible opportunities for participation, skills and entrepreneurship, while mainstreaming gender equality in all rural policies.

Group 8: Driving local prosperity through bioeconomy



The bioeconomy as a driver for local prosperity and competitiveness in rural areas

Ms Silvoja Aile, DG ENV, European Commission ([PPT](#))

The European Commission's upcoming revised Bioeconomy Strategy places sustainability, competitiveness, and regional value creation at its core. It responds to growing global momentum – over 60 countries already have bioeconomy strategies – and aims to ensure Europe remains a leader in bio-based innovation, not a follower.

Stakeholder consultations highlighted barriers such as complex regulation, financing gaps, uneven market conditions, and biomass constraints. The new approach seeks to scale up innovation, create lead markets for sustainable bio-based products (e.g. textiles, chemicals, construction materials), and strengthen regional cooperation to deliver a circular, nature-positive bioeconomy that creates local jobs and industrial resilience, while ensuring secure and sustainable biomass supply.



Regional bioeconomy strategy in Grand-Est region, France

Ms Marie Clotteau, Grand Est-Europe (France) ([PPT](#))

In France's Grand Est region, the bioeconomy has become a pillar of territorial development, grounded in strong agricultural, forestry and industrial assets. With over 200 supported projects and seven territorial biorefineries, the regional strategy 'Ambition Bioéconomie 2040' promotes four priorities: food security; soil, air and water health; bioproducts; and energy sovereignty.

Implementation is driven by sectoral supply-chain contracts (*fr.* 'contrats filières') that unite local authorities, universities, research centres and industries around hemp, flax, plant-based chemistry and sustainable fuels, turning regional biomass into innovation. A strong focus on awareness and citizen engagement, through a 'Month of the Bioeconomy' and public campaigns, ensures the concept becomes visible and accessible beyond experts.



The green future for bio-districts in the Netherlands

Mr Michael Wilde, Organic Embassy (the Netherlands) ([PPT](#))

In the Netherlands, organic districts ('bio-districts') illustrate how the organic movement and EU Green Deal goals translate into local, participatory transformation. The Farm to Fork target of 25% organic farmland by 2030 has triggered a national plan promoting organic regions where local governments, farmers, retailers, schools and consumers collaborate to shorten value chains and guarantee fair prices.

Organic districts combine environmental benefits (healthy soils, biodiversity, lower emissions) with social and economic gains (better farmer well-being, local trust, rural-urban reconnection). Measured through eight pillars – including governance support, community engagement, education, and hospitality linkages – these districts represent a community-backed model of food production, showing that sustainable farming can anchor inclusive, resilient rural economies.



Flemish food strategy 'Go4Food', Belgium

Ms Katrien Dejongh, Flemish Land Agency (Belgium) ([PPT](#))

In Flanders (Belgium), the [Go4Food strategy](#) connects food systems and rural policy through a place-based approach. Coordinated by the Flemish Land Agency, it supports municipalities in crafting local food strategies that foster short supply chains, healthy diets, and rural-urban linkages. The strategy's

toolkit includes an accelerator for local food policies, food coordinators connecting producers and institutions, and guides on circular food systems and 'food landscapes' at the rural-urban interface.

By integrating food with land use, climate adaptation, public procurement and educational programmes and school partnerships, Flanders is embedding food policy into spatial and social planning – empowering local governments to retain value locally, strengthen collaboration across the value chain, and secure land for sustainable food production.

Keynote listener recommendations for the Rural Action Plan and Pact

- > Promote education, capacity building and awareness raising among consumers, policymakers and stakeholders on organic agriculture, food quality and the bioeconomy. Emphasise how labelling schemes and local currencies can enhance understanding of product origins, territorial identity and added value.
- > Strengthen legal, regulatory and administrative frameworks by mainstreaming biodiversity considerations and ensuring that public procurement applies organic and sustainable quality criteria. Give priority to products with verified regional origin to foster sustainability, transparency and territorial equity.
- > Reinforce the connections between territories, food systems and communities by improving farmers' positions in value chains, ensuring that rural populations capture a fair share of the bioeconomy's benefits, and preserving Europe's diversity of food cultures and local products.

