



POLICY ACTION LAB



Highlights report

Bringing the Rural Pact closer to citizens

Introduction

The Policy Action Lab organised by the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO) brought together around 100 participants from 24 European countries. It explored how the Rural Pact can bring tangible benefits to local people and analysed examples of rural communities taking action to achieve the objectives of the EU rural vision. Participants discussed key aspects that enable the Rural Pact to add value at the local level and identified conditions, policies and approaches that make it possible.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



22 May 2024



Brussels (Belgium)



Around 100 (policymakers, public authorities, local practitioners, researchers, advisors, businesses, EU-funded project representatives)



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



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Welcome and framing the day

Colin Scicluna (Head of Cabinet of Dubravka Šuica, European Commission's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography)



Bringing EU policies closer to citizens is key for the future of rural areas. The rural vision achieved good progress in implementing its [action plan](#). While discussions on the future of agricultural policies are under way, policies for rural areas need to go beyond agriculture to address depopulation and foster democratic change by enhancing citizen participation in policymaking.

Pascale Van Doren (Rural Pact Support Office) ([PPT](#))

RURAL PACT

- Policy Lab [rationale and agenda](#)
- [Why become a member of the Rural Pact Community Platform](#)

Setting the scene for localising the ingredients of the Rural Pact

Key achievements and way forward for the rural vision and Pact

Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI) ([PPT](#))



The European Commission's [report](#) on 'the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward' looks back at the 30 months of implementation of the rural vision in particular on the progress achieved with the rural action plan implemented by the EC. It further outlines the process of preparing the post-2027 EU rural policy, including a set of questions for reflection, to which rural stakeholders can respond.

What are the Rural Pact and its seven ingredients at national and regional levels

Urszula Budzich-Tabor (Rural Pact Support Office) ([PPT](#))

RURAL PACT

The Policy Briefing '[Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States](#)' – available in all EU languages – outlines the seven ingredients for successfully implementing the Rural Pact at the national or regional level.

A survey carried out prior to the event provides a preliminary picture of what the Rural Pact means to participants, the aspects they find most important and how the Rural Pact can best contribute at local level.



How could the Rural Pact benefit rural communities? Examples of initiatives

Many initiatives already exist at the local level, contributing to the rural vision, as is embodied by the examples below. These initiatives show the types of local action that can have a particularly big impact on the lives of rural people, and should be recognised and strengthened by policymakers.

The 'Landscape Charter' to mobilise rural stakeholders and plan action

Pere Sala (Landscape Observatory), Sergi Mendez (Consell Comarcal del Priorat in Catalonia, Spain) ([PPT](#))



The territory of El Priorat (with nearly 10 000 inhabitants) implements a dynamic local process which started with a '**Landscape Charter**'. This is a voluntary instrument defined in Catalan law, which helps rural communities to set out common objectives and management strategies to improve their landscape and turn it into an active asset for the future.

The charter's multi-level governance system enables the local area to implement concrete actions and mobilise stakeholders to address a wide range of challenges such as depopulation, energy, agriculture and economic diversification. It also holds thematic forums which are open, encourage debate and drive initiatives. They are made up of interested people and representatives of organisations involved in the topic. The charter and its planned actions are complementary to, and supported by, the local LEADER strategy and various policies and programmes at regional, national and EU levels.

Strengthening impact through a supra-municipal instrument

Bruno Weber Regnier and Karine Bordeau (PETR Pays Vallée du Loir, France) ([PPT](#))



The Pays Vallée du Loir is a French public entity, also known as a "Territorial and Rural Equilibrium Pole" (PETR). It gathers 57 municipalities of its territory, and is steered by a committee of elected local representatives as well as an advisory board of volunteers representing the local community. The Pays aims at animating projects and supports local actors and administrations to work on various themes such as territorial cohesion, Natura 2000, landscape and architectural charters, energy and environment, culture and heritage, etc. To proceed, the Pays uses LEADER funding and engages with other funds, notably from the county, regional, national and European levels.

