Group discussions: Results from the harvest sheets

2nd Rural Pact Conference (16-17 September 2025)

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Contents

1. Introduction

This document summarises the results collected from the group discussions that took place at the Rural Pact Conference. It provides an overview of the main points from the harvest sheets used to collect the main points emerging from the discussions, in particular with regards to

> > the concrete actions/policies are needed in the Rural Action Plan to advance on the topic

> > recommendations for the Rural Pact.

2. Results from the group discussions

This section provides a description of the prioritised challenges and opportunities to be addressed in each of the subtopics of the group discussions, and proposes solutions identified by participants.

2.1. Group 1: Rural society in the digital era

How to overcome the last miles in digital infrastructure?

Rural areas continue to face significant barriers in accessing next-generation connectivity, excluding them from developing economically and socially, and increasing disparities in access to essential services. The high costs of deploying digital infrastructure in sparsely populated areas act as a major disincentive. In addition, regulations and permitting procedures are largely urban-oriented, making them ill-suited for rural contexts and slowing down deployment. Furthermore, the 5G spectrum is bought by operators, who mainly invest in densely populated areas. While they are obliged to cover up to 95% of the population, the remaining 5%— in low population density areas, therefore rural— represents as much as a quarter of the EU's territory where it will not be possible to implement 5G applications. The window to prevent this outcome is 2 years, after which all available spectrum will have been sold.

Proposed actions

- Adapt regulation and permitting to rural contexts, simplifying procedures to accelerate deployment.
- Introduce last-mile grants to offset the high costs of rolling out infrastructure in sparsely populated areas.
- Reserve 100 MHz of spectrum (in the 3.8-4.2GHz band) for rural use ensuring that rural economies and societies can benefit from 5G-based applications and innovation (ensuring that the attribution of all available frequences by BEREC and national regulators are used in rural areas).
- Treat telecom infrastructure as essential utilities, granting the same rights of access and permitting rules as electricity, water and waste networks.
- Make secure and reliable high-speed digital connectivity – including 5G - a Service of General Economic Interest, with concession models (as applied in France) to ensure 100% territorial coverage also in rural areas.

How to boost the transfer and adoption on new technologies in rural areas?

Rural areas face structural barriers to adopting new technologies. Many educated young people leave rural regions, meaning the potential to use technology often remains untapped. There is also a lack of knowledge ecosystems that can identify the specific needs and capacities of rural end-users, making it difficult to design effective and realistic support measures. Finally, the trust deficit in digital solutions—often provided by private actors—creates uncertainty among rural citizens and businesses about which technologies to adopt and rely on.

Proposed actions

> Ensure the future National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) allocate dedicated funding for place-based policies supporting technology transfer and adoption. The LEADER/CLLD approach could be mobilised here, given its participatory approach involving public authorities, businesses, civil society, and citizens.

> Collect EU-wide evidence on the digital needs and capacities of rural municipalities, businesses, and citizens to inform future policies and investments at all levels, as currently such evidence is lacking.

> Develop incentive programmes for young graduates and students to live, work, invest, or start their careers (e.g. through internships programme) across a wide range of rural economic sectors (in farming and beyond such in care, tourism, bioeconomy, etc). Universities should be encouraged to highlight rural opportunities—potentially through a dedicated "Rural Erasmus" initiative – to attract young professionals to rural areas. This should be complemented by targeted infrastructure investments (e.g., co-working spaces, research labs, innovation hubs) to create a complete ecosystem enabling technology transfer and place-based adoption in rural areas.

> Simplify and adapt regulatory frameworks to boost the adoption of new technologies in rural areas, ensuring they are better suited to rural contexts - for example by reducing licensing and administrative barriers that currently prevent farmers and rural businesses from using drones or other digital tools.

How to improve the provision of public services through digital technology?

Rural municipalities face difficulties in digitalising public services. Digital infrastructure, connectivity, and tools are costly and often unaffordable for local authorities with limited budgets. At the same time, digital skills remain low in many rural administrations, while access to EU funds is restricted or too complex, making it harder for local actors to invest in innovative solutions. However, there is clear potential in collaboration between municipalities and higher-level administrations, which could enhance efficiency and capacity in the provision of digital services.

Proposed actions

> Introduce tax incentives and regulatory simplification adapted to rural areas.

> Public administrations at all levels (national, regional, and local) often operate separate digital systems and platforms to engage with citizens. Establishing common systems and technical standards is essential to simplify access and ensure user-friendly services. This is particularly

important in rural areas, where the population tends to be older and may face greater challenges in using digital tools.

- o the systematic application of rural proofing to digital regulation.

> Provide training programmes to strengthen digital skills among local administrations and to support the effective deployment of infrastructure and tools.

> Establish an EU-level "Digital Public Service Development Voucher" scheme for rural public authorities (or partnerships), following a similar moder as for the WIFI4EU programme. This should be a bottom-up mechanism, starting from local needs and then aligning with regional and national priorities.

How to develop inclusive digital transformation strategies and policies in rural areas?

