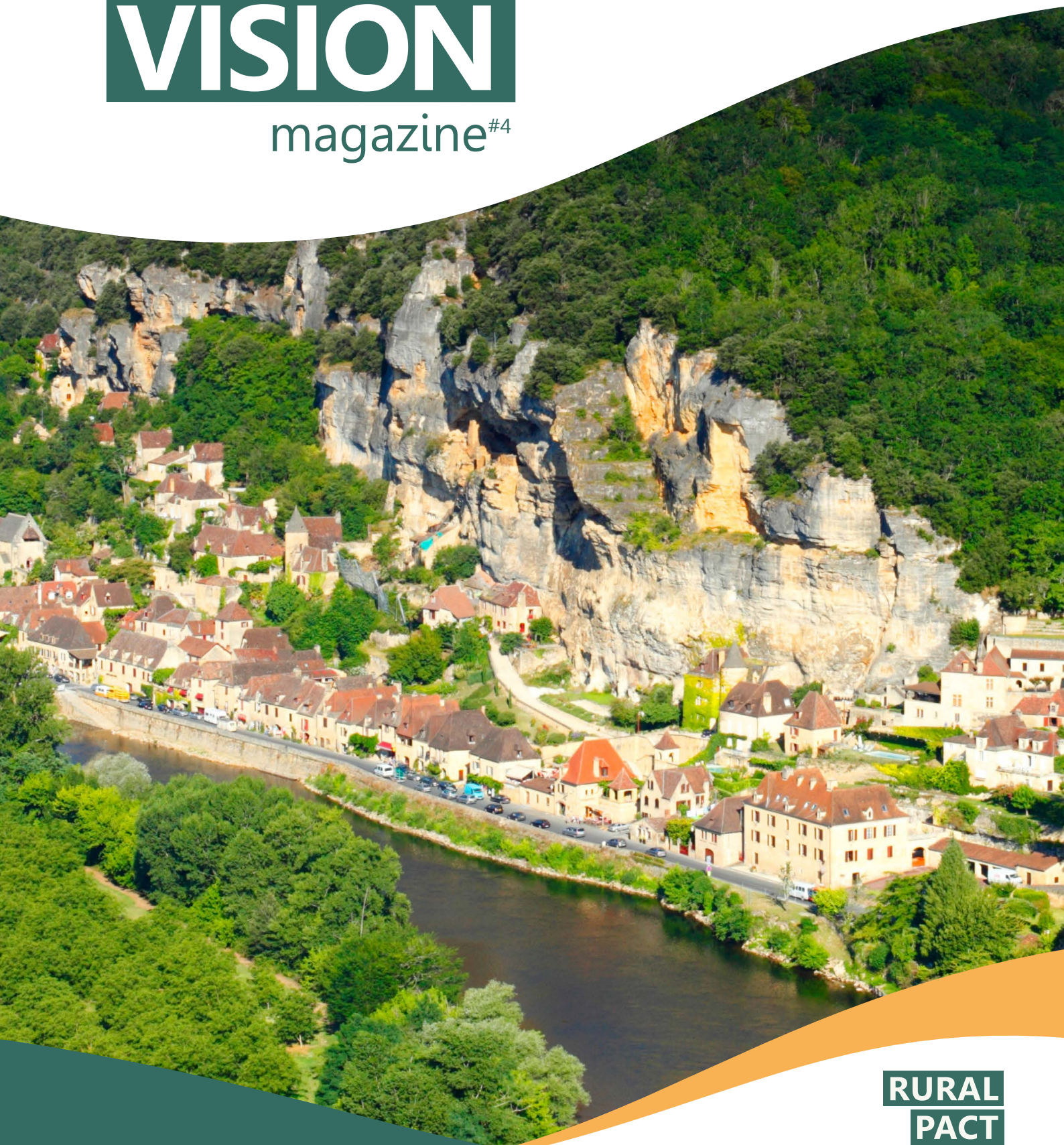


RURAL VISION

magazine^{#4}



Empowering
Rural
Europe



RURAL
PACT



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EDITORIAL

Wherever they live, all Europeans should enjoy the basic freedom to remain where they choose to build their lives. This is what we mean by the **'right to stay'**. Ensuring that staying is a genuine choice for everyone and that people are not forced to leave because of a lack of opportunities.

Providing the right conditions and opportunities for this is particularly challenging in remote and rural areas. People need access to quality jobs and economic opportunities, affordable housing, efficient transport, digital connectivity, modern infrastructure and reliable public services such as education, childcare and healthcare. These are the **foundations of a good quality of life**. They are often also the deciding factors in whether people can imagine building their future in a particular place.

This is why the European Commission is preparing the **first-ever European strategy for the right to stay**. Building on the good work done under the [EU rural vision](#), this strategy complements the Commission's work on other territorial strategies dedicated to the eastern border regions, islands, outermost regions and cities.

It will build on more than 700 contributions received from stakeholders across all 27 EU Member States and provide a **common framework for action** across different policy areas. A framework that strengthens the attractiveness of our regions and creates the conditions for people to remain, work and thrive.

