

RURAL VISION

magazine^{#1}

Empowering
Rural
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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the Rural Vision Magazine!

As we compiled this magazine, we were driven by the sense that 2023 has marked a bountiful 'harvest' year for the long-term vision for rural areas within the European Union (LTVRA). Numerous actions have been set in motion to translate this vision into reality. The seeds sown in June 2021 through the publication of the EU's rural vision and the rural action plan, further nurtured with the launch of the Rural Pact in December, the first Rural Pact conference in June 2022, the opening of our Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO) and the creation of the Rural Pact Coordination Group in 2023, are now starting to yield tangible results.

In this first edition, we try to reflect the **progress made in 2023 towards the rural vision** (section 1), placing a special emphasis on the pivotal role that Member States can play in its realisation. The High-Level Rural Policy Forum held in Sigüenza (Spain) was unquestionably a significant milestone, supporting the conclusions of the Council of the EU on the long-term vision for rural areas adopted under the Spanish presidency. At EU level, we emphasise the actions put forward to strengthen the Rural Pact community – which has more than 2 150 formal members – and its indispensable role in achieving the vision. In this regard, you can find inspiring words from the newly appointed chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group established this year by the European Commission, reinforcing the multi-level and multi-actor nature of the pact. Also, we shed light on the added value brought to you by the Rural Pact community platform launched in June, an online collaborative tool where you can find all the latest information about the Rural Pact as well as information and resources useful for the revitalisation of rural communities facing population loss and economic decline.

The Rural Pact focus (section 2) showcases the activities conducted to support the community, outlining key topics undertaken by the RPSO in 2023 to enhance capacities and bring rural areas higher on political agendas. You will discover examples and the progress made by rural actors in crucial areas such as rural depopulation, access to digital education, the energy transition and social entrepreneurship.

Whether you act locally or at national or EU level (or in all of these areas), we hope that this magazine provides you with stories and information to inspire and drive progress in implementing the rural vision. We welcome your feedback, suggestions and proposals for contributions to future editions.

Enrique Nieto

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Bringing Member States on board with the Rural Pact



By Enrique Nieto,
Rural Pact Support Office



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A key priority this year within the [Rural Pact](#) was to bring the Member States on board as they are essential for the success of the Pact. National, regional, and local authorities are responsible for the programming of several EU funds and for key policy areas that affect rural territories such as education, health, transport, energy, the environment, digital infrastructure, and innovation. Member States play a key role in ensuring that all these policy departments target more and better coordinated support to rural areas and contribute to the common rural vision.

The Spanish presidency of the Council of the European Union has reactivated the debate started under the Slovenian presidency in September 2021, and succeeded to adopt conclusions on the LTVRA. These [conclusions](#) took account of the results from exchanges between national representatives dealing with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and with Cohesion Policy (CP) from all EU countries, the outcomes of the [Rural Pact conference in Sweden](#) and key messages emerging from the [High-Level Rural Policy Forum](#) that took place on 27-29 September 2023 in Sigüenza (Spain). In particular, the forum has been instrumental in advancing dialogue with key policy-makers and stakeholders and in formulating recommendations for Member States to progress in the implementation of the rural vision.

How can national and regional governments take action to support the vision?

The Rural Pact [policy briefing](#) identifies key components to implement the Rural Pact at the Member State level. These elements complement the 11 OECD principles on rural policy and encompass:

- establishing a forward-looking vision with a holistic strategy/action plan,
- designating a government member and dedicated services to address rural issues across policies,
- putting in place appropriate governance systems to facilitate coordination,
- implementing mechanisms to ensure integrated funding streams and synergies,
- conducting rural proofing, establishing structures and mechanisms to engage with rural communities,
- providing capacity building and networking support for a broad array of stakeholders.

Rural stakeholders and governments can use these ingredients to take stock of what is missing in their countries and take action to progress towards the rural vision goals.

Meet the chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group



*Interview to Radim Sršeň,
Czech Deputy Minister of
Regional Development & Member of the
Committee of the Regions*

In this interview, the newly **elected chair** of the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG) unpacks the group's role, his part as chair and what is in store for the coming months.

What is the coordination group's role in steering the Rural Pact?

The group is an important tool to facilitate the Rural Pact and fulfil the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas. It will disseminate the value of the vision and the pact to rural areas to generate action and help both become a reality. It should also be a strong voice allowing the Rural Pact to be heard in the EU institutions and at national level.