Despite progress, rural territories still face persistent digital divides. Connectivity remains incomplete, with rural areas still lacking fibre or reliable high-quality coverage - universal access should be guaranteed. There is also unequal access to smart solutions, where affordability and availability create barriers. Finally, certain groups lack the skills or equipment to participate fully in digital life, highlighting the need for targeted incentives, training, and knowledge transfer.

Proposed actions

> Mandate universal territorial coverage through EU regulation, ensuring even the "last miles" are included.

> Introduce alternative financing models to de-risk investment in rural digital infrastructure and services.

> Launch an EU-level pilot voucher programme for digital capacity building, providing small-scale support to bring knowledge and expertise into rural areas. This could be implemented through LEADER/CLLD or Smart Villages initiatives.

> Digital transformation to be a component of Smart Village strategies and Local Development Strategies, ensuring it is mainstreamed into rural policy planning.

How to enhance digital skills in vulnerable groups?

Rural areas face unique challenges in building digital skills among vulnerable groups. Persistent disparities in digital infrastructure limit access to training opportunities, while an ageing population often lacks both motivation and safe spaces to learn new skills. Dedicated content and tailored learning environments are rarely available. The closure of rural schools further reduces opportunities for learning, removing key community hubs that could otherwise foster intergenerational exchanges and serve as centres for digital upskilling.

Proposed actions

> Support rural schools as digital skills centres, building on initiatives such as "Learning from the Extremes". This should include not only equipment, but also training programmes and collaboration with businesses to ensure practical learning opportunities. Support schools to become Learning Hubs that serve both as a resource for lifelong learning development and as a vehicle for the delivery of a wide range of services. School resources such as facilities,

technology equipment, and well-trained staff can provide a range of educational and retraining opportunities for the community.

> Expand mobile learning centres in rural areas, bringing training directly to communities with limited infrastructure.

> Support bottom-up initiatives that address real local problems.

> Erasmus+ should have a more focus on specific rural issues, including digital skills.

> Develop an EU-wide repository of IT courses tailored to rural populations and their needs, coupled with financial incentives to encourage the creation and uptake of content adapted to different groups (e.g. older people, low-skilled workers, young people).

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

How to boost energy communities including renewable energies in rural areas?

Rural areas hold great potential for renewable energy but face significant barriers in scaling solutions. Limited financial resources, fragmented governance structures, and regulatory hurdles slow down progress. Renewable energy projects often require high investments and involve a high financial risk for committed local stakeholders. These obstacles make it difficult for the local population to participate. In addition, low trust among stakeholders and misinformation often hinder investment and the creation of resilient energy communities. As a result, many local initiatives (e.g. cooperatives) and rural communities struggle to access funding, scale up projects, and fully benefit from the green transition.

Proposed actions

> Establish accessible financing schemes and targeted EU/national grants to support renewable energy cooperatives and small-scale rural projects.

> Provide technical training, advisory services, and capacity-building programmes for local authorities, businesses, and citizens to build competences in forming, operating and promoting benefits of renewable energy communities.

> Simplify regulations and harmonise rules governing approval procedures and the integration of energy communities into the electricity grid and energy markets and promote their effective EU-wide implementation to encourage faster adoption of renewable solutions in rural contexts.

> Foster community engagement and reduce local resistance to renewable energy projects through awareness campaigns, participatory decision-making, and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms.

> Special support for projects with a high level of participation by the local population, which ensures that the benefits of these projects accrue to the region.

> Strengthen cooperation among municipalities, businesses, and civil society to build resilient and inclusive rural energy communities.

> Support digital tools and data platforms to connect rural actors with investors, advisors, and knowledge networks and to facilitate the exchange of best practices of successful energy communities.

How to ensure that vulnerable rural stakeholders have access to essential energy services?

Many rural households continue to face obstacles in securing reliable and affordable energy. High energy costs weigh heavily on vulnerable groups, while outdated infrastructure limits reliability and efficiency. At the same time, local communities often lack access to technical advice and training, reducing their ability to adopt sustainable solutions. Weak institutional capacity and complex administrative procedures further hinder the delivery of inclusive services. Together, these barriers prevent rural areas from fully benefiting from the green and digital transitions.

Proposed actions

> Expand financial support mechanisms, including subsidies and targeted funding, to guarantee affordability of energy for vulnerable groups, and ensure that all relevant laws, programmes and strategies undergo social proofing. This is essential to verify that measures are inclusive, accessible and do not unintentionally exclude or disadvantage vulnerable rural households.

> In the case of households experiencing energy poverty, it is particularly important to provide upfront grants, since these households cannot afford to pre-finance renovation works and wait for reimbursement.

> Upgrade rural energy infrastructure with modern, efficient, and sustainable systems to ensure reliability and resilience (with particular emphasis on supporting autonomous RES systems and battery storage solutions).

> Provide technical assistance, training, and advisory services for local communities to improve energy literacy and capacity (with particular emphasis in rural areas on mobile one-stop-shops that could be organised by Local Action Groups).

> Simplify access to support schemes and strengthen local governance structures to reduce administrative barriers.