Delivering these conditions requires **strong coordination across different policy areas**. Cohesion policy has a central role to play by addressing the root causes of territorial imbalances and investing in place-based solutions that reflect local needs. At the same time, delivering on the right to stay depends on an **integrated approach** that brings together a variety of policies. As Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, I ensure coordination across several policy areas, including agriculture, transport, tourism, fisheries and the blue economy. These areas also play an important role in strengthening competitiveness and making the right to stay a reality.

Furthermore, the right to stay is one of the key objectives of the future [EU budget beyond 2027](#) and for the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). The right to stay strategy aims to contribute to the NRPPs' preparation by providing practical solutions and guidance on **how European and national policies can be harnessed** to strengthen the attractiveness, prosperity and resilience of regions across the Union.

The goal is simple but ambitious: every European should have the freedom to build a future where they choose to live. Achieving this requires the **commitment, cooperation and coordination** of all actors and all levels of governance to turn the right to stay into a reality for people and communities across the EU.

Raffaele Fitto,
Executive Vice-President
for Cohesion and Reforms,
European Commission

Rural voices in the next EU policy framework: why and how to engage



By Urszula Budzich-Tabor,
Rural Pact Support Office

Rural stakeholders need to engage early

The proposed post-2027 EU policy framework gives Member States greater flexibility to decide how EU funding will contribute to support the development of rural areas. While this creates opportunities for more integrated territorial development, it also means that decisions on funding priorities, governance and implementation will increasingly be taken at national and regional levels. As part of the partnership principle, rural stakeholders therefore have an important role in helping ensure that the future National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) reflect the needs and opportunities of rural communities.

New opportunities – and new uncertainties

From 2028, the Commission proposes consolidating the current mix of funding streams into a [single European Fund](#) covering economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural areas, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security. Member States would allocate these resources through the proposed NRPPs.

The proposal allows for **more integrated support for rural areas under a single framework**. However, rural stakeholders have identified three main areas of uncertainty:

- **Funding** – although the Commission proposes a rural target of at least 10% of the non-ring-fenced allocation, national governments will have greater flexibility in deciding how NRPP resources are used.
- **Policy priorities** – Member States will define measures and targets reflecting national priorities, and it is not clear to what extent the existing interventions will be continued and in what format.
- **Governance** – Member States may designate managing authorities and coordination committees separately for each NRPP chapter, meaning that much of the governance structures – and the ways rural actors can engage with them – remain uncertain until the content of the plans is finalised.

What could rural stakeholders advocate for?

Discussions within the Rural Pact show that rural stakeholders are ready to engage with national authorities responsible for preparing the NRPPs. Three priorities have emerged.

First, they wish to ensure that an **adequate share of funding is allocated to rural areas**, reflecting both their importance for European society and their contribution to achieving the objectives of the new NRPP fund.

Second, they call for **broad investment priorities** able to address the diversity of rural needs and opportunities. These include economic development beyond agriculture, fisheries and forestry, sustainable jobs, access to services, culture, quality of life and the EU's emerging 'right to stay' strategy.

Third, they stress the importance of **strengthening bottom-up approaches** through an enhanced partnership principle, reduced administrative burden and wider use of territorial instruments, particularly Community-led Local Development (CLLD).

Preparing for dialogue

Under the strengthened partnership principle, national governments will prepare the NRPPs together with regional and local authorities and relevant stakeholders, including representatives of rural communities. At the same time, governments will need to balance rural priorities with those of other territorial and sectoral interests, while working within a demanding timetable leading to the start of the new funding period in 2028.

Rural organisations therefore need to be well organised and ready to engage at the right moment if they are to ensure that rural perspectives are reflected in the plans.

Different approaches across Member States

Several Member States are already adopting different approaches to stakeholder engagement.

In **Poland**, the ministry responsible for drafting the NRPP has established a team of around 90 stakeholders from different thematic fields, including a dedicated group on the territorial dimension, to help develop the strategic objectives and measures of the plan.

In **Estonia**, stakeholder engagement combines national and regional seminars, conferences and written consultations. The process places strong emphasis on inclusiveness, legitimacy and policy analysis, with the LEADER Union acting as a strategic partner.

In **Austria**, engagement focuses on targeted co-design going beyond and complementing the traditional broad consultations. Dialogue forums, webinars, workshops and planned technical working groups all contribute to developing the future NRPP.

The indicative timeline below outlines the main stages of NRPP preparation and opportunities for stakeholder engagement, based on the draft EU legislation and Member State plans available in July 2026.