What are the group's main priorities in the coming months?

Capacity building and an information campaign are key to inform about the possibilities and tools within the Rural Pact to all tiers of government – from local, regional and national to European level. Many people in rural areas feel left behind so one of the main priorities is to reach out to civil society and citizens. Studies on the geography of discontent show that the majority of people unhappy with the EU live in rural areas. We need to change this and place a much bigger focus on developing rural areas.

The rural vision and the pact are not only about agriculture: a holistic approach is needed for rural areas. This means we also have to communicate with EU Directorates-General and national ministries dealing with other fields such as employment, education, health, mobility or culture,

on top of those responsible for agriculture and regional development. We may reach out to Member States' prime ministers, since they coordinate policy at national level. We are also planning to contact the future candidates for the European Parliament to commit to supporting rural areas. We also want to use our members' many events to amplify our voice. The Rural Pact Support Office will provide crucial support, for effective and successful activities, including communication and dissemination support for events organised by the RPCG members, dissemination of best practices, monitoring of commitments to the Rural Pact at national, regional & local levels, mapping how far the Rural Pact is applied in Member States, etc.

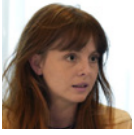
How do you see your role as chair of the RPCG?

Myself as chair, and the vice-chair Edina Ocsko - Coordinator of the **Smart Village Network** - will be a strong voice within the Rural Pact and beyond with the support of all members of the group. It is really a team effort. It's crucial that all our voices reach out and involve every single actor that can add value to rural areas.

The negotiations are starting on the future of cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy and other relevant EU policies which play a role in rural areas. So now is the time for the rural voices to be heard and to promote a horizontal and multi-level approach to rural development.



The Rural Pact: A committed community



By Julie de Galard,
Rural Pact Support Office

The first two objectives of the Rural Pact are to amplify rural voices and bring them higher on the political agenda, and to structure and enable networking, collaboration & mutual learning, while the third objective is to encourage voluntary commitments to act in favour of the [ten shared goals](#) of the long-term vision for rural areas.

The Pact's community, comprising public authorities, academic and research institutions, civil society organisations, businesses and individuals, is invited to submit formal or informal commitments within the framework of the Rural Pact to demonstrate their willingness to make a difference in EU's rural areas and, potentially, inspire others to act. One of the first commitments implemented was the organisation the 3rd Rural Geographies [conference](#) in June 2023 by the University of Groningen (Netherlands).

These commitments represent a collective ambition to contribute to making rural areas stronger and more resilient, connected and prosperous by 2040. What stands out is the kaleidoscope of themes these commitments encompass. They embody the shared vision under which rural areas require holistic and coordinated efforts that take account of social, environmental and economic challenges while responding to the specific needs and inherent diversity of each rural area.



A "strong" commitment –

The French Rural Parliament commits to establishing a High-level Institute for Rural Studies (IHEMRU) to provide training, encourage scientific research and foster dialogue among diverse rural stakeholders. Launched in early 2023, the institute provides insights into contemporary economic and societal issues through the prism of rurality. It also explores key questions regarding the future of these territories in the context of digital transition, sustainable development and governance, empowering students to actively co-create tomorrow's solutions.



A "resilient" commitment –

The Share Network commits to advancing inclusive rural territories by disseminating its latest [policy brief](#), championing the role of rural territories in integrating migrants and refugees, encouraging synergy between integration and rural revitalisation policies, amplifying communities' voices while advocating for

inclusive and meaningful participation, promoting multi-level and multi-stakeholder collaboration, cultivating best integration practices, facilitating mutual learning and bridging the gap between EU and local initiatives for a more resilient rural future.



A "connected" commitment –

Eurocities commits to strengthening urban-rural cooperation based on a territorially balanced development across Europe supported by key actions: promotion of a political exchange at EU level, drafting of a policy statement, 'Delivering EU's Rural Vision 2040 through urban-rural cooperation', and a case studies publication to identify gaps and opportunities in terms of instruments and policies, and implementation of a technical discussion with research organisations such as [ESPON](#) (the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion) and the [Joint Research Centre](#).



