

RURAL PACT

Empowering communities to take action for the rural vision

Policy Briefing

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1. Introduction

Rural areas are essential for Europe's identity and well-being. However, rural communities across the EU are facing a number of challenges, including: depopulation and ageing; deterioration of public services such as education, health or transport; declining incomes from primary industries; and negative consequences of climate change.

Public policies are trying to address these challenges, but this response can be limited due to lack of coordination between different sectors, insufficient funding, bureaucracy or attempts to apply 'one-size-fits-all' solutions, without taking into account the specificity of each area.



If you are wondering how the Rural Pact can help your local community, this briefing is for you!



Funded by the European Union

2. Why is the Rural Pact important for local communities?

The European Commission, in consultation with numerous stakeholders, developed in 2021 a [long-term vision for EU's rural areas up to 2040](#) (LTVRA - rural vision). Key achievements of the rural vision and ways forward are outlined in the Commission's [report](#) from March 2024.

The Commission also put in place the Rural Pact – a collaborative mechanism to involve EU stakeholders in taking action for the rural vision. The Pact aims to bring rural issues higher in political agendas, build capacities through peer learning and networking, and encourage action.

To complement the Commission's initiative, many public authorities are putting in place new institutional frameworks or strengthening existing ones to boost their rural policies and therefore to make the Rural Pact happen at national and regional levels. However, more sustained effort is needed to ensure that the benefits of the Pact can reach local communities at village, municipality or sub-regional level.

Ten shared goals of the EU rural vision

1. **Attractive spaces, developed in harmonious territorial development**
2. **Engaged in multi-level and place-based governance**
3. **Providers of food security, economic opportunities, goods and services for wider society**
4. **Dynamic communities focusing on well-being**
5. **Inclusive communities**
6. **Flourishing sources of nature**
7. **Fully benefitting from digital innovation**
8. **Entrepreneurial, innovative and skilled people**
9. **Lively places equipped with efficient, accessible and affordable public and private services**
10. **Places of diversity**

Members of the Rural Pact



Public authorities
at local, regional,
national and EU levels



Civil society
organisations



Businesses and
business organisations



Academic and research
institutions



Citizens

How can the Rural Pact help local communities?

Potential benefits for rural communities

- ✓ **Raise awareness** among authorities and the general public about the importance of rural areas
- ✓ Give a space to and support **rural voices in getting heard** in decision-making processes and bodies, and in advocating for enhanced policy support for rural areas
- ✓ **Proof all policies** – housing, health, education, mobility – from the perspective of **rural needs, and enable communities' involvement** in the design and implementation of those policies
- ✓ Provide space for exchange and **mutual learning**
- ✓ Improve **local actors' capacity** by facilitating access to knowledge, technical skills, information about funding, implementation capacity to identify and address rural challenges and opportunities
- ✓ Identify and disseminate **inspirational practices**
- ✓ Mobilise stakeholders to design, plan and implement **strategic vision and actions** for rural change
- ✓ Advocate for enhanced **coordination of policies** to address rural challenges in a comprehensive way