> Encourage partnerships between municipalities, businesses, and civil society to deliver inclusive solutions.

> Promote digital platforms and innovative technologies to bridge energy gaps and improve service delivery in remote areas.

How to boost Sustainable Energy & Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) in rural areas?

Rural areas face specific barriers in designing and implementing Sustainable Energy & Climate Action Plans (SECAPs). Limited technical capacity, financial constraints, weak governance structures, fragmented cooperation among stakeholders, and low awareness all make it difficult to launch and sustain effective plans. Without targeted support, rural municipalities risk falling behind in contributing to EU climate and energy goals.

Proposed actions

> Strengthen local governance by providing training, guidance, and institutional support for rural municipalities.

> Develop innovative financing mechanisms and incentives to attract investment in renewable energy and efficiency projects.

> Promote cooperation between public authorities, civil society, research institutions, and businesses to share expertise and resources.

> Support capacity building for local actors through workshops, knowledge exchange platforms, and technical assistance.

> Launch awareness campaigns highlighting the social, economic, and environmental benefits of SECAPs.

> Encourage community participation to ensure inclusivity and ownership in energy transition initiatives.

> Align rural actions with EU and national climate-energy frameworks.

2.3. Group 3: Making rural areas attractive places for young generations

What makes rural areas attractive for young people to live and work?

Despite progress, many rural areas struggle to retain and attract young people. A persistent social gap between rural and urban youth, restrictive regulations (e.g. on mobility), the absence of a distinct 'rural youth' perspective in policy, and their limited participation in decision-making processes, constrain opportunities for young people outside cities. At the same time, resistance to innovation and risk-taking discourages entrepreneurship, while practical barriers such as unaffordable housing, weak services, and poor mobility make rural life less appealing.

Proposed actions:

> Support public authorities to co-develop "youth attraction pacts" at municipal, inter-municipal, or regional level. These should integrate housing, mobility, jobs, culture, and essential services into a coherent strategy for youth-friendly territories. These strategies can be implemented through approaches such as one-stop shops for youth or mobile services in specific areas (e.g. employment services).

> Promote return pathways through combined housing, work, and family support packages, offering targeted guidance and incentives for young people who wish to come back to their communities.

> Introduce tailored measures for rural youth (e.g. women, NEETs, returnees, different age groups) across EU funding programmes such as CAP, ESF+, Erasmus+, and Horizon Europe, as well as in youth strategies.

> Strengthen bottom-up, community-driven initiatives (e.g. European Youth Village model, rural volunteering schemes) that empower young people as active co-creators of rural futures.

How can we support youth employment and business renewal in rural areas?

Rural areas face major obstacles in creating sustainable opportunities for young people. Limited access to land, finance, and markets, combined with excessive bureaucracy, make it difficult for young entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses. A mismatch between education and rural labour market needs, together with a shortage of affordable housing, further reduces the attractiveness of rural employment. Many jobs available to young people are seasonal or precarious, offering few long-term career prospects.

Proposed actions:

> Expand youth start-up funds under LEADER/CLLD, EAFRD, and ESF+ to reduce financial barriers for young entrepreneurs.

> Support tiers-lieux, incubators, fablabs, and co-working hubs in rural areas as drivers of youth-led innovation and enterprise.

> Strengthen apprenticeships, vocational training, and mentoring schemes tailored to the needs of rural SMEs, farms, and social enterprises.

> Promote public–private partnerships and cooperative models to enable business creation and renewal.

> Facilitate remote and digital work opportunities, building on improved digital infrastructure.

> Provide micro-grants and small-scale funding instruments to support first-time entrepreneurs and young innovators.

> Encourage networking, peer learning, and EU-level exchanges, including a potential "Rural Erasmus" for entrepreneurs.

> Facilitate transmission of businesses by connecting young people to exissting businesses.

> Develop place-based projects linked to local resources, including circular and bioeconomy and cooperatives to decentralise economic activity and job-creation.

How can we support rural youth to take part in decisions and lead change?

Young people in rural areas often face barriers to meaningful participation. Their involvement in local decision-making is limited and sometimes tokenistic, with little influence on outcomes. Youth organisations receive weak recognition and limited resources, restricting their ability to represent peers effectively. Moreover, a lack of follow-through after consultations discourages sustained engagement, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Proposed actions:

> Develop an EU strategy for rural youth, mirrored by local strategies, to provide continuity, visibility, and institutional recognition for youth engagement.

> Establish youth hubs and platforms—both physical and digital—for information-sharing, networking, and joint advocacy across territories.

> Provide dedicated funding and capacity-building to youth organisations and structures, enabling them to represent their peers effectively and sustainably.

> Strengthen peer-to-peer learning and exchanges between youth organisations and stakeholders, building on and expanding the existing Rural Pact Community Group on youth.

How can we support vibrant rural communities for youth through culture, creativity and innovation?

Rural areas hold strong potential to attract and retain young people through culture and creativity, yet key barriers persist. There is a shortage of accessible physical spaces for cultural and creative use, support structures are often limited or underfunded, and institutional backing remains weak. As a result,

youth-led initiatives—despite their energy and innovation—often struggle to gain visibility and recognition.