A "prosperous" commitment – The

Romanian GAL Napoca Porolissum commits to implementing sustainable rural development strategies which enhance the well-being of local communities and preserve cultural heritage and the environment, by developing and implementing a comprehensive local development strategy that reflects the needs, opportunities and challenges of the region and aligns with the goals and principles of the Rural Pact. Community engagement, capacity building, mobilisation of funding resources, monitoring and evaluation constitute the driving actions of this commitment.

When exploring these commitments, we must remember that they are not just promises on paper. They represent a call to action, a collective determination to make the EU's rural areas thrive and, ultimately, become key players in shaping Europe's future. These collective actions, in their own diversity, reflect the spirit of the Rural Pact, where every action counts and where everyone's voice is valued. They place rural communities at the forefront of change, where each member actively participates at their own level in addressing the challenges faced, so that no one is left behind. This is an open invitation to all stakeholders forming the EU's rural community, to commit at its own level to this shared vision and contribute to a brighter rural future.

Get to know community members, exchange, and enrich your knowledge!



By Marie Lambert,
European Commission,
Directorate-General for Agriculture
and Rural Development

The Rural Pact Community Platform is the online collaborative tool that we launched in June 2023 to answer community needs to cooperate.

Through it, you can create your profile, select your themes of interest, connect with peers throughout Europe, engage in conversations, decide actions to take and get inspired!

The Commission initially committed to set-up the rural revitalisation platform, a one-stop shop for those working for rural areas affected by population and economic decline. But we understood from our exchanges with you that the whole community shares the need to collaborate and that grouping tools would be more efficient. The Rural Pact Community Platform was born, integrating the Rural Revitalisation Platform as one of its two priority focus areas.

The tool combines publicly accessible content with an informative part and tools reserved for community members. Browsing the platform, on top of the latest

[news](#) and [events](#), you will find general information about the [Rural Pact](#) and [Rural Revitalisation](#). The novelty of the tool however comes from the various 'Community groups', collaboration spaces for registered members only, either dedicated to a particular theme (of interest to rural people) or to a "geographical area" (for example, a country, in which rural stakeholders can use it as a national online collaborative space).

Community Groups are members-led, and their value emerges from the collective action that they can trigger. Creating new relationships

between stakeholders from the same field of interest, identifying needs and opportunities, enabling the creation of collaborative projects, developing new networks, these are some of the goals of these groups.

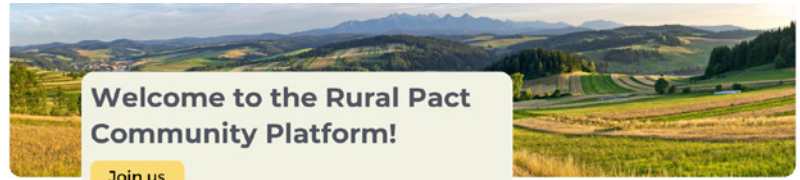
To create such a group, members must first identify "coordinators" that are ready to [express their interest](#) to create and moderate this part of the community. Coordinators must be recognised organisations with the capacity to mobilise relevant stakeholders, to provide strategic guidance of the group and steer its progress and impact.

A group works in one language, either English or any other EU official language. As for the whole platform, automated translation is available to make it accessible to everyone.

Inspiration is another objective of the platform. The [knowledge hub](#), which pools various resources in one place, is continuously being consolidated. As is the [Good Practices](#) database, which keeps being enriched with a number of past and present projects, policies, tools, or methodologies than can be replicated to boost further actions and contribute to the objectives of the Rural Pact.

But as a picture is worth a thousand words, an experience is worth a thousand images, we would now encourage you to look at the [Platform](#), to discover the various functionalities and make the tool yours if you think it useful for you!

We hope to see you there and to read from you!



Community Groups



“

We see the value of the platform in its inclusiveness, to be able to reach anyone in the Rural Pact community who is interested in a given subject and signs up for the group, even people that we might not be in touch with otherwise.

Edina Ocsko, RPCG Vice-Chair,
Coordinator of the Smart Village Network

Schools as learning hubs of rural communities



By Nikos Zygouritsas,
Ellinogermaniki Agogi SA

In 2023, the [European Year of Skills](#) aims to address skills gaps in the European Union and boost the EU skills strategy. It promotes investment in training and upskilling, enabling people to stay in their jobs or find new ones, while matching people's aspirations and skill sets with opportunities on the job market, especially for the green and digital transitions and the economic recovery.