Italian 'Inner Areas Strategy' supporting local action

Mirta Sutter, (LAG MontagnAppennino, Tuscany, Italy) ([PPT](#))



The LEADER LAG of MontagnAppennino is involved in the implementation of the Italian '[Inner Areas Strategy](#)', (IAS) a national programme covering 60% of Italy's territory and managed through multi-level governance. The LAG provides technical support to local beneficiaries of the Strategy, on projects focusing on such topics as education or mobility. For example, the Castelnuovo di Garfagnana train station received IAS funding for a range of infrastructure investments, while the LAG funded a tourist information centre for the area. In the 2021-2027 period, the LAG will also manage part of the Strategy's funding.

The LAG additionally implements its own territorial strategy and supports community projects that involve cooperation among different types of actors. The combination of IAS and LAG strategy allows the creation of synergies and broadens the scope of LAG intervention, enabling stronger impact.

Examples which inspired discussion in working groups

Hilvarenbeek Smart Village



Ruud Groenendijk (Tussenheid Hilvarenbeek, the Netherlands) ([PPT](#))



become derelict.

In the Netherlands, a network of development advisors supports citizens' initiatives and assists them in accessing funding and implementing their projects, including on strengthening social cohesion and/or repurposing buildings that would otherwise

Cult(r)ural mediation as a leverage point for regional development



Yanina Taneva and Nevena Yovcheva (Sun Land Foundation, Bulgaria) ([PPT](#))



'Cultural mediators' are strategically used as levers for local development in the most remote rural communities in Bulgaria by building on traditional community cultural centres and fostering resilience through intergenerational, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches.

Des Hommes et des Arbres



Mathieu Ruillet ('Des Hommes et des Arbres', France) ([PPT](#))



A team of rural innovators plays the role of intermediaries – an initiative under the 'Innovation Territories' programme – to foster, identify, accelerate and showcase locally relevant solutions valorising the role of trees for people and ecosystems.

Rural Pact Laboratory: key messages from working groups



Understanding the Rural Pact at local level

- > In many rural areas, there are already visions, strategies and mechanisms to put those strategies in place. The Rural Pact **must build on and strengthen existing local structures and networks**, such as LEADER or smart villages. These structures may have to be strengthened to serve as communication channels across all governance levels for better policy implementation.
- > Simpler and clearer language at the EU level: The language used by the Rural Pact and rural vision, as well as their objectives and many concepts such as 'rural proofing' are not fully understood by most rural communities. They need to be **simplified and explained** (who needs to be involved; what are the rules and scope for action etc.) before they can meaningfully reach the local level – potentially, through short videos.

Elements which can help achieve the rural vision at local level

- > **Local, action-oriented vision** that allows to work on a wide range of topics;
- > **Governance structure** enabling to pull resources and actions together, as well as acting as an intermediary between the local community and the policymakers at all levels;
- > **Capacity building** for community animation and structures that support project design and identification of funding opportunities;
- > **'Local heroes'** who are able to mobilise others, particularly those with the capacity to implement joint actions, disseminate and distribute information and tools, backed by a support network;
- > The European brand of and momentum created by the Rural Pact, as drivers for both local and higher-level administrations to **explore enhanced forms of coordination and cooperation**. It would imply improving already existing structures.

Empowering local communities to take action – conditions and approaches

At local level:

- > Putting in place '**rural mediators**' to drive the process, map and activate dormant resources, act as a bridge between different types of actors and build community capacities;
- > **Pooling the available resources** in local consortia or intermediate organisations;
- > Transmitting local needs to policymaking levels and **encouraging/mobilising political support** from different sectors and funding sources;
- > Sharing **good and bad practices** and showcasing solutions that work well (keeping in mind the issue of transferability due to significant differences between rural areas across the EU).



At policymaking levels:

- > Putting **local needs at the centre** of rural policies and designing policies through rural proofing, rather than retroactively monitoring policy impacts – sharing information about the future plans of competent authorities in key policy fields with local stakeholders;
- > Improving **multi-level governance** by introducing obligatory measures for incorporating local actors' views and incentives for recognising local governance structures as key interlocutors in policy design and implementation, using existing advocacy networks such as rural parliaments;
- > Strengthening **linkages** and enabling **complementarity** between different policies (e.g. CAP and Cohesion policy), creating opportunities for networking and building trust among relevant administrations;
- > Improving access to funding for innovators, **reducing bureaucracy** and **focusing on results and high-quality action** rather than on administrative requirements;
- > Providing human and financial resources for **building the capacity of local actors** (especially those lagging behind) in a wide range of policy fields, as well as supporting smaller organisations and facilitating access to tools providing guidance and practical advice (e.g. on funding opportunities).