Proposed actions:

> Enable access to space and infrastructure by encouraging municipalities to repurpose underused or vacant buildings for cultural, creative, and social innovation purposes, with simplified administrative procedures.

> Promote multifunctional community hubs that combine cultural, social, and co-working uses, serving as anchors of vibrant youth life.

> Strengthen support structures and visibility by ensuring Local Action Groups (LAGs) integrate culture and creativity into their strategies, and by creating a dedicated rural strand within Creative Europe.

> Improve knowledge, skills, and collaboration by establishing a European portal for best practices, providing digital tools for networking, and offering training for municipalities and youth organisations.

2.4. Group 4: Empowering local communities to enhance resilience

How to design appropriate tools (including LEADER/CLLD) to empower local communities?

Participatory approaches such as LEADER/CLLD have proven effective in mobilising local communities, yet significant barriers remain. Delivery mechanisms are often complex and burdensome, discouraging uptake, while knowledge about existing tools is limited across all levels—from managing authorities and auditors to beneficiaries. As a result, many rural areas struggle to use the instruments which in principle should already be available to them.

Proposed actions:

> Build capacity across the system—from managing authorities and auditors to beneficiaries—ensuring that training goes beyond sharing experiences and best practices and has a theoretical/conceptual foundation (LEADER, CLLD, New Bauhaus) - "back to theory".

> Promote one-stop-shop approaches to simplify delivery and ensure that all areas, regardless of size or capacity, have access to participatory tools such as CLLD.

> Train rural actors to use existing tools effectively, for example through practical guidance and training on the EU funding toolkit.

How can local authorities promote bottom-up approaches?

Local authorities play a decisive role in shaping rural development, yet bottom-up approaches remain underused. Many administrations are not accustomed to participatory methods and may even resist them. Where they are applied, the same small group of stakeholders is often repeatedly involved, limiting inclusiveness and representativeness. Empowering communities requires ensuring that a broad and diverse group of actors is engaged, and that local policies systematically integrate participatory principles.

Proposed actions:

> Apply bottom-up approaches systematically across local policies, supported by tailored tools and awareness-raising initiatives for local authorities.

> Share best practices and concrete examples that clearly demonstrate the added value of participatory methods for more effective and legitimate policies.

> Introduce multi-annual contracts that integrate all rural development and farming support, with a dedicated budget—similar to the LEADER/CLLD model—to institutionalise bottom-up approaches.

How to enhance resilience of local communities to crises?

Recent shocks have shown that many rural areas remain vulnerable. There is often no common understanding of what constitutes a crisis or how to prepare for one. Roles and responsibilities are frequently unclear, and cooperation between institutions and communities is weak. This lack of preparedness leaves rural territories exposed when crises occur.

Proposed actions:

> Establish special funding measures for border regions, which are often the most exposed to cross-border and multi-dimensional crises.

> Encourage the exchange of experience—including both good and bad practices— so that communities can learn from successes and mistakes.

> Develop resources and support structures that equip rural communities to anticipate, respond to, and recover from crises more effectively.

How to foster voluntary and community action?

Volunteers and community groups are at the heart of rural vitality, yet their contribution often goes unrecognised. Negative rural narratives undermine their efforts, while many volunteers do not know how to go from ideas to action, and this weakens mobilisation. In addition, support structures are weak or absent and funding often lacks continuity: projects start but are hard to sustain or scale without predictable support, making it difficult to sustain initiatives and scale up local successes.

Proposed actions:

> Recognise the role of communities and volunteers through EU-wide visibility (e.g. via the Rural Observatory), but also at national/local level, through events such as festivals or cross-community encounters to inspire replication and scale-up.

> An EU "Rural Erasmus" for volunteers, promoting exchange programmes and cross-cultural learning; education and training to build long-term capacity among volunteers and community leaders.

> Provide solid and permanent support structures at EU and local levels, including practical tools for community managers, as well as village renewal prizes, micro-funding schemes and co-financing for community organisations to sustain engagement.

> Strengthening the awareness and voice of volunteers and community groups. Social media campaigns and visibility actions to change narratives and promote positive images of rural life.

How to better empower of regions with special needs and constraints?

Supporting regions with special needs and constraints requires clearer definitions and tailored solutions. A key challenge is the absence of a clear definition of remote or constrained areas, which makes it harder to design targeted support. These territories often face multiple overlapping challenges, including poor access to services, depopulation, and geographic isolation. Without adequate recognition and flexible tools, they risk being left further behind.

Proposed actions:

> Implement the functional rural areas concept, ensuring that regions with special constraints are explicitly recognised and supported.

> Develop regenerative projects with a holistic approach, creating incentives for people to remain in or return to these areas.

> Strengthen the LEADER approach by providing greater flexibility, capacity-building for existing LAGs, support for new LAGs, and tools for community self-assessment. Funding for areas with special constraints should be ring-fenced to guarantee dedicated resources.

2.5. Group 5: Boosting innovative and competitive rural economies and businesses

How can collaboration and support ecosystems foster innovation in rural businesses, including SMEs?