Key recommendations for the future

Stakeholder panel: Key messages, conclusions and recommendations for future action and policies; ideas to update the Rural Action Plan and advance with the Rural Pact

The main messages emerging from the panel discussion include:

- > **Make the right to stay a right to shape your own future.** Rural communities have the power and talent to design their own future: they ask for enabling policies, recognition, facilitation, tailored approaches, and a focus of rural policy on the well-being of those who live and work in rural areas, in their diversity, beyond agriculture and beyond tourism.
- > **Create national and regional Rural Pacts** that mirror the EU Rural Pact – translating the long-term vision for rural areas into place-based strategies owned by multiple ministries (not only agriculture) and engaging local and regional authorities, communities, and civil society in coordinated action.
- > **Institutionalise multi-level and cross-sector cooperation** between municipalities, regions, and national authorities to deliver services, mobility, and resilience – moving beyond silos and fostering inter-municipal partnerships supported by enabling regulatory frameworks and accessible funding streams.
- > **Guarantee long-term, multi-annual, and earmarked support for rural development and LEADER/CLLD, not just within the CAP** – recognising that small, locally managed grants often generate the most sustainable impact, hence simplify procedures and requirements for small, rural grants. Capacity building is very important (of local authorities, managing authorities and beneficiaries) to share a common understanding on participatory tools and help designing good support instruments and good projects.
- > **Embed rural proofing systematically at both EU and national levels** to identify and correct regulatory and fiscal biases that disadvantage rural areas. Ensure that all new policies, especially

Panellists

- > **Mr Kevin Grauwels**, Flemish Land Agency, Belgium)
- > **Ms Hilkkä Vihinen**, LUKE Institute, Finland
- > **Mr Ben van Essen**, European Rural Parliament and ERCA
- > **Ms Anita Sejicka**, Latvian Rural Forum, Latvia
- > **Ms Charlene Lambert**, Women Entrepreneurship Platform

on energy, transport, health, and digitalisation, reflect rural realities and enable local benefit from the green and digital transitions.

- > **Empower rural communities and youth as co-creators of solutions**, through participatory governance, local self-assessment tools, and stable small-scale funding. This includes dedicated European and national strategies for rural youth, integrating youth voices into decision-making and ensuring tailored funding and capacity-building opportunities.
- > **Invest in people and inclusion by expanding rural incubators**, one-stop-shops, and local hubs for entrepreneurship, training and care services – particularly supporting women and vulnerable groups – so that rural areas become attractive places to live, work, and stay or return.

Closing remarks



Mr Hugo Sobral, Deputy Director-General, DG REGIO, European Commission

The Rural Pact is not just a framework, but a living movement driven by a passionate and forward-looking community. Europe's resilience depends on the strength of its rural territories which are essential for food security, economic vitality, and climate action. Investing in essential services, connectivity, and local capacities and strengthening multi-level governance through partnership and dialogue are key.

As the EU enters into discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, rural actors need to make their voices heard at national and regional levels and to fully use cohesion policy tools and funding. The Rural Pact is a relevant framework enabling a sustained partnership between European institutions and rural actors, and DG AGRI and REGIO will continue collaborating to support it.



Mr Mihail Dumitru, Deputy Director-General, DG AGRI, European Commission

The European Commission remains strongly committed to rural areas as vital contributors to Europe's food security, competitiveness, and democratic stability. Rural stakeholders are encouraged to contribute ideas to the forthcoming Rural Action Plan, to ensure effective use of existing EU funds, and to engage actively in shaping the next CAP and MFF. Three forthcoming Commission priorities include: a new EU Strategy on Generational Renewal; reflection on the future of livestock systems; and scaling up the bioeconomy as a driver of local prosperity.

The Rural Pact community has become a powerful and united voice advocating for rural interests beyond agriculture, while recognising farming's continuing central role. Unity and collaboration are essential – “not to meet halfway, but to do the journey together,” Mihail Dumitru said – to make rural areas places where people want to live, work and thrive.



Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform
https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en



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