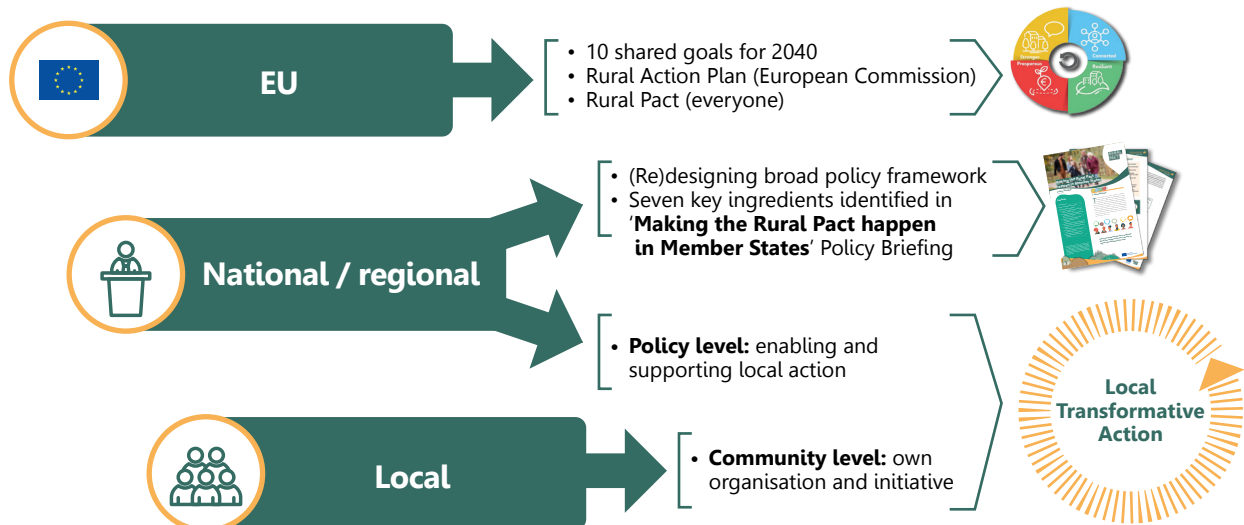
Linked to Rural Pact objective

- ✓ Objective 1: **Amplify rural voices and bring them higher on the political agenda**
- ✓ Objective 2: **Enable networking, collaboration and mutual learning**
- ✓ Objective 3: **Encourage voluntary commitments to act for the vision**

However, for rural communities to take full advantage of these benefits, national or regional governments must put in place a number of ingredients at the level of policy design. A strong political leadership would be needed, as well as mechanisms to engage rural communities and facilitate networking and peer learning, long-term strategy and action plan, rural proofing, integration and coordination of sectoral policies and funding sources. Those elements have been described in the publication on [‘Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States’](#) and a report on [‘Enabling factors for rural revitalisation’](#).

Acting on the broad design of national or regional policies affecting rural areas, while essential, is not sufficient to ensure that **individual local communities benefit from the Rural Pact** and are able to take effective action towards the rural vision objectives. This requires a concerted effort by local actors – including civil society and private entities, authorities and other public actors – as well as by national and regional policymakers.

Bringing the Rural Pact closer to citizens: who needs to do what ?



3. What needs to happen to bring the Rural Pact closer to citizens?

Rural areas are very diverse, there is **no one-size-fits-all approach**. Rural communities will find different solutions to develop a tailored response to their local challenges and opportunities.

communities to take action. Some of these elements are implemented by local communities themselves, while others need to be provided by higher-level authorities to put in place an enabling environment for action.

Nonetheless, there are number of key elements that facilitate local transformative processes and empower local

Each **rural community** must develop its own initiatives that respond to its specific needs and opportunities, in line with its cultural and legal contexts. In particular, it is recommended that rural communities:



- **Come together around the local leaders** – person(s) or organisation(s) that could drive the transformation of the rural area;
- Adopt an appropriate **organisational set-up** (structure and decision-making mechanisms) that allows broad participation;
- Agree on **shared vision and plan**, with broad transformative actions, including the identification of needs and opportunities.

A number of actions must also be taken by **higher-level authorities** at regional, national and European levels to stimulate and support local transformative action. These authorities should, in particular:



- **Recognise the local leaders** and their organisational set-ups **as partners** in genuine multi-level governance;
- Organise and/or finance **local capacity building**;
- Foster **coordinated action** of all relevant policies and funding streams;
- Improve **access to funding** and reduce bureaucracy.

4. What should local actors do?

4.1 Come together around a local leader driving the local transformative process

Taking action for the rural vision requires the involvement of many different stakeholders, but there is usually one actor – an individual, a small group of people or a single organisation – who starts the development process or acts as its catalyst. Such '**local leaders**' may come from the public, private or civil sector, but they need to be characterised by, at least, an ability to **inspire, motivate and mobilise** others in the territory, and the **public spirit** or sense of common good.

The local leader should not be perceived as representing a single political or economic interest, but follow an inclusive and democratic process. Local leaders can play the role of 'champions' (standing up for a cause important to the local community), 'ambassadors' (representing certain values and mobilising their community) or 'mediators' (bringing together diverse actors or interests and fostering synergies between them).

These people or organisations should not work in isolation, but along with a support network to ensure the implementation of the actions in the long term. Ensuring the participation of young people (see useful material from [Generation Europe Academy](#)), women and business representatives is key.

In remote rural areas in Bulgaria, the [Ideas Factory Association](#) is working with around 30 villages, using cultural mediation as a method to foster intergenerational and cross-sectoral linkages. The initiative 'Baba Residence' brings young artists to stay with elderly rural women to foster intergenerational linkages and social capital, thus increasing community resilience.



The young people co-create adapted solutions jointly with the villagers (for example, renovating an old school building) to make the villages liveable spaces and democratise access to resources. Culture is used as leverage to address social isolation, mental health and other pressing problems in this most quickly depopulating country in the world. Thanks to the cultural mediators some villages are now able to attract new families to settle down.

See also how the Dutch Smart Village of [Hilvarenbeek](#) supports citizens' initiatives through a network of local development advisers.

4.2 Adopt an appropriate organisational set-up that allows broad participation

New dynamics require an organisational set-up that enables the involvement of different stakeholder types, encourages broad participation, and combines democratic decision-making with flexibility.

In many rural communities there is no need to put in place new organisations or structures, as there are already structures in place that can play this role. Examples include village movement organisations, well-functioning LEADER partnerships and drivers of Smart Village initiatives.

Nonetheless, these may need strengthening and capacity building to cover a broader range of thematic areas of key importance for the territory – such as mobility, health, culture – by targeted national/regional policies (see below). This could further support awareness raising of the local structures among their communities and bringing in new allies.

In other communities, key stakeholders can choose not to use existing or new structures, but simply describe the common goals, roles and responsibilities in a contract or agreement.

According to the degree of formalisation, there could be a range of formats a community might adopt:

- Common **declaration** or **statement of intention** publicly made by local stakeholders;
- **Cooperation Agreement** or a **Memorandum of Understanding** signed between the key actors;
- **Partnership Agreement** with a designated entity representing the partners, as lead partner or accountable body – this is the case with LEADER in some Member States where Local Action Groups (LAGs) do not have a legal entity, but elect one of the partners to be the accountable body;
- Stakeholders subscribing to a **formal legal instrument** (see example of the Landscape Charter below);
- **Dedicated office** established by key stakeholders to support cooperation among them – for instance, municipalities coming together to set up an inter-municipal structure;
- Dedicated **legal entity** established for the implementation of the strategy or action plan – many LEADER LAGs have the structure of an NGO, set up specifically to implement the local strategy, others operate as private, non-profit companies.



More informal arrangements

- declaration or statement of intention
- Cooperation Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding



Medium level of formalisation

- stakeholders subscribing to a formal legal instrument
- Partnership Agreement with a designated entity



More formal arrangements

- joint structure or office to support cooperation
- dedicated legal entity to implement the strategy or action plan

The Catalan Landscape Charter (Spain) is a voluntary legal instrument which enables local stakeholders to work together in order to improve the landscape and turn it into an asset for the future. The [county of Priorat](#) is using this Charter as an axis of broader local development, enabling the community to diagnose local challenges and find adapted solutions to address depopulation, food and energy sovereignty, agriculture, and economic diversification.



The governance structure involves advisory and consultative bodies of the Landscape and Sustainability Commission, supported by the Landscape Office and various governmental departments of the region, as well as participative fora of interested stakeholders which help to encourage debate and drive initiatives.

The Priorat Landscape Charter is supported under the local LEADER strategy and involves close cooperation among the county council, the Landscape Office and the LAG. In this sense, the Charter is a tool for local development coordination, planning actions in new, previously unaddressed areas, and is linked to higher-level policies, notably the [Catalan Rural Pact](#).

See also a French example of a dedicated inter-communal body enabling joint action: Pays Vallée du Loir 'Fostering territorial cohesion through a dedicated instrument' [presentation](#) and [video](#).

Such a common vision should take **already existing initiatives as a starting point** and cover **a broader range of themes**: economy, environment, infrastructure, or services such as health, education, mobility, housing. The rural vision could serve as an overall framework to explore relevant themes for the areas. It may be a long and gradual process according to the needs at local level, as local stakeholders may not be able to act on all these themes from the start.

[Nockregion in Upper Carinthia](#) aims to be the best Austrian region for living and working. The Nockregion LAG organised working groups involving 800 people and developed a single strategy that describes the ambitions of the area.



As LEADER funding is not sufficient to achieve all this, the LAG also uses the European Social Fund (ESF) and other EU and national funding sources, so that LEADER accounts for only 30% of its total budget.

The LAG also tries to engage with higher-level policies, for example the LAG manager was involved in the national board dealing with demographic change, although such linkages are still rather limited.

See also a French example of an innovative territory and its network of various actors, mobilised around a shared vision with five challenges: 'People and Trees' (Fr. 'Des Hommes et des Arbres') [presentation](#) and [video](#).

4.3 Agree on a shared vision and plan with broad transformative actions

The transformative action undertaken at the local level to address needs and make rural areas stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous should be coherent and well planned.

Many rural areas are already covered by a number of strategies and plans, and it may not be necessary – or even advisable – to mobilise the community to develop yet another strategic document. It would, however, be useful for the whole community to agree on a **broad common vision** for their area in the future, and for the relevant actors to know **how their action contributes to the overall vision**, even if it is financed under national or regional level strategies or programmes.

You would like to do something in your rural area, but don't know where to start? A number of tools already exist.

- The EU-funded [Smart Rural 21](#) project (2020-2022) supported rural communities (villages) in developing Smart Village strategies and implementing innovative actions. The project [final report and leaflet](#) contain a series of [community tools](#), [innovative local solutions](#), and lessons from working with communities.
- The '[Compass for Local Empowerment in rural areas](#)' by the European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA) features a range of useful tools and examples.
- The EU LEADER Toolkit, particularly the section on '[How to form a Local Action Group \(LAG\)?](#)' outlines useful suggestions.
- The [Rural toolkit on EU funding](#) collects information about potential sources of funding and support for local initiatives.



5. What should policymakers do to enable action?

5.1 Recognise local leaders and their organisational set-ups as partners in genuine multi-level governance

The [Rural Pact Community Platform](#) enables the connection of peers from across Europe. By joining the Platform, stakeholders can initiate or participate in thematic discussions via community groups, share experiences, find partners and access useful material. The [Rural Observatory](#) is a source of useful information and data about EU rural areas.

Although many rural communities are organising themselves to foster local action, their efforts tend to be overlooked by national and regional authorities who often consider themselves the main drivers of rural change.

Acknowledging that rural communities are the main actors, delegating to them

the power to decide what should be done, and involving them in the implementation of local action in multi-level and multi-actor governance processes may require a mentality change. See the SHERPA Position Paper on '[Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)' for useful ideas on how this can be achieved.

Some communities may wish to brand their actions as 'local Rural Pact' as a way of signalling their commitment to act for the rural vision. Linking up with this European political initiative may also gain recognition for those areas by regional, national or European authorities. Communities that are well advanced in putting in place the elements mentioned previously (in subsections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3) or others might consider using the 'Rural Pact' brand to increase their visibility, raise awareness of their efforts, and connect with other communities implementing similar approaches.

In many Dutch villages, local communities are invited to make proposals for transformative action to address local challenges. They develop 'Village Plans' which – once the community and municipality agree on the division of tasks – become 'Village Pacts'.



This is part of the government's effort to give more responsibility to local people and less focus on the state. For example, the local community has the power to challenge what public authorities are doing, and take over the public services if they are not satisfied with their delivery.

The first generation of 'Village Plans' focused mainly on what the villagers would like the government to do, subsequent plans focus more on what the people can do themselves.

The Catalan example (subsection 2.2) also shows how different departments of the regional government work with the local initiative to enable a more effective coordination of various policies targeting rural areas.

5.2 Organise and/or finance local capacity building

If local communities are to play a greater role in designing and implementing local transformative action covering all thematic areas of the rural vision, they need to have the **capacity** to do so. This includes **knowledge, skills, and human and financial resources** to do the job.

Capacity building – the provision of training, advice, peer learning and information, as well as funding for staff, office equipment and travel – is an essential condition for the empowerment of rural communities. Tailor-made courses, helpdesks and online tools that provide easy-to-understand information and targeted advice need to be made accessible to a wide range of rural actors.

This should be complemented with **community animation** on the spot, especially in those areas where nothing or very little is happening yet. It is also very important to provide rural communities with opportunities to learn from one another through networking meetings, study visits or traineeships.

Finally, funding must be available for the **basic costs** of running an office and employing people who will continue to mobilise the local actors around the action plan and ensure its consistent implementation. Such capacity building could be funded, for example, through technical assistance available to managing authorities responsible for EU funding.

Scottish communities can develop '[Local Place Plans](#)' which set out proposals for land development and use. Once registered with the relevant local authority, these become part of the Scottish planning system and must be taken into account.



The community body set up to develop the Plan will have ownership of its delivery. A [special guide](#) in clear and simple language helps communities go through the process, and several organisations exist from which they can seek support.

Help in developing the Plan could also come from the Community Learning and Development teams based within local authorities, or from local planning departments.

Additional support for the implementation of the Plan can be obtained. For example, the Langholm Alliance got funding for two posts, a community enterprise manager and a project assistant, from the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency.

5.3 Foster coordinated action

Appropriate governance systems and mechanisms to combine different funding sources and foster synergies have been identified as one of the [key ingredients of the Rural Pact at national level](#). However, it is not enough to ensure coordination and complementarity at policy level – it is important that this is translated into practical action on the ground.

Ideally, rural communities will have a space where they get transparent information and have their say on a variety of policy and funding topics, without having to navigate different institutions or divergent rules and procedures. It is not necessary, nor feasible, to ensure that such a space is available in every rural community, but it should not be too remote from rural actors – a reasonable solution could be at sub-regional (NUTS 3) level.

It is also important to foster exchange of experience, cooperation and coordination; build trust between authorities responsible for different funding sources; and ensure they have a common understanding of the needs and expectations of rural communities.

In some Italian regions, the implementation of LEADER (financed under the EAFRD) complements the government's Inner Areas Strategy (IAS) which aims to reinforce the demographic structure of rural areas.



The [MontagnAppenino LAG](#) in Tuscany acts as a rural development animator supporting the union of municipalities in implementing the IAS. Such cooperation creates synergies, with IAS mainly financing measures implemented by public entities, for example infrastructure projects addressing depopulation and social exclusion, and the LAG supporting collaborative projects on community development, non-agricultural businesses and innovation.

The LAG further provides technical support to public entities applying for IAS funding. In the 2021-2027 period, LAGs will also manage some IAS measures.

See also an example of coordination of funds at regional level in [Finland](#). For ideas on how networking can help build a common understanding, foster cooperation and trust between funding managing authorities, see the example from Sweden in the '[NRN support for LEADER/ CLLD implementation](#)' publication (p.5).

5.4 Improve access to funding and reduce bureaucracy

Local communities will not be able to implement their transformative action without access to funding schemes which are sufficiently **flexible** to respond to a great variety of needs, and sufficiently

simple to enable local project promoters to obtain funding without facing excessive administrative barriers.

Some national or regional managing authorities develop complicated rules and conditions for the administration of EU funds, which go well beyond EU legislation (sometimes referred to as 'gold-plating').

As a result, many local actors are unwilling to apply for support or abandon their projects in view of lengthy decision processes – this creates a negative image of European funding in many local communities. Thus, bringing the Rural Pact and vision closer to citizens should be linked with a **streamlining and simplification** of access to EU funding.

The [Rural toolkit on EU funding](#) (see box on p.5) is also a valuable tool to help rural communities navigate the complex landscape of EU funding opportunities.

Explore additional suggestions on mobilising different actors for the implementation of the rural vision in the [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\) opinion](#) 'Towards a greater involvement of Member States, Regions and Civil Society actors in the implementation of the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas'.

An important method of simplifying access to funding is the use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs). This does not require beneficiaries to keep a record of every single expenditure on their project, they only need to demonstrate that they have achieved

the agreed outputs and results and get paid on this basis.

In Finland, an [SCO system](#) (lump sums) was already used for many rural projects in the 2014-2020 period, under both LEADER and other measures. The simple application process encouraged many small or first-time beneficiaries to develop project ideas, and LEADER LAG advisers were available to help them choose the best funding option.

Another way of facilitating access to funding for small-scale beneficiaries is the use of 'umbrella projects' (packages of small operations which for administrative purposes are treated as a single project). For more examples of reducing the administrative burden for local actors, see the FARNET guide on '[Delivering CLLD effectively](#)'.



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