

Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States

Policy Briefing

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1. Introduction

This policy briefing outlines the key elements, or ingredients, needed to mobilise stakeholders around the Rural Pact and foster concerted action towards meeting the objectives of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas in the specific context of each Member State or region. It also presents some examples of how these elements are put into practice. This publication is intended primarily for public authorities at national level (and at regional level in Member States where regional authorities have legislative or programming powers), civil society organisations (especially those involved in policy-making or advocacy), researchers, business organisations and other stakeholders with an interest in rural policies.



If you are wondering how to make the Rural Pact happen in your country or region, this briefing is for you!

2. Why is the Rural Pact needed?

As the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has highlighted, rural areas are **essential** for Europe's identity and well-being. They also play an important role in addressing major social and environmental **challenges**. For rural areas to thrive, a **coordinated effort** is needed by a wide range of actors and stakeholders at different governance levels.

In 2021, after extensive joint reflection and consultation with stakeholders, the European Commission published a communication

on the **long-term vision for the EU's rural areas** ([LTVRA](#)). A [rural action plan](#) has been developed to accomplish this vision articulated around nine flagship initiatives, 15 accompanying actions and six [horizontal actions](#), reflecting the Commission's commitment to stronger, more resilient, more connected and prosperous rural areas by 2040. One of these horizontal actions is to propose a **Rural Pact** – a mechanism to involve and encourage action from all relevant stakeholders and governance levels that can help to achieve the long-term vision.

Rural Pact Objectives



Amplifying the voice of rural areas and bringing them up in policy agendas



Networking, collaboration & mutual learning



Commitments to act

In June 2023 the European Commission set up the [Rural Pact Coordination Group](#), made up of key rural stakeholders, to steer the Rural Pact process over the next three years, coordinated by the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, with the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy as co-lead. The Commission has also established the [Rural Pact Support Office](#) to animate the pact and help the community achieve its objectives by implementing key tasks. These include organising events, collecting and disseminating good practices, coordinating efforts with other EU policy networks, supporting the Rural Pact community platform, producing the Rural Vision Magazine, a newsletter and policy briefings, and managing the website and social media channels. The EU-level activities are all designed and carried out with strong involvement of stakeholders. However, to achieve results, the **Rural Pact needs to spread beyond the EU level and reach stakeholders at national, regional and local levels**. National, regional and local authorities are responsible for many policy actions that impact rural areas, including choices on how EU funds are used. Other stakeholders, like civil society organisations, have important roles in shaping and implementing policies. The long-term vision can only be achieved with their active participation and engagement. Moreover, well-being and livelihoods in rural areas – particularly those with specific constraints like mountainous, island or cross-border regions – do not

depend only on actors typically associated with agriculture and rural development. Public authorities (e.g. those responsible for education, health, transport and other services, energy, environment or digital infrastructure), urban policy actors, businesses and researchers also have a role to play.

Depending on needs and organisational cultures across the EU, there are attempts to establish rural pacts at various levels (national, regional, local) and in various forms. It is important that **no rural area in the EU is left behind** and that all can benefit from the coordinated effort to make them stronger, more resilient, more connected and prosperous. To this end, stakeholders interested in EU rural areas should join the Rural Pact Community at the EU level, as well as taking practical steps in their own field of activity, and also look for the best ways to **translate the Rural Pact into action in their national, regional or local contexts**. Such activities at different levels will support each other and help turn the long-term vision into a concrete strategy with practical outcomes, as called for by stakeholders at the [High-Level Rural Policy Forum](#) held in Sigüenza (Spain).



3. The Rural Pact ingredients

Long before the LTVRA was developed, some EU Member States (e.g. Finland) had governance structures in place enabling coordinated and comprehensive rural policies across various thematic domains, similar to what is advocated with the Rural Pact; other countries have started implementing similar initiatives more recently, triggered by negative trends such as rural depopulation, economic decline and discontent, or to seize opportunities created by European funding (for example, Spain and Czechia). Based on their experience, and on the LTVRA process at the EU level, there are a number of **elements that Member States can implement which contribute to the Rural Pact objectives** at national or regional level. These elements complement the 11 [OECD Principles on Rural Policy](#) and include:

- ▶ Structures and mechanisms to engage with rural communities;
- ▶ A designated government member and dedicated services to deal with rural issues across policies;
- ▶ Capacity building and networking support for a broad array of actors and stakeholders;
- ▶ A forward-looking vision, implemented through a holistic strategy/action plan;
- ▶ Effective rural proofing and adequate data systems;
- ▶ Appropriate governance systems to facilitate coordination; and
- ▶ Mechanisms to coordinate the allocation of funding and ensure synergies.