One of the key areas of action is the urban-rural divide in digital skills.

In 2021, [Eurostat](#) identified the urban-rural divide in digital skills as one of the key areas requiring action.

Overall EU Statistics (2021):

- Just over one-quarter (26%) of the EU population aged 16-74 reported having above-basic overall digital skills.

Breakdown by Living Area:

- **Cities:** 33% have above-basic digital skills.
- **Towns and Suburbs:** 24% have above-basic digital skills.
- **Rural Areas:** 20% have above-basic digital skills.



© Learning from the Extremes

The EU-funded [Learning from the Extremes](#) Preparatory Action aims to demonstrate ways to reduce the digital gap suffered by school communities in rural areas by:

- **Connecting students:** Students should have modern, connected, and constructive learning spaces equipped to support engaged, personalised learning.
- **Developing teachers' capacities:** Teachers should have the development, support, and resources they need to integrate digital tools within the learning environment.
- **Access to digital tools:** School communities should have access to digital tools and connectivity for effective communication and collaboration.
- **More quality teaching:** All staff should be able to partner with schools to help close the gap in access to high-quality teaching.
- **Professional support:** All schools should be able to share teaching excellence with professional support in the classroom, the school, and the region.

The Learning from the Extremes approach, which is currently being applied in [123 schools in 10 countries](#), offers open, interoperable and personalised solutions that meet rural schools' real needs. At the same time, it supports school heads in capturing innovation and deciding on the appropriate strategy to diffuse innovation to their schools. Through constant reflection, this approach guides them towards the transformation of their schools into innovation hubs and digital learning commons. In this way, rural schools can be transformed into core nodes of their local communities, becoming 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. Learning hubs can play a key role in training people, providing a laboratory for trying out innovative ideas, demonstrating the effectiveness of advanced technologies and opening people's minds to innovative solutions.



Schools as learning hubs of rural communities

Combating rural depopulation through a territorial approach



By Dr Serafin Pazos Vidal,
European Association for Innovation
in Local Development (AEIDL)

By 2040 half of the EU's population will live in demographically declining regions, according to the latest [EU Cohesion Report](#). This challenge is an underlying topic permeating the EU's long-term vision for rural areas ([LTVRA](#)), rural action plan and the Rural Pact. To address this the Rural Pact Support Office organised the well-attended policy action lab 'Taking Action to Tackle Rural Depopulation' held on 29 June 2023.

Depopulation across large parts of the EU is not a new phenomenon, but it has accelerated since the start of this century. There are long-term trends such as population ageing and migration to urban areas, particularly of women and skilled individuals. Decline is becoming widespread, affecting small towns and villages. It is also generating significant discontent in the so-called [places that don't matter](#). Some Member States such as [Spain](#), [Italy](#) and [Finland](#) have developed national strategies or programmes to address this issue. In northern Europe policies such as [smart shrinking](#) are being considered whereas in eastern Europe the focus is on [brain drain](#). This is why the European Commission made it a priority for this term. And in addition to the LTVRA many initiatives have been put forward by the [Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography](#), including the latest Communication presenting a [toolbox](#) on the impact of demographic change in Europe. In particular, a [new Commission initiative](#) on harnessing talent seeks to address the concerns around brain drain. Since 2021, the [ERDF Regulation](#) contains a [definition](#) of what constitutes a demographically declining area. There is a greater focus on the problems of disadvantaged areas, in particular rural areas and those suffering from demographic decline, going beyond the general principles set out in art. 174 TFEU. The Regulation recommends Member States to set out an integrated approach to addressing demographic challenges of such regions and areas. This can include, for example, improving access to basic services, including digital services, enhancing attractiveness for investment, including through business investments and connectivity to large markets.



Better territorial approaches mean better evidence. The new EU better regulation guidelines incorporate the principle of [rural proofing](#), whereas the Joint Research Centre has launched the [EU rural observatory](#), supported by other research projects such as the [RUSTIK](#) and [GRANULAR](#) Horizon Europe projects.

At the policy action lab, practitioners, experts and decision makers agreed on a number of [takeaways](#). They focused on building the capacity of local actors, creating linkages among people, organisations and territories, and fostering local and community-led innovation. Initiatives like the [Startup Village forum](#) and the [Rural Pact community platform](#) can help drive this discussion forward.

The European Commission is already taking steps to address some of the policy action lab topics, such as improving the accessibility of online tools and materials in national languages like the [toolkit](#) on EU funds for rural areas. Conclusions on the rural vision adopted by the EU Council under the Spanish presidency in November 2023 highlight challenges related to depopulation and demographic change. This will build upon the work already carried out by the European Parliament on both [depopulation](#) and [brain drain](#). Contributions from the [Committee of the Regions](#) and the [European Economic and Social Committee](#) have also been significant.

Social entrepreneurship to revitalise rural communities



By Anastasia Costantini,
Diesis Network

While some European rural areas demonstrate higher levels of productivity, GDP, population growth and have ample access to services, other face ongoing challenges such as significant unemployment and limited resources, with only half the rural population having access to reliable internet, making economic growth and social development difficult. This is compounded by low GDP per capita and an ageing population, making sustainable development an even greater challenge.

As mentioned in the European Social Economy [Action Plan](#), by engaging all stakeholders or boosting collective engagement and promoting participatory governance, social enterprises can play a key role in revitalising the economic situation in rural regions. The concept of [social entrepreneurship](#) puts people as well as social and environmental concerns before profit and can take various forms such as cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations and foundations. It represents an opportunity for rural development, aiming to address social and ecological issues, and is an essential tool for breaking free from the negative cycle that some rural areas are experiencing. An exemplary social enterprise model supporting rural social entrepreneurship is the “[Whole Village](#)” initiative, focusing on the revitalisation of Transylvanian rural areas. The process begins with a cultural heritage assessment, followed by securing local authority backing, community involvement, and empowerment. Remarkably, this initiative has successfully restored 700 historic structures, planted three million trees, generated 100 permanent jobs, and,

in parallel, fostered community cohesion and sustainable development.

The impact of social entrepreneurship on rural areas is substantial as it provides essential social services and creates jobs for disadvantaged groups. Initiatives like Work Integration Social Enterprises ([WISE](#)) promote the development of vulnerable groups and social inclusion. [Social farming](#), which combines sustainable agricultural production with socio-sanitary and [socio-occupational services](#), addresses critical challenges posed by an ageing population, changing family structures and an inclusion of newcomers (both from urban areas and third countries). The emergence of [green social entrepreneurs](#) in rural areas offers urban youth opportunities to rediscover the benefits of rural living and drive economic growth while also preserving the environment. By linking rural and urban areas, social entrepreneurship can help to create a more balanced and sustainable society, where everyone can benefit from the opportunities of the digital age.

Social entrepreneurship can be a powerful tool for developing diverse and sustainable economies and regenerating communities, especially through arts, culture and tourism. Such initiatives not only empower individuals and promote education but also enhance social cohesion by bridging the gap between rural and urban areas. An example is [Teatro Povero](#), a successful community cooperative in Italy. The cooperative follows democratic principles of solidarity and has been instrumental in boosting local development in areas with declining populations. It caters for the specific needs of the community, supports the local and regional economy, and enhances the overall quality of life, thereby contributing to the growth of the local economy.

Social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in empowering [rural communities](#), promoting social inclusion, fostering economic growth and unleashing the creativity of young green entrepreneurs who are essential for the future of rural communities. It is imperative that we break the vicious cycle and embrace the transformative power of social entrepreneurship in our rural regions.



Rural Energy Communities: Leading Europe's Shift to Sustainable Self-Sufficiency



By Eugenia Bonifazi,
Ricardo Energy and Environment,
Project Manager of DG ENER Rural Energy
Community Advisory Hub (RECAH)

Across the EU, rural areas face unique challenges: a dependence on outside energy sources, an ageing infrastructure, and the urgent need for sustainable growth. Rural energy communities are an effective way to shift towards renewable energy and reducing emissions. Demonstrating that innovative energy solutions are closer than we think, these communities harness local resources like wind, solar, and biogas to craft sustainable and economical energy pathways. They are aiming for self-sufficiency, reducing dependence on foreign energy, while actively engaging locals, ensuring they receive benefits.

Through rural energy communities, the energy transition market evolves from a centralised framework to a network of interconnected energy hubs. They present an inclusive approach to energy independence, contrasting with centralised energy governance by emphasising a bottom-up model that actively engages citizens. Such collaborative initiatives offer local benefits that increase support and enhance the broader social acceptance of renewable energy projects. For instance, when a community feels overlooked in a wind energy project, resistance arises. However, with active community involvement in planning and implementation, support greatly increases, bringing shared benefits. This underscores the importance of community involvement in the renewable energy shift.

Research shows that the main barriers to participating in an energy community are the lack of awareness, perceived skills or knowledge. This highlights the need to amplify awareness and provide adequate guidance across the EU by showcasing effective best practices and business models for communities to emulate. To address these challenges, RECAH has extended diverse technical assistance to 28 rural energy communities, encompassing around 90 distinct activities.

These span across critical areas such as regional investment opportunities, technological guidance, legal and regulatory advice, stakeholder engagement strategies, and capacity-building initiatives. RECAH has also developed comprehensive [guidance documents](#) for those keen to establish or join energy communities. These resources offer insights into citizen engagement strategies, technological considerations, and navigating the complexities of EU Member State national legal and policy frameworks. More guidance documents will be published at a later stage regarding democratic governance, as well as the potential role of municipalities, farmers and larger actors in energy communities.

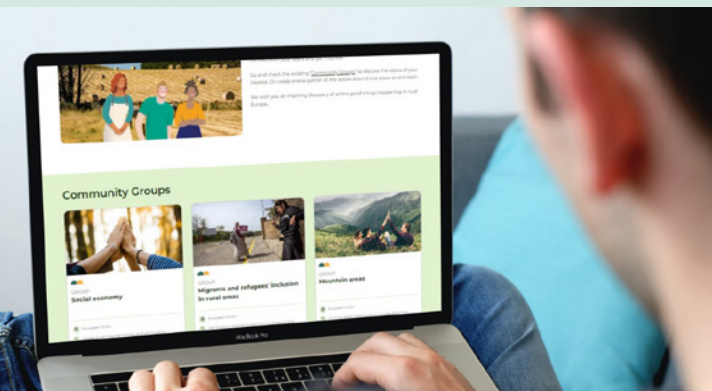
There has also been a concerted effort to document and disseminate best practices of rural energy communities across the EU. These best practices serve as a beacon for other communities aiming to embark on a similar journey. An example is Wildpoldsreid, a project that has been successful in generating renewable energy from a mix of sources, including wind, solar, small hydro, and biogas, surpassing their annual consumption by 500-800%. To read the full article and other best practices, visit the [RECAH website resource page](#).

Serving as a reliable guide in policy and technology, the RECAH consortium takes pride in their role in enabling the development of rural energy communities. We are dedicated to ensuring these rural communities access the services and support they require, without any barriers.



Overview of relevant sources of information

In our ongoing effort to keep you well-informed and engaged, we have curated a list of essential resources that offer valuable insights into rural development and sustainability. These resources are instrumental for policy-makers, researchers and citizens alike who are interested in the progress and initiatives under the Rural Pact.



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Rural Pact community platform

A digital hub where stakeholders can connect, share ideas, and collaborate on projects. Community groups within the platform focus on specific rural development topics, offering a space for targeted discussions and problem solving.

Visit the [Rural Pact community platform](#)

RPSO good practices

A repository of successful initiatives and projects that have made a significant impact in rural areas. These good practices serve as a guide for implementing effective and sustainable solutions.

Explore [RPSO good practices](#)

RPSO publications

Stay updated with our latest highlights reports and policy briefings that delve into the intricacies of rural development, offering data-driven insights and actionable recommendations.

Read [RPSO publications](#)

Other relevant publications



The Cost of Non-Rurality – preparing for a better urban – rural balance in EU Funding, CoR: An in-depth analysis of the economic implications of neglecting rural areas, published by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR).

[Learn more](#)



Fostering Agriculture and Rural Policy Dialogue, OECD: A comprehensive report that explores the role of agriculture in rural development and offers policy recommendations.

[Learn more](#)



Rural Europe: a publication by Eurostat's Statistics Explained, published in January 2023.

[Learn more](#)



Just transition and revitalisation: a new EU strategy for rural areas: Policy Brief published in 2022 by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

[Learn more](#)



Bridging the rural-urban divide: Addressing inequalities and empowering communities: This report outlines creative solutions that are being deployed across Member States to provide services in remote areas.

[Learn More](#)

Feel free to explore these resources to deepen your understanding of the issues and to stay engaged in the dialogue surrounding rural development. Find out more relevant resources in the [Knowledge hub](#).

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