Rural SMEs play a vital role in local economies but face persistent barriers to innovation. There is a shortage of skills and a need to facilitate linkages among SMEs. Whilst support provided by existing EU SME support networks (such as the Enterprise Europe Network) is useful, it is insufficiently known and not targeted at the needs of more local-focused and micro enterprises. At the same time, companies in rural areas—particularly in the cultural and creative industries—struggle to access funding, as they are often considered too risky for loans. Without better support ecosystems, rural businesses risk missing opportunities for growth and competitiveness.

Proposed actions:

> Introduce innovation vouchers and small-scale funding tools to enable targeted investments, alongside start-up competitions and innovation hubs to stimulate entrepreneurship among rural SMEs.

> Build capacity for local authorities to create supportive environments and strengthen connections between economic actors. The Rural Pact can be leveraged to ensure that non-agricultural SMEs are fully integrated into programmes for rural areas.

> Promote awareness campaigns, knowledge exchange, and dissemination of good practices in business support to inspire replication and upscaling.

> Encourage application of the partnership principle by decisionmakers, to include rural economic stakeholders in policymaking to foster a supportive environment for rural businesses.

How to foster business capacity (including social entrepreneurship), in particular of women and young people?

Rural areas hold untapped potential for women and young entrepreneurs, yet significant barriers persist. Decision-making bodies remain male-dominated, leaving women under-represented in positions of influence. At the same time, many women and young people lack confidence and key skills—such as legal, financial, and digital competencies—needed to start or grow a business. Also, they are rarely aware of the SDGs, which can provide inspiration for new businesses. The types of business models that are supported need include the entire spectrum (social enterprises, small family teams LTDs and everything in between. Dedicated support programmes targeting these groups are still scarce, limiting their capacity to fully engage in entrepreneurship, including in the social economy. Policies need to advance on core funding, product knowledge and uniqueness (including storytelling to market the product), gender proofing and gender-related goals, specific support to elderly women (especially those whose farm work was not remunerated).

Proposed actions:

> Establish community centres that provide tailored support services, mentoring, and training for women and young people interested in entrepreneurship. These centres could be located in a local library. For those living in rural areas at some distance from towns and villages, a 'bibliobus' model could be launched where the entrepreneurship support comes to them on a regular basis on a bus.

> Boost local economies by supporting local products and social enterprises, creating markets and visibility for youth- and women-led initiatives.

> Create dedicated thematic hubs or centres offering opportunities for women to explore and develop small-scale businesses (e.g. in crafts, cosmetics, textiles, or food transformation), with access to facilities, equipment, and advisory services.

> Storytelling can help illustrate role models and possibilities (and Rural Pact can help e.g. develop a "storytelling manual" and provide training at events), and micro-finance opportunities need to be developed and shared. Rural Pact can also award annual prizes for the most innovative/impactful business ideas.

How can rural areas benefit from the new emerging economic opportunities?

New opportunities are arising in rural economies, from digitalisation to the green and circular economy. However, rural areas often lack the conditions to seize them. Weak digital infrastructure, limited services, and a shortage of skills prevent entrepreneurs and workers from taking advantage of change. At the same time, the potential of remote work and digital nomads offers rural areas a chance to attract talent and stimulate new forms of business innovation—if the right support is in place. In addition, the increasing value of data held by rural businesses—such as soil composition, fertiliser use, and livestock feeding patterns—presents significant opportunities for research and commercial innovation, making rural knowledge an emerging asset in the data-driven economy.

Moreover, the village lifestyle and environmental conditions make rural areas particularly attractive for green and healthy living. This creates new business opportunities in sectors such as the development of retirement villages and rehabilitation care facilities. However, these initiatives require specific health-

related infrastructure and qualified specialist staff, which are feasible only in a limited number of rural locations—and definitely not in the most remote ones.

Proposed actions:

> Provide training, retraining, and capacity-building programmes (including in schools) to equip rural entrepreneurs and workers with skills such as data use, business management, and digital marketing, as well as other skills needed to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

> Build clusters of organisations around new opportunities, encouraging collaboration between businesses, research institutions, and local authorities.

> Promote entrepreneurship and guidance services to help rural people identify, develop, and adapt business models to the opportunities most relevant for their area.

How to foster industrial and craft geographical indications in rural areas?

Industrial and craft geographical indications (GIs) can boost rural economies, local expertise, and cultural heritage, yet they remain underdeveloped. The new regulation on CI GIs protection is a positive starting point, but legislative and administrative frameworks are not tailored to their specific ecosystems, often only viewing them as intellectual property issues. Meanwhile, awareness among craftspeople is limited, and data on craft products and sectors is scarce, making it difficult to design effective support measures.

Proposed actions:

> Promote a holistic approach to industrial and craft GIs, going beyond intellectual property to highlight their role in rural communities and territorial development (including the possibility of an EU pilot project).

> Improve data collection on crafts in cooperation with Eurostat and the JRC (through the Rural Observatory) to build a solid evidence base for policy.