Taken together, these form the ingredients of a successful Rural Pact. The **individual solutions can be adapted** to the national context, including specific legal and administrative frameworks, funding sources, organisational culture and stakeholder capacities.

3.1 Structures and mechanisms to engage with rural communities

Rural change cannot be achieved without the strong involvement of rural communities. Policies designed and implemented in a participatory way are known to have a much greater chance of success than top-down approaches. This is particularly true for rural areas. Such involvement must go beyond occasional consultations: it should be **regular, systematic and ensure representative participation** of the most concerned stakeholders. It is also important to involve these stakeholders throughout the

whole policy process, from conceptualising and designing policy to drafting legislation, implementation and evaluation of results.

For this, specific mechanisms are needed, adapted to the capacities and availability of rural communities' representatives, as well as activities that foster open discussion (e.g. debates and workshops). There are a variety of possible formats: for instance, relatively formal structures like working groups or coordination committees involving different types of actors (e.g. the Rural Policy Council in **Finland**); or events to help formulate and voice rural communities' needs, as well as raising awareness and appreciation of rural areas among the wider public. Existing networks with direct links to rural communities can play an important role. This could take place, for example, within the framework of **national rural parliaments**, which enable rural communities and civil society

The rural parliament in Latvia

The Latvian Rural Forum (a national organisation bringing together key civil society stakeholders in rural development) organises the Latvian Rural Communities Parliament every 2 years. In 2023 this event brought together around 300 representatives of local and regional authorities, businesses, policy-makers (including the ministries of agriculture, environmental protection and regional development, and welfare), academics, rural development professionals and enthusiasts. Participants exchanged experiences and a resolution was developed to serve as a road map for all decisions on rural areas for the next two years.



See more information [here](#).

organisations to establish dialogue with policy-makers (see example from **Latvia**). Such rural parliaments have been organised in many EU Member States (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Romania, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania) as well as in neighbouring countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Scotland in the UK); their conclusions are brought to the [European Rural Parliament's](#) biennial gatherings.



© Lidija Pavić-Rogošić

It is time that the Long-Term Vision for Rural Europe is not only adopted, but implemented. For this we need a change of minds, more appreciation of rural areas, as well as place-based approaches and more trust in the local people. We should go away from policy silos and look at rural areas in a comprehensive way.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić,
EESC member, ODRAZ – Sustainable Community
Development (HR)





3.2 A designated government member and dedicated services to deal with rural issues across policies

Rural development typically falls under the responsibility of a government ministry; often it is also dealing with agriculture, forestry and/or food economy. However, decisions made by bodies in charge of economic and regional development, education, health and transportation can have an equal or greater impact on rural life. Ensuring all these services cooperate to achieve a positive impact on rural areas requires strong leadership, and having a **designated government member in charge of rural issues** is key for rural people to feel heard. Establishing a special service to deal with rural matters may also help raise awareness on the importance of rural areas among the relevant government bodies and facilitate coordinated action. Inspiring solutions can be found in the examples from **Ireland** and **Finland**.

Finland's Rural Policy Council

Finland has long recognised that rural policy must involve all institutions whose decisions affect daily life and entrepreneurship in rural areas. With this in mind, a structure was developed to bring them together and ensure collaboration: the Finnish Rural Policy Council. This is attached to the Finnish government, with the minister for agriculture and the minister for economic affairs and employment typically sharing the functions of chair and vice-chair. The 34 members are appointed by the government and represent ministries, agencies, the private sector and civil society organisations. They are supported by a secretariat managed by the secretary general, with three vice-secretaries general representing the public sector, civil society and research bodies. Most of the council's work is carried out in thematic networks.



See more information [here](#).

'Our Rural Future' in Ireland

Ireland's comprehensive policy for rural areas is underpinned by the national long-term development strategy Project Ireland 2040 and based on the vision of a thriving rural Ireland integral to the national economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being and development.



To achieve this, a comprehensive set of policy measures has been designed, each with a specific government department responsible for its implementation. The process is coordinated by the Department of Rural and Community Development and led by its minister, while progress is monitored by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment chaired by the prime minister.

See more information [here](#).

A dedicated service like this can also act as the first point of call for stakeholders to share ideas or express concerns about rural issues. Ideally, it should be staffed with people who understand and communicate well with diverse rural stakeholders and different administrative departments and with experience of other sectors in the economy or civil society.



© Radim Sršeň

Looking at the geography of discontent, we need to stop talking and start acting! The Rural Pact and initiatives such as rural proofing need to happen not only at EU but also Member State, regional and local levels. A holistic approach is needed, with less bureaucracy.