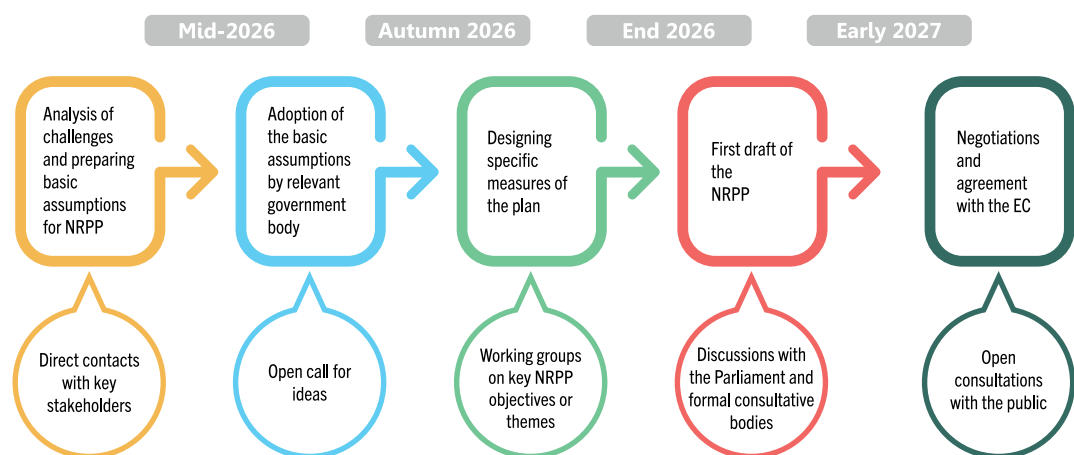
Engaging throughout the process at national and European levels

Stakeholder engagement should continue **throughout the preparation of the NRPPs**. Rural organisations should participate in early consultations, thematic working groups and public calls for ideas, while also engaging with Members of Parliament, regional and local authorities and research organisations working on rural development.

Equally important is ensuring that rural voices remain involved once the plans are implemented, through participation in monitoring committees, steering groups and similar governance bodies.

Alongside national discussions, rural stakeholders are also encouraged to engage in shaping the final EU legislative framework wherever possible. This can be achieved through European organisations representing rural interests, such as the Partnership for Rural Europe (PREPARE), European LEADER Network for Rural Development (ELARD), European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA), Rural Youth Europe (RYE) and others.

The Rural Pact Support Office will continue supporting this process by informing Rural Pact members about legislative developments, policy debates, engagement opportunities and stakeholder initiatives through its news, monthly newsletter and direct mailings.

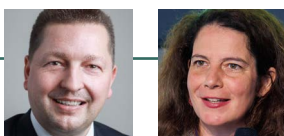


Rural Pact Policy Lab 'Anchoring rural areas in the National and Regional Partnership Plans':
https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/anchoring-rural-areas-national-and-regional-partnership-plans_en

A stronger rural dimension after 2027: perspectives from the CoR and EESC

As the EU's post-2027 policy and budget framework takes shape, how can rural needs and opportunities remain firmly in focus? The rapporteurs of two CoR and EESC opinions share their perspectives on strengthening the rural dimension of cohesion policy and embedding rural proofing across EU policymaking, funding and governance.

Radim Sršeň, European Committee of the Regions (CoR) opinion rapporteur, and Edina Ocsko, President of the Smart Village Network Services



The unanimous adoption of the European Committee of the Regions' opinion 'Future of Rural Development, 2028+' reflects a shared call for rural development to become a **core objective of cohesion policy**.

The future of rural development is at a crossroads: rural areas can either become museums or vibrant, attractive places for all generations.

Rural areas face many challenges, but have great potential. A **holistic, place-based, integrated, multi-fund and multi-policy approach** is the only recipe for their future. This should reflect the needs of the nearly 30% of European citizens living in rural areas.

Dedicated support is also needed for instruments such as **LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages** which have proved highly effective in engaging citizens and delivering tailor-made solutions across Europe.

Grounded in the **principle of subsidiarity**, the post-2027 framework should ensure the meaningful involvement of local and regional authorities and other rural partners throughout the design and implementation of the National and Regional Partnership Plans.

This approach can unlock the strategic potential of rural areas, enhance quality of life and help reverse demographic decline and growing discontent.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinion rapporteur



Rural proofing should become a systematic and participatory part of EU policymaking, ensuring that the specific realities of rural areas are considered from early policy design to implementation and evaluation. Rather than a one-off assessment, it should be **embedded across relevant policy areas and levels of government**.

The EESC has consistently stressed that effective rural proofing requires the **involvement of rural communities, civil society organisations, social partners and local stakeholders**. Their knowledge and experience are essential for identifying territorial impacts, shaping policy responses and ensuring that measures reflect local needs and opportunities. Where negative territorial impacts are identified, rural proofing should lead to adjustments.

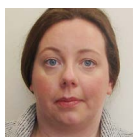
To deliver results, rural proofing must be **supported by reliable data** on the challenges and opportunities facing rural communities, together with **clear responsibilities, capacity building and transparent monitoring**. The **Rural Observatory** should become a permanent instrument, while **strong coordination** across administrations, **regular reporting and good practice** exchange are also needed.

Ultimately, rural proofing should help make rural areas attractive places to live, work and invest, supporting balanced territorial development and enabling people to stay, return and thrive.

Making rural areas more attractive: what integrated approaches can deliver

EU countries and regions are committing to and exploring more integrated approaches to rural development in response to demographic change, economic transitions and territorial disparities. As discussions advance on the future National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), attention is turning to how policies can better reflect diverse rural realities and strengthen territorial attractiveness.