> Develop a mapping and outreach strategy to engage entrepreneurs, supported by experts who understand their reality and can communicate in accessible terms. Partnerships with organisations such as the European Crafts Alliance (and other members of the European working group on crafts and industrial GIs) could help sensitise producers, provide training, and promote craft products at national and international level.

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

What are the conditions to enable people to stay in and return to rural areas?

For many citizens, remaining in or returning to rural areas is still a challenge. Gaps in essential services—education, health, transport, housing, pharmacies, culture, among many others—reduce quality of life. At the same time, slow economic development and limited opportunities discourage youth and working-age populations from building their future locally. Yet, there is scope for harnessing the strong rural identity of rural citizens and the attractiveness of rural territories. The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) can help anchoring the 'right to stay' in EU and national policy in relation to rural areas.

Proposed actions:

> Ensure that the future EU strategy on 'right to stay' is connected to the LTVRA and contributes to its objectives. The Strategy should help designing future National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) and highlight the importance of strategies for the integrated development of rural areas, access to territorial services and infrastructure.

> Expand Horizon Europe funding opportunities for research and innovation linked to the LTVRA and the right to stay, including benchmarking EU standards for quality of life, high quality public services and economic development in rural areas.

> Implement pilot initiatives on innovative service delivery models, particularly through digital technologies (e.g. e-health, e-administration).

> Consider using regulatory sandboxes to test new models of service delivery, taxation, and innovation in rural areas, beyond the agriculture and food sectors.

> Support thematic business incubators and clusters of rural enterprises to foster growth through cooperation. Include a dedicated rural strand with a specific approach to rural enterprises (beyond agri-food enterprises) in the European Clusters Collaboration Platforms, to reflect the smaller scale and territorial dispersion of rural businesses.

> Support local authorities in the renovation of public buildings and housing, making rural areas more attractive for both current residents and returnees.

How to ensure quality health services in rural areas?

Access to health services is a fundamental right, yet rural communities face persistent challenges. Keeping doctors in the countryside is difficult, as training and practice opportunities are often urban-based. Patients frequently travel long distances to access specialist care and treatment, creating inequalities in service provision. Telemedicine offers promising opportunities but cannot replace the need for in-person consultations. At the same time, care services for elderly people are often missing, placing additional burdens on relatives—with a subsequent impact on family well-being and the rural economy. Preventive health services are also underdeveloped in many rural areas.

Proposed actions:

> Incentivise medical students and doctors to train and practice in rural areas, making rural careers more attractive.

> Conduct research and pilot initiatives on how to improve the attractiveness of rural areas for healthcare professionals.

> Develop multi-service hubs in rural areas that include health and care services, offering flexible and scalable solutions for dispersed populations.

> Expand the use of telemedicine and digital health tools, while ensuring continued access to in-person consultations where needed.

How to facilitate access to housing in rural areas?

Adequate housing is a prerequisite for vibrant and resilient rural communities, yet rural areas face specific barriers. Available housing is often scarce, unaffordable, or in poor condition, while renovation

costs are high. Complex bureaucracy and restrictive administrative regulations further discourage investment. Funding opportunities are limited, with few schemes dedicated to tackling rural housing. At the same time, energy efficiency provides an opportunity to renovate homes and revitalise empty buildings, while new models such as co-housing or cooperative housing remain underdeveloped. In certain areas, competition with tourism creates additional tensions. Housing should be guaranteed as a right for all citizens, including those in rural areas.

The Rural Pact could facilitate the exchange of good practices on innovative housing models and on how rural housing challenges are being addressed across Europe, while also advocating for national and EU policies that approach housing from a distinctly rural perspective, recognising its differences from urban contexts.

Proposed actions:

> Include specific provisions in future EU policies on housing which are tunned to rural areas. When identifying solutions, concerns remain that housing is mainly addressed from the urban perspective.

> Support renovation and energy efficiency programmes with simplified procedures and technical assistance to make them accessible for rural households.

> Create rural housing banks and matchmaking platforms to connect housing seekers with property owners of vacant or underused housing, supported by mediation between residents and owners.

> Introduce tax incentives and financial support (micro-credits or guarantees) for co-housing, social rental schemes, cooperative housing, and other affordable housing models tailored to rural needs.

How to roll out multi-service hubs in rural areas?

There is growing demand for multi-service hubs across rural Europe, yet their development faces significant barriers. High costs, regulatory constraints, and difficulties in accessing suitable buildings often prevent hubs from being established. Moreover, models need to be adapted to local territorial realities so they can provide missing services without creating unfair competition with existing businesses. Despite these challenges, hubs can play a crucial role in ensuring access to essential services in rural territories. In addition, multi-service hubs have an important social role. They reduce loneliness, strengthen community bonds, and local residents are willing to contribute personally to their development, for example by doing voluntary work.

Proposed actions:

> Develop EU guidelines for rural proofing in setting up multi-service hubs, helping Member States adapt solutions and funding frameworks to rural needs.

> Recognise some of the services provided by hubs as Services of General Economic Interest (SGEIs), which are essential for citizens but not sufficiently provided by the market. On this basis, dedicated funding should be made available for hubs.

> Provide special funding for the design, launch, and expansion of hubs, including for new services such as electric vehicle charging stations.

How to improve mobility in rural areas?

Mobility remains one of the biggest barriers to rural development. Reliable public transport is often unavailable, creating high car dependency that may exclude young people, older residents, and others without private vehicles. This leads to mobility poverty, with many relying on old, polluting cars to access essential services. At the same time, public services are shrinking, requiring people to travel more and further. Yet opportunities exist in flexible and on-demand transport, community car-sharing, and innovative service planning. Europe should aim to ensure that all citizens — whether living in urban or rural areas — enjoy equal mobility opportunities, with essential services accessible within 30 minutes through sustainable transport modes, without the need to own a private car.

In the future, autonomous vehicles and drone deliveries could further expand rural mobility options. In addition, mobile hubs can help bringing services closer to users, thereby reducing the number of individual trips.

The Rural Pact can drive policy change on rural mobility by advocating for integrated, rural-sensitive mobility policies and plans, preparing a shared political vision or manifesto, and organising dedicated conferences, working groups, and an EU-level event on the topic.

Proposed actions:

> Promote best practices at EU level to inspire and guide rural mobility solutions, fostering networking and peer-to-peer exchange.

> Create dedicated programmes for authorities to design and fund integrated packages of local and regional mobility solutions.

> Boost regional mobility plans with a strong rural voice, ensuring the inclusion of rural areas in transport strategies and related policy making processes.

> Pilot rural mobility solutions through Smart Villages, testing approaches such as on-demand transport, collective community-led mobility, and digital service hubs, and safe cycle paths.

2.7. Group 7: Building inclusive rural communities

How can rural communities support the integration of newcomers and ensure a sense of belonging?

Rural communities are increasingly hosting newcomers, but integration remains uneven. Diverse profiles make integration pathways complex and require flexible responses. Job offers often do not match available housing, municipal commitments can change after elections, and gaps in essential services (such as schools, mobility, and healthcare) create additional barriers. At the same time, administrative hurdles—such as recognition of skills or residency—complicate settlement, while mismatched expectations between newcomers and long-term residents can lead to tensions. Without spaces for everyday contact and trust-building, mismatched expectations between newcomers and long-term residents may fuel tensions and negative narratives. Building and maintaining social capital and trust is therefore essential.

Proposed actions:

> Create standardised relocation packages linking jobs, housing, services, and cultural orientation, based on step-by-step models or user journeys to simplify the newcomer experience.

> Promote pre-visit programmes and formal agreements between municipalities, employers and NGOs.

> Develop multifunctional community spaces (community hubs) and practical experiences (e.g. education, training, work placements) where newcomers and locals can meet, learn, and interact.

> Support community organisations through co-financing to sustain integration activities.

> Develop village-level plans that make integration a shared responsibility and foster open-minded community cultures, where residents and newcomers co-formulate local needs.

> Support community managers or mediators to ensure both the "soft" aspects (dialogue, trust-building) and the "hard" aspects (information, infrastructure), contributing to long-term belonging.

How can rural communities reduce isolation and improve long-term care?

Rural areas face growing challenges in caring for ageing and vulnerable populations. Gaps in local health and care services, combined with weak transport links, increase isolation. People with disabilities are particularly affected by insufficient tailored services and limited accessibility. In addition, long-term funding shortages undermine the sustainability of care provision, leaving many residents without adequate support.

Proposed actions:

> Support intergenerational initiatives and local meeting places (clubs, cultural/sport activities, community hubs) that bring together younger and older residents, reducing loneliness among elderly people and strengthening community solidarity. Community-led programmes such as LEADER can be leveraged to back these hubs and activities.

> Secure sustainable funding for mental health and care services in rural areas to guarantee continuity of essential support for isolated and vulnerable people.

> Invest in adapted infrastructure—including accessible facilities, transport, and digital tools—to enable older people and those with disabilities to participate fully in community life.

> Create simple local access points in villages where residents can connect with home care, community initiatives and specialist health services, ensuring better coordination and continuity of support. Peer learning across territories can help replicate effective local models.

How can we improve opportunities and visibility for women in rural communities?

Women in rural areas continue to face systemic barriers to equality. Fewer educational opportunities, combined with economic dependence, isolation, and social stigma, limit their independence and participation. Many women also shoulder additional family responsibilities without adequate support, while their under-representation in decision-making leaves their voices unheard in shaping local and regional futures.

Proposed actions:

> Provide free or affordable education and training opportunities to empower women with skills, confidence, and independence.

> Offer start-up grants and practical support to help rural women create businesses and successfully access funding opportunities.

> Develop targeted outreach and support structures—such as rural women's hubs or community-based networks—to reach those most in need.

> Improve coordination between rural development policies and social services, so that responsibilities are clear and support for women is complementary rather than fragmented.

> Apply gender-sensitive rural proofing in policy-making, adding an explicit gender analysis layer to existing rural proofing processes. Policies should also consider the diverse realities of rural areas, including cultural traditions and gender roles.

How can we support vulnerable groups into work in rural areas?

Rural labour markets often exclude those most in need of opportunities. Dedicated spaces for vulnerable groups are lacking, projects are often short-term and disconnected from real needs, and businesses underuse available human resources. At the same time, employers may lack confidence, while barriers such as transport, skills gaps, and limited training opportunities make it difficult for vulnerable groups to access and sustain employment.

Proposed actions:

> Promote inclusive employment in local services by combining regular jobs with volunteering and social enterprises, offering stepping-stones for vulnerable groups.

> Examine opportunities in the bioeconomy, green and care sectors (e.g. energy retrofits, agroecology, elderly care) and translate them into sustainable job pathways, supported by micro-apprenticeships and vocational training adapted to rural SMEs.

> Create long-term mechanisms for advocacy and partnerships giving vulnerable groups a voice, through collaboration between employers, NGOs and local actors, complemented by supported employment models with job coaches, job carving and employer incentives.

> Scale up Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) and other rural social enterprises in services, catering, care and the circular economy, to anchor inclusive employment locally.

2.8. Driving local prosperity through bioeconomy

How to mainstream a bioeconomy in rural areas which benefits local communities?

The bioeconomy offers major opportunities for rural development, but its potential remains underused. Fragmented benefit-sharing across the value chain, complex regulations and certification processes, and limited access to finance restrict participation. At the same time, a lack of integrated approaches between farmers, businesses, and researchers, as well as low awareness and limited training opportunities, prevent rural communities from fully benefiting. Weak infrastructure and poor connectivity further constrain access to markets and innovation.

Proposed actions

> Ensure equitable benefit sharing among all actors in the bioeconomy value chain so that rural communities benefit equitably.

> Streamline regulations and certification to reduce administrative barriers for bio-based projects.

> Improve access to finance through innovative public-private partnerships and targeted rural finance tools and keep relevant tools such as CBE-JU and Horizon Europe.

> Promote integrated approaches connecting farmers, businesses, and researchers to develop sustainable bio-based supply chains (for instance linked to fibres / bio-based products / biofuels...).

> Launch training and awareness programmes in schools, universities, and rural communities to expand knowledge about bioeconomy opportunities.

> Provide guidance and tools to LAGs on how to identify local bioeconomy opportunities and facilitate capacity-building actions and awareness-raising among LAGs, local authorities, and rural stakeholders to strengthen their skills in designing, implementing, and managing bioeconomy projects (e.g., toolkits, best practice collections, and thematic workshops).

> Improve rural infrastructure and connectivity to expand participation and market access for bioeconomy activities. (not against this sentence, but this was not discussed directly in the group so I would suppress it, we discussed about the availability of plants for biogas which is different).

> Ensure sustainable and stable biomass all over the year requiring to work with actors all over the supply chain (with farmers to know the amount of biomass they can provide, with enterprises to know how much they need).

How can bio-districts be further supported?

Bio-districts are powerful tools for linking sustainable agriculture, local communities, and territorial development. Yet several barriers limit their potential. Bridging the gap between traditional and organic farming, motivating farmers to transition, and raising consumer awareness remain ongoing challenges. In addition, young farmers need stronger financial support and mentoring, while regional stakeholders often lack effective coordination.

Proposed actions

> Appoint regional coordinators to connect stakeholders and ensure that bio-district initiatives are coherent, effective, and well-governed.

> Promote nature-connected agriculture by supporting pioneers and inclusive practices that inspire broader adoption across farming communities.

> Facilitate collaboration with IFOAM and Rural Pact partners to raise consumer awareness and strengthen certification standards for organic products.

> Create funding and mentoring programmes for young farmers to help them transition to and sustain organic farming practices.

> Build strong communication networks between farmers, policymakers, and consumers to accelerate transitions and showcase the benefits of bio-district models.

How to enhance connections between territories, food and people?

Strengthening the links between food systems, communities, and territories is essential for sustainable rural development. Yet consumer awareness on biodiversity and healthy food remains limited, access to local products is unequal, and farmers face growing pressures from market competition, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Without stronger connections, both rural livelihoods and food system resilience are at risk.

<u>Proposed actions</u>

> Strengthen Local Food Systems: Support local markets, cooperatives, and public procurement of local food (e.g., for schools and hospitals).

> Integrate criteria for purchasing healthy, locally-grown food from small farmers into public procurement, and encourage local farmers to join forces (e.g. via platforms) so they can jointly respond and strengthen their position when submitting bids for public tenders.

> Promote short supply chains (farmers' markets, cooperatives, community-supported agriculture) to keep value within rural areas.

> Diversify crops and livestock to enhance resilience: protect and promote local seeds, local varieties and local breeds.

> Establish local economic initiatives (e.g. exchange systems or local currencies) to strengthen producer–consumer links and encourage local purchasing.

> Develop educational programmes and school partnerships to connect children, consumers, and farmers, raising awareness of healthy food, biodiversity, and sustainability.

> Adapt legislation and incentives to support farmers and reward practices that protect biodiversity and promote sustainable land use.