Radim Sršeň, Deputy Minister for Regional Affairs (CZ) and Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group



3.3 Capacity building and networking support for a broad array of stakeholders

Participation of rural stakeholders is essential for achieving rural change. But, to take part in the Rural Pact, many may need support from intermediary organisations. These can provide explanations, encouragement and opportunities for discussion, as well as enabling people to exchange experiences and formulate opinions and positions. This type of support may be particularly important for inhabitants of small remote villages, small-scale farmers, micro-entrepreneurs, women and youth representatives. Starting from building trust and explaining key concepts in simple language, skills development and targeted training, a **long-term systematic effort** might be needed to involve these 'unusual suspects'. Providing a budget to cover travel costs to meetings could be key, especially in bigger Member States (such as **Sweden**, see example). Beyond support for networking and participation, it is also important to ensure rural actors can access funding and implement projects that contribute to the LTVRA at the local level. One-stop shops can strengthen and revitalise rural communities through animation, advice, networking and help to meet funding requirements. This support is already provided by many LEADER local action groups (LAGs), but it can also come from specialised services (as in the **US** example).

Involving and building capacity of rural stakeholders in Sweden

Involving stakeholders in rural matters in Sweden is facilitated by the National Rural Network (NRN). National and regional rural stakeholders (whether they implement the common agricultural policy or not) are encouraged to apply for formal membership and commit to actively participating in thematic working groups, and they can act as intermediaries helping to transfer policy dialogue to the local level. To facilitate participation of civil society actors, the NRN has funding for travel costs, and even fees (for volunteers).



See more information [here](#).

Helping rural communities access information and funding

In the United States, federal agencies and commissions responsible for rural issues team up to ensure rural communities have equitable access to federal funding. They also provide expertise to help these communities clarify local priorities and apply for funding for job creation, infrastructure and community improvement.



See more information [here](#).

To raise rural beneficiaries' awareness of the relevant European funds, on 6 February 2024 the European Commission released a toolkit on EU funding opportunities for rural areas. This centralises information in one place accessible to local authorities, stakeholders, project leaders and managing authorities, helping them to make the most of new opportunities offered by the 2021-2027 EU budget.

Programme France Ruralités

Building on the implementation of its first national rural agenda, in 2023 the French government launched a comprehensive programme to boost rural areas. This has four pillars: technical support on investment projects for municipalities, increased biodiversity funding to valorise rural environmental assets, practical solutions for daily life (mobility, education, health, culture, housing, etc.), and a new system of designing rural revitalisation zones, which benefit from tax relief. An important element of the programme is the promotion of 'third places' to foster collective innovation.



The programme was launched jointly by the prime minister, the minister of ecological transition and territorial cohesion, and the deputy minister in charge of local authorities and rural affairs. Results will be monitored through indicators such as the percentage of vacant rural homes, the number of new rural businesses and the percentage of citizens who consider rural areas a good place to live. See more information [here \(in FR\)](#).

3.4 A forward-looking vision implemented through a holistic strategy/action plan

To address the challenges facing rural areas, decision-makers must have a clear vision guiding the direction to pursue long term. Rural communities and those looking to invest, settle down or work in rural areas, especially young people, need to know that policy support will continue to be available for many years. For this, a broad consensus is needed among political groups and civil society (including both rural and urban organisations), farmers, SMEs, youth and various economic and social actors; effective conflict management provisions might also be necessary. Consensus and the involvement of key government services make it possible to assure **long-term continuity** and secure sufficient resources – human, institutional and financial – to turn a vision into reality.

A holistic multi-sectoral strategy is also essential for the vision to become a reality. Since rural policies have to deal with multiple and complex challenges, fragmented interventions are not effective; trying to address a single issue or support one target group can even be counterproductive. A holistic and integrated approach helps take into account the social, economic and environmental aspects of rural life which in many cases are interlinked (see example from **France**). A national or regional rural pact can be the first step in bringing together different policy strands and facilitating a **broader, more integrated view** of rural areas. This should be translated into **practical steps** which form a coherent action plan, clearly indicating who is responsible for what and how progress can be monitored and evaluated.

3.5 Effective rural proofing and adequate data systems

Since rural areas are affected by a large number of legislative and administrative decisions, a mechanism is needed to maximise the positive and limit the negative impacts. Rural proofing is a mechanism that identifies and assesses the impacts of new regulations, plans or programmes on rural areas. To be successful, it must be integrated into the entire **governance system** and tailored to the specific administrative structure of a country/region. In the **UK**, according to the [2020 Rural Proofing Report](#), each government department has a nominated rural proofing lead whose role is to champion rural proofing in their policy field. The government has also drawn up [practical guidance on considering the outcomes of policy in rural areas](#). In **Finland**, rural proofing is integrated into the Ministry of Justice's guidance on impact assessment of government legislative proposals and it is accompanied by easy-to-use assessment methods as well as training and **raising awareness of legislators**. The [ENRD thematic group on rural proofing](#) has prepared an analytical framework and recommendations for rural proofing at national, regional and local levels.