Perspectives from Ireland, the French Grand Est Region and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlight practical lessons on coordinating policies and governance levels, adapting support to local contexts and connecting investment with territorial needs and assets. Their experiences offer insights for future rural policies and integrated planning across Europe.



Michelle McKiernan,
Rural Strategy Unit,
Ministry of Rural and
Community Development
and the Gaeltacht, Ireland

Ireland's 'Our Rural Future' strategy demonstrates that **strengthening rural attractiveness requires an integrated, whole-of-government approach**. Since its launch in 2021, the strategy has shown how embedding rural development across government can improve policy coherence and deliver more coordinated, place-based outcomes.

The strategy is supported by cross-government coordination **mechanisms that bring together multiple government departments**, enabling coordinated delivery across sectors including transport, enterprise, digital connectivity, housing and public services. These arrangements have **helped reduce policy fragmentation, align investment priorities and foster a more integrated planning culture** in which rural development is recognised as a shared responsibility across government.

The strategy has also strengthened the **consideration of rural impacts in the development of new policy initiatives**. Through guidance and practical resources, departments are encouraged to assess how new policies and programmes may affect rural communities from the earliest stages of policy design. This has **increased awareness of territorial impacts** across government and helped ensure that the

Rural Pact Policy Lab on policy coordination: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/policy-lab-enhancing-policy-coordination-vibrant-rural-areas_en

Country-specific information on advancing the Rural Pact: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/countries_en

Policy briefing 'Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States' (available in all EU languages): https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/publications/making-rural-pact-happen-member-states_en

OECD Rethinking Regional Attractiveness programme: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/rethinking-regional-attractiveness.html>

opportunities and challenges facing rural areas are more consistently reflected in national policy.

Governance mechanisms – including **regular monitoring, interdepartmental collaboration and ongoing engagement** with local authorities, regional bodies, community organisations and other rural stakeholders – have strengthened accountability, improved policy coherence and supported more responsive, place-based implementation.

The next iteration of 'Our Rural Future' will build on this whole-of-government approach, providing a strategic framework to sustain coordinated investment and further strengthen the resilience and attractiveness of rural communities.

The experience of implementing the strategy provides a strong foundation for the development of NRPPs, demonstrating how cross-government coordination, stakeholder engagement and a place-based approach to development can ensure investment responds to the diverse needs of rural areas.

Franck Leroy,
Grand Est Region, France



Since April 2024, the Grand Est Region has been implementing its Rural Pact, a strong political commitment to place rural areas at the heart of regional action.

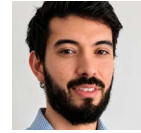
In 2024, with the Rural Pact, we made a clear choice: to put rural areas at the heart of our regional priorities. Rural communities are not places left behind. They are places where people innovate, create jobs and shape the future of our region. Our role is to give them the means to act, by listening to local needs and supporting the initiatives that bring their ambitions to life.

The region adapts its support to the diversity of rural areas through 12 regional offices, simplified procedures, tailored funding schemes and dedicated support mechanisms, helping turn local projects into reality.

Since the pact was launched, more than **EUR 500 million in regional and European funding** has supported **5 600 projects**, from improving living environments and preserving natural resources to supporting businesses and the ecological transition.

The region also invests in young people through education, mobility, training and employment initiatives, including its **EUR 1-per-month boarding school accommodation scheme**, benefiting more than 15 000 high school students each year.

Through the Rural Pact, the Grand Est Region is reaffirming its ambition to deliver practical, locally rooted solutions and build a stronger future for rural communities.



Fernando Rianza, Michael Flood
and José Ignacio Donoso Salas,
OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship,
SMEs, Regions and Cities

As competition intensifies to attract skilled workers, investment, visitors and ideas, the OECD has worked with more than 60 regions across member countries on rural and regional attractiveness. Our work shows the importance of **getting the basics right before reaching for big-ticket projects**: good local services, housing, schools, healthcare, transport, digital connectivity and a reliable quality of life to support newcomers.

Rural regions then need to build on this foundation with a credible proposition about their future, backed by investment and delivery, and grounded in distinctive assets such as natural capital, industrial legacy and community life. These assets are often underestimated.

Rural regions are home to little over a quarter of the OECD population, but account for nearly half of its manufacturing jobs. Local specialisations can support cultural heritage, exports and local identity. Innovation is also not limited to cities: in rural Scotland, remote areas drove much of the country's productivity growth over the last decade, supported by entrepreneurship and social innovation.

For future NRPPs, **rural attractiveness will require a long-term vision, a comprehensive policy approach, sustained funding and alignment across government agencies and local actors**. Integrated approaches work best when **rural needs remain visible throughout the policy cycle**, supported by rural proofing, territorial data and community involvement. The aim should be to connect investment, policy and local assets so that attractiveness becomes a credible future for residents, firms and new generations.



Image by StevanZZ on Canva

Generational renewal beyond farming: building rural futures across generations



By Tatiana Ferreira and
Alen Mujčinović,
European Rural Youth Observatory

Generational renewal is about much more than succession in farming. Rural communities also need young entrepreneurs, professionals, service providers, craftspeople and community leaders if they are to remain vibrant places to live and work.

Creating the conditions for younger generations to build their future in rural areas is therefore becoming an **increasingly important territorial challenge**. This key message emerged during the Rural Pact Good Practice Webinar on **generational renewal in rural businesses**, which explored policy measures and practical examples showing how integrated approaches can strengthen rural economies and communities.

Creating the right conditions

Generational renewal **depends on the long-term vitality of the entire rural economy**. Small and medium-sized enterprises, tourism, crafts, local services and community organisations all contribute to attractive places where people can choose to stay, return or invest. Building these prospects requires favourable conditions for entrepreneurship, quality jobs and lifelong learning.

Additionally, young people identify growing **opportunities linked to the green and digital transitions**, particularly in renewable energy, the bioeconomy, sustainable tourism, care services and the digitalisation of rural businesses.

Research from the European Rural Youth Observatory (EURYO) reveals that young people's **decisions are shaped by much more than employment alone**. Housing, mobility, education, digital connectivity, access to essential services, and opportunities to participate in community life all influence whether young people decide to remain in, return to or invest in rural areas.

Learning across generations

Strong **rural entrepreneurial ecosystems** are equally important. Business continuity increasingly depends on moving beyond traditional family succession towards **more diverse business transfer models**, supported by mentoring, advisory services and practical guidance.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer allows experienced professionals to pass on expertise, confidence, collaborative networks and local knowledge alongside business assets. Rural Pact webinar examples from Austria, Spain, Germany and Slovenia demonstrated how **tailored advisory support, mentoring, incubation programmes and business transfer initiatives** can strengthen business continuity and generational renewal in rural areas.

Building attractive rural futures

The webinar discussions reinforced these findings, highlighting that **attractive rural ecosystems depend on integrated, place-based strategies** combining economic opportunities with quality services, housing, connectivity and strong local partnerships. The webinar also emphasised that women, newcomers, international students and senior experts represent valuable resources for addressing labour shortages, supporting entrepreneurship and community life. Mentoring, networking and peer learning help connect generations and build the confidence and skills needed for successful rural careers.

Generational renewal is therefore not simply about replacing one generation with another. It is about creating rural places where people of different ages can contribute, collaborate and build long-term futures together.

Good Practice Webinar on generational renewal: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/generational-renewal-rural-businesses-empowering-youth-supporting-elders_en

EURYO: <https://www.euryo.org/web/>

Making integrated territorial approaches work: three lessons from across Europe

Across Europe, territorial instruments such as LEADER/CLLD, Smart Villages and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) are helping rural communities address complex challenges through integrated, place-based approaches. While they differ in scope and governance, they share common objectives: strengthening participation, improving coordination and supporting long-term territorial development.

Drawing on experiences from multi-funded LEADER/CLLD in Nouvelle-Aquitaine (France), the Smart Village approach in Ballyboughal (Ireland), and the Pinhal Interior ITI (Portugal), this article explores practical lessons for the post-2027 policy framework.



Luís Matias,
Pinhal Interior
ITI, Portugal

The Pinhal Interior ITI was developed after devastating forest fires as a long-term response to the challenges facing a low-density functional rural territory (i.e. including villages, towns and their hinterland). Bringing together 24 municipalities and five inter-municipal communities, it combines **multiple funding instruments around a shared territorial action plan**, coordinated by a territorial development agency.

Our experience shows that building territorial resilience requires more than emergency responses. Post-2027 policies should better **recognise functional rural territories**, support **closer coordination across governance levels** and provide greater **flexibility to combine different funding sources**. Simplified, locally managed integrated investments, built on shared territorial priorities and community participation, would help transform long-term vulnerabilities into opportunities for resilience, competitiveness and sustainable rural development.

Rural Pact Good Practice Webinar on territorial instruments: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/good-practice-webinar-territorial-instruments-leaderclld-integrated-territorial-investments_en



Catherine
Hua,
Périgord Vert
Local Action
Group, France

Nouvelle-Aquitaine's multi-funded CLLD approach combines LEADER with regional development funding (ERDF) within local development strategies. Each strategy allows the Local Action Group (LAG) to decide which fund is used to support a project. Our experience shows that **Nouvelle-Aquitaine's allocation of substantial funding to territorial development expands resources for local development**, and that providing LAGs with access to ERDF funds **improves coordination** between LAGs, the managing authority and regional services, including those responsible for the non-profit sector, circular economy, culture and tourism.

At the same time, different eligibility rules, funding demarcations and management systems add complexity and can limit flexibility. One of the main lessons for the post-2027 framework is that **more harmonised rules across funding instruments** would make integrated territorial approaches simpler, more effective and easier to implement.



Ian Dempsey,
Prescience, Ireland

Ballyboughal's Smart Village experience has shown the importance of framing rural development around resilience, liveability and quality of life. Starting from community priorities, the **strategy translated a shared vision into practical actions** on governance, placemaking, biodiversity, heritage, recreation and social well-being, with implementation led through local community structures and volunteer groups.