Co-creating conclusions and proposals – panel discussion

A panel discussion focused on what needs to be done to **ensure the elements/conditions are in place for local action to contribute to the Rural Pact objectives**.

Maria-Teresa Valera (Regional government of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain) stressed the importance of having a common understanding of rural challenges (such as depopulation) and speaking the same language. The rural vision needs to be at the centre of EU policies.

Vanessa Halhead (European Rural Communities Alliance and Scottish Rural Action) highlighted the complexity of rural action, with multiplicity of players and issues, requiring structures and processes to enable dialogue and make things happen. Stronger (possibly legal) commitment from national governments is needed to meaningfully listen to rural communities.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić (European Economic and Social Committee and Croatian organisation ODRAZ) pointed out the importance of information, training and capacity building, as well as the role of mediators who can help integrate top-down and bottom-up policies. Pressure from the local level can bring about change and better coordination at the national level.

Michael Schmitz (Confederation of European Municipalities and Regions and German Association of Counties) stressed that the Rural Pact should help the many local stakeholders who are already active. Additionally, coordination of policies targeting rural areas should go beyond DG AGRI and REGIO, and include transport and mobility issues.

The panel discussion stressed the need for urgent action to put these conditions and approaches into practice. Additional suggestions highlighted by the audience through a Slido poll include:

- > **LAGs** are a key ally at the local level, but they are not enough. They need to go beyond LEADER and have a **genuinely integrated rural vision and planning**, including Cohesion and other policies.
- > **Rural mediators** are needed to create a bridge between the local people and the support programmes.
- > Local people should be empowered and trusted to build on what is already in place, and to use methods that have proven to work well.
- > An EU instrument would be needed to finance cooperation and peer-learning initiatives for local actors, as well as a technical office to support this, especially in areas that are lagging behind.
- > It is not for the local level to contribute to the Rural Pact, but vice versa, the Pact should contribute and support local action.

Concluding remarks

Keynote listener

Sari Rautio (Member of the Committee of the Regions and the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy) ([PPT](#))



Place-based development is essential, because areas are different and one size does not fit all, ideas have to come from the bottom up. Rural areas have many valuable resources and 'heroes', but these resources need to be promoted and recognised. At national level, there is still a lot of fragmentation of policies, so more coordination and collaboration is needed to avoid silos.

It is important to listen to the local people's voices and to let them know that their ideas are taken seriously. The impact of the Rural Pact will depend on motivated people willing to share. "Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something."

Next steps for the Rural Pact Support Office

Pascale Van Doren, Rural Pact Support Office ([PPT](#))



The Support Office will organise another two Policy Action Labs in 2024 (online in [September](#) and in-person in December), as well as an event at the European Week of Regions and Cities in October 2024, organised jointly with Interreg Europe and focused on [advancing the Rural Pact by fostering local action](#).

Closing remarks of the European Commission

Antonia Gámez Moreno (DG AGRI) ([PPT](#))



The purpose of bringing the Rural Pact to the local level is not to create new structures, policy instruments or impose a new layer. It is to strengthen already existing initiatives by helping them getting recognition at all policymaking levels, fostering mutual learning, and connecting all actors and all levels of governance into a broad and powerful movement.

The European Commission will continue implementing the EU rural action plan, including actions of importance to the local level, supporting the facilitation of the stakeholder network, and improving available tools, such as the community platform. All participants are encouraged to take part in the debate about future rural policies and respond to the questions for reflection prepared by the Commission.

Wallis Vandebrock-Goëlen (DG REGIO)



Cohesion policy supports rural areas through all of its objectives, but especially through Policy Objective 5 'Bringing Europe closer to citizens', dedicated to integrated and sustainable territorial development.

The policy takes account of the specificities of all EU territories and builds on their respective assets to overcome constraints while incentivising multi-level partnerships and place-based approaches, ensuring that public investment decisions are taken as close as possible to citizens. It is essential to have good-quality granular data that can grasp the diversity of rural areas and underpin territorial impact assessment. Action at EU level must be complemented with place-based policies.

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



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