To assess the impact of decisions on rural areas, and to measure progress with implementation of policies and strategies, access to **high quality data** is essential. The Spanish region of Catalonia publishes a comprehensive biannual book with detailed statistics about its rural areas. This data is used by the regional rural [vision](#) steering committee to monitor new legislative proposals and assess the impacts in rural areas. In Hungary, the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System ([www.teir.hu](#)) integrates rural data from various sources with a dedicated LEADER module which provides data to LAGs and municipalities. Evidence-based decision-making on rural issues can also be supported by the [Rural Observatory](#), launched in December 2022 by the European Commission to centralise, analyse and disseminate data related to EU rural areas.





3.6 Appropriate governance systems to facilitate coordination

Given the importance of involving many different policy actors in rural development, it is vital to establish a system that facilitates coordination, both **horizontal** (e.g. between different sectoral ministries) and **vertical** (between different governance levels: national, regional, sub-regional and local). Such coordination should help avoid duplication of efforts or contradictory actions and create synergies. A multi-level governance model should involve civil society organisations, businesses and social partners. Mechanisms and incentives should be put in place to ensure that different services and administrative levels communicate regularly, and that cooperation is not limited to the exchange of information, but facilitates open participatory discussion and planning of joint activities.

Regular meetings of staff members responsible for different policy tools can be worthwhile, ideally in an informal setting, to build **trust and a common understanding** of challenges and objectives. Clear lines of responsibility for specific tasks and strong legitimacy of the body in charge of coordination are also highly important, as illustrated by the **Spanish** example. Some Member States have [Food Policy Councils](#) which can serve as an inspiring model of multi-stakeholder platforms.

Combatting rural depopulation in Castilla-La Mancha

In 2021 the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha passed a special law on economic, social and tax measures to combat depopulation and develop rural areas. Strong leadership from the regional vice-president, with the support of a dedicated commissioner for the demographic challenge, were key to mobilising and involving all regional government departments (such as agriculture, education, health and transport) in the law's development and in implementation of a regional strategy to make it a reality.



This strategy covers a wide range of actions and mobilises EUR 3 322 million from regional, national and EU funds, including NextGenerationEU. To coordinate the strategy, the Regional Council for the Development of the Rural Environment and the Fight against Depopulation has been created with the involvement of representatives from all regional government departments, provincial councils and local bodies, as well as key socio-economic actors (e.g. trade unions, business, universities and civil society).

See more information [here](#).



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Facing rural challenges implies the development of transversal policies that involve all the levels of government. In Catalonia, the Rural Pact was the result of a participatory process, and its governance involves civil society, government and parliament.

Albert Puigvert, Association of Rural Initiatives in Catalonia (ES)



3.7 Mechanisms to coordinate the allocation of funding and ensure synergies

On top of good coordination between different bodies, effective support to rural areas requires **linking different sources of funding** – European, national, regional and local – to ensure the various instruments combined are sufficient to address rural needs and adapted to target beneficiaries' reality (small-scale projects, limited administrative capacity, etc.). The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and cohesion policy (ERDF, ESF) are the key sources of EU financing for rural change, but several other funds (resilience and recovery funds) and programmes (e.g. Erasmus, LIFE) can play a role. These funding streams can also be **combined** through multi-fund approaches to create even more opportunities for action on the ground, as is the case in **Czechia**. National and regional managing authorities can facilitate access to funding for rural stakeholders by putting in place dedicated funding streams **targeting rural areas** and designing simple, user-friendly rules for application, eligibility and reporting across the different funds. This was done, for example, by **Sweden** in the 2014-2020 period, with all community-led local development funding for rural areas from four EU funds (EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and EMFF) managed by a single authority and implemented through a harmonised set of rules.

Another solution is a one-stop shop to support rural municipalities, businesses and NGOs in accessing public funding, established at local, regional or national level. In some Member States (for instance, in the [Tyrol region in Austria](#)) this role is played by LEADER LAGs.

Rural Development Concept in Czechia

Czechia combined different EU funds for rural areas in 2014-2020: its 178 rural LAGs covered almost all of the country's rural areas, making use of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the EAFRD, with most funding coming from the ERDF. Based on this experience, Czechia designed its Rural Development Concept in 2020 under the Ministry of Regional Development's supervision, combining a variety of funding sources through territorial instruments and SMART strategies.



During the Czech presidency of the EU, the Czech Rural Pact was initiated. This brings together citizens, local authorities and other partners to promote rural development there.

See more information [here](#) and [here](#).

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