One of the key lessons is that **a shared vision must be matched by the capacity to deliver it**. Strengthening local governance, skills, volunteering and community leadership is just as important as securing project funding. Future rural policies should therefore **invest not only in projects, but also in the long-term social capital, local capacity, networks and partnerships** that enable communities to turn ideas into lasting action.

What makes rural innovation ecosystems thrive? Three perspectives on building lasting innovation

Innovation in rural areas is increasingly recognised as essential for strengthening resilience, competitiveness and quality of life. But innovation rarely succeeds in isolation. Across Europe, public authorities, practitioners and local actors are exploring how to create stronger rural innovation ecosystems by connecting people, ideas, funding and experimentation.

Rural innovation takes many forms, from Spain's work linking innovation with demographic challenges, to Austria's experience with broader rural innovation support systems, and the SMART ERA project's focus on experimentation and scaling. This article delves into the conditions that can help rural innovation become more visible, connected and sustainable over time.

Webinar materials and report: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/events/good-practice-webinar-rural-innovation_en

Good practices, news, events, publications: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/topics/research-and-innovation_en

Good Practice Brochure on place-based innovation: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/publications/good-practice-brochure-place-based-innovation_en



María Martos,
Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO), Spain

Rural depopulation in Spain is not just about villages losing residents, but also about territories seeing a decline in opportunities, services, employment and prospects for the future. Still, rural communities are not starting from scratch: they bring together **knowledge, community networks, identity, heritage and the capacity to innovate from within**.

It is within this framework that the Network of Territorial Innovation Centres (Red CIT) has emerged, promoted by MITECO's General Secretariat for the Demographic Challenge and co-developed with provincial councils. The ministry acts as the network's hub and provides the strategic framework, while provincial councils focus on strategies tailored to specific local needs.

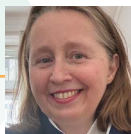
Red CIT is an expanding network that connects all current 28 provincial Territorial Innovation Centres (CITs), building a national innovation ecosystem that involves relevant actors such as local, regional and national government representatives, businesses, knowledge institutions, citizens and regions.

The provincial CITs themselves act as local territorial ecosystems and transformation labs, providing **methodological assistance to steer innovation in their territories, capacity building and access to funding**. Their value lies in **combining multi-level governance, technical support and social innovation** to foster entrepreneurship, attract talent, improve services and strengthen territorial equity.

Teruel province's CIT offers an example of how civil society, businesses and public actors can co-manage initiatives, including a rural innovation forum, a vacant housing rehabilitation programme and joint interprovincial projects on rural entrepreneurship.

This approach can unlock the strategic potential of rural areas, enhance quality of life and help reverse demographic decline and growing discontent.

Rita Trattnigg, Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, Austria



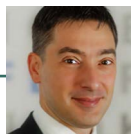
Austria's approach to rural innovation starts from the premise that the greatest regional impact comes from **cross-sectoral, multi-level and multi-actor cooperation**. To complement innovation within agriculture best, we have broadened our approach to strengthen rural innovation ecosystems rooted in local and regional communities and economies.

To connect with innovators already driving change on the ground, we introduced two complementary funding instruments: **Rural Innovation Hubs**, which act as incubators, and **Rural Innovation Partnerships**, which support implementation projects. These complement the common agricultural policy's (CAP) EIP-AGRI intervention by extending innovation support beyond agricultural production.

Building strong innovation ecosystems also depends on creating the right conditions. Through **project selection criteria**, we encourage place-based solutions, regional ownership, multi-actor cooperation, cross-sectoral partnerships and links with research and development organisations. **Intermediary structures within regional governance systems**, such as LEADER Local Action Groups, play an important role in connecting different 'nodes of innovation' and strengthening collaboration.

The projects supported so far bring together actors from a wide range of sectors to create new value chains, strengthen regional economies and develop innovative business models. Alongside funding, the national CAP Network provides **innovation support to help projects build sustainable business and impact models** that can continue beyond the funding period.

Our experience also shows that successful rural innovation ecosystems are closely linked to multi-level governance and benefit from a **'capacity to build capacity' approach**. Strengthening the ability of people and organisations to support others creates a snowball effect, enabling innovation ecosystems to grow, adapt and generate lasting benefits for rural areas.



Matteo Gerosa, Fondazione Bruno Kessler and SMART ERA project

The SMART ERA project, funded under Horizon Europe, explores how **digital tools, participatory design and integrated Smart Innovation Packages** can help revitalise rural communities. Working across six pilot regions in 10 countries, the project addresses common barriers to rural innovation, including limited human capital and weak links between local innovation actors.

One of the clearest lessons from three years of experimentation is that communities are not the audience for rural innovation but its engine. Rural territories are too often treated as places where solutions are delivered rather than designed. Our work has shown that **lasting innovation grows from local ownership and active participation**.

To support this, SMART ERA **combines physical and digital co-design toolkits with tailored engagement approaches** that avoid overstretching local capacities. Two roles have proved particularly important: **'community activators'**, who mobilise diverse local stakeholders, and **'pilot orchestrators'**, who bridge the gap between technology providers and communities. They help translate local needs into concrete actions, build trust between actors and sustain collaboration beyond the initial project phase.

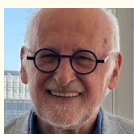
Our experience also shows that **technology alone is not enough**. Digital tools require users, governance arrangements and long-term support if they are to remain relevant after project funding ends. This is why SMART ERA promotes Smart Innovation Packages, **combining technology with supportive local policies and social innovation**.

Finally, scaling innovation requires the **active involvement of the entire local innovation ecosystem**. Bringing together academia, communities, businesses and public authorities helps connect knowledge, investment, legitimacy and decision-making, enabling innovation to move beyond isolated pilots towards more connected, resilient and sustainable rural innovation ecosystems.

How the Rural Pact is taking shape across Europe: national and regional experiences

Across Europe, the Rural Pact is increasingly inspiring new governance approaches and stakeholder cooperation at national and regional levels. Despite different contexts, these initiatives share common goals: strengthening participation, improving coordination across sectors and governance levels, and promoting integrated rural development.

From the Netherlands' stakeholder-driven Rural Pact process to Catalonia's Rural Agenda and Flanders' work linking the Rural Pact with integrated rural strategies, this article explores how these experiences are putting Rural Pact principles into practice.



Ben van Essen,
Rural Pact Netherlands and
European Rural Community
Alliance

The Rural Pact Netherlands (RPNL) was established in 2024 as a stakeholder-driven platform bringing together Dutch members of the Rural Pact. It has grown into a network of more than 150 members, supported by a working structure, a manifesto for rural areas and, since March 2026, a work plan supported by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Our experience shows the value of a **platform for dialogue and cooperation around a common vision for rural areas**. Rather than becoming a political arena, RPNL promotes **ownership that transcends sectoral interests**.

This vision is translated into a Rural Agenda with concrete actions, driven by the commitment of our members. We believe this collaborative approach provides a strong foundation for long-term rural development.

Country-specific information: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/countries_en

Policy briefing: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/publications/making-rural-pact-happen-member-states_en

Sergi Méndez and
Albert Puigvert,
Association of Rural
Initiatives of Catalonia,
Spain



A key lesson from Catalonia's experience is that stakeholder participation alone is not enough. Lasting impact requires **turning participation into governance structures, shared responsibilities and policy instruments**.

Through the Catalan Rural Agenda, public administrations, local authorities, civil society, universities and socio-economic actors have built a **permanent framework for territorial dialogue and collaboration** around a shared vision. This has helped move beyond isolated projects towards integrated action across sectors and governance levels.

Another lesson is that **rural governance must lead to policy change**. Catalonia is translating Rural Pact principles into rural proofing and a legislative framework – the Rural Municipality Statute – helping ensure rural perspectives are systematically considered in public decision-making.

Kevin Grauwels, Flemish
Land Agency, Belgium



Flanders is using the Rural Pact approach to develop a **shared vision for rural areas through broad stakeholder engagement**. Workshops, an online survey and hearings in the Flemish Parliament brought together stakeholders and the wider public to shape a shared vision for rural communities.

The next step is translating this vision into **coordinated action across government**, supported by rural proofing and a knowledge centre linking research, practice and policy.

Looking ahead, the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans and the 10% rural spending target offer an **opportunity to build more integrated rural development strategies**. The Rural Pact can provide a common framework for stakeholder engagement, stronger governance and better coordination of measures addressing rural needs and opportunities.

Why political commitment matters for rural Europe

National governments and regional authorities across Europe, as well as EU institutions are increasingly using the Rural Pact as a framework to strengthen cooperation, visibility and long-term engagement for rural areas.

Through political commitments, signatories highlight shared priorities, support more integrated approaches to rural development and reinforce collaboration across governance levels and sectors.

From Finland's focus on cross-sector coordination, to Asturias' place-based regional perspective and the European Economic and Social Committee's institutional role, this article explores why political commitment matters and how it can help strengthen the future of rural Europe.



Sari Essayah,
Ministry of Agriculture and
Forestry, Finland

For Finland, formalising our commitment through the Rural Pact was a natural step in reaffirming our long-standing commitment to rural policy and rural development. The timing was particularly appropriate, following the completion of the national Rural Policy Report, the parliamentary debate on it and the start of preparations for the next EU funding period.

Political commitments help strengthen long-term cooperation by **reinforcing the importance of working together across sectors and governance levels**. They encourage the development of structures and forums that bring together public authorities and stakeholders around shared objectives. In Finland, the Rural Policy Council – which I chair – provides a long-established platform for cross-sector collaboration, helping coordinate rural policy and support integrated approaches to rural development.

Between November 2025 and September 2026, eight national and regional governments made political commitments to the Rural Pact.

Discover these and other public authorities' commitments to the Rural Pact: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/public-authorities-commitments_en

Marcelino Marcos Lández,
Ministry of Rural Environment
and Agrarian Policy, Asturias,
Spain



For Asturias, the commitment to the Rural Pact reinforces the path already initiated through our own Pact for Rural Asturias: a shared roadmap, with concrete measures extending to 2030, built through dialogue with rural stakeholders.

Political commitments such as these help to coordinate public administrations, productive sectors and rural communities, while promoting **integrated responses tailored to the specific needs of each territory**. However, this ambition requires adequate resources.

Maintaining a strong common agricultural policy, with sufficient funding for rural development, is essential to transform cooperation into real opportunities, economic activity and territorial cohesion.



Stoyan Tchoukanov,
European Economic and Social
Committee (EESC), Belgium

Political commitments through the Rural Pact are valuable because they help **ensure that rural policies are shaped with people**, not just for them, and further support the visibility, implementation and monitoring of the agreed actions.

The EESC's commitment to the Rural Pact aims to strengthen the role of organised civil society in building the future of rural areas in the EU. Farmers, businesses, workers, cooperatives, youth organisations and local communities all have a role to play in identifying needs and delivering solutions.

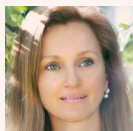
By fostering dialogue, cooperation and shared ownership, the Rural Pact helps ensure that rural voices are heard and that no rural territory or community is left behind.

Driving change on the ground: every action counts for the rural vision

Rural Pact Community members contribute actively to the EU's long-term vision for rural areas through voluntary action – large and small, in an individual capacity or on behalf of their organisations.

Through concrete initiatives addressing diverse local needs, stakeholders ranging from citizens, entrepreneurs and academics to farmers, NGOs and public authorities help to achieve the objectives of the rural vision.

Read from three Community members about their actions and why they chose to act for the rural vision.



Marieta Okenková, Slovak
University of Agriculture and
Slovak Rural Parliament

The Slovak 'Vision for More Attractive Rural Areas 2040' was developed over seven years, within the Horizon projects PoliRural and PoliRuralPlus. It is a living document shaped through participatory dialogue, foresight activities, stakeholder consultations and cross-sector collaboration involving municipalities, experts, civil society, rural and urban communities, and policymakers.

The process **transformed local needs and territorial challenges into a shared long-term vision and practical actions** for resilient, inclusive and innovative rural development. The vision has gradually been reflected in several national policy and strategic frameworks, strengthening its practical relevance and long-term impact. It demonstrates how cooperation can improve rural governance, inspire replication of good practices, strengthen networking among rural actors, and mobilise partnerships for Europe's rural future.

Patrice Joly and
Dominique Faure,
Institute of Higher
Studies of the Rural
World (IHEMRu), France



We train decision-makers in the public and private sectors in France so they have a better understanding of rural areas and can incorporate their challenges, strengths and dynamics into the decisions of today and tomorrow. Through our work, IHEMRu helps to promote research into rural areas and the scientific insights arising from European exchanges, in order to **inform public policy and foster regional innovation**.

Actions for the rural vision are particularly valuable as they highlight inspiring examples, encourage collaboration and bring together stakeholders committed to supporting rural communities. This approach raises the profile of rural areas, promotes their inclusion in public policy and supports their ability to tackle environmental, food, energy and demographic challenges.



Salvatore Coppola-Finegan,
EcoCitizen, Luxembourg

ANNE-MARIE is a digital platform and mobile app that enables Luxembourg's rural communities to better monitor forest ecosystems, contributing to science education and ecological awareness.

More than half of our forests are held by small family foresters, and the people closest to them rarely show up in national datasets. Pairing pupils, foresters and citizen-science tools brings both landscapes and landholders into view.

Actions for the rural vision matter because rural Europe is mostly about small actors without a voice at policy level. Submitting an action is how their work becomes visible across the EU!

Submit an action for the rural vision: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/actions-rural-vision_en

Browse existing actions for inspiration: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/actions-rural-vision/actions/search_en

Connecting people, inspiring action: inside the Rural Pact Community Groups

Rural development challenges are increasingly complex and interconnected, creating a growing need for spaces where stakeholders can exchange experiences and learn from one another. Rural Pact Community Groups bring together practitioners, policymakers, researchers and civil society around shared rural topics, strengthening dialogue, collaboration and peer learning across Europe.

Read from three Community Group coordinators as they share what drives engagement, the initiatives they are developing and their future priorities for the groups.

Nancy Duxbury,
Culture and
creativity group



Culture and creativity are at the heart of place-based development, contributing to education, social cohesion, quality of life, local economies, innovation, environmental stewardship, tourism and demographic change. Yet, practitioners and organisations in this field remain vulnerable due to **limited policy attention** and **insufficient support** tailored to their specific needs.

Our group brings together an array of stakeholders, including cultural producers, small businesses and associations, public agencies and researchers. It helps members feel less isolated and aims to **foster collective initiatives that can influence policy and planning**.

Meaningful engagement goes beyond sharing information. It requires **regular opportunities to build relationships, identify shared priorities and develop joint actions**. Webinars, project fairs and publications help sustain momentum, supporting practical follow-up and stronger policy frameworks for culture and creativity in rural areas.



David de Ugarte,
Rural depopulation and
repopulation group

Our Community Group is still taking its first steps but is already helping organisations with similar challenges find one another and explore potential collaboration. Meaningful participation is still being built, but seems to grow **when members feel heard**, meetings have **clear but flexible agendas** and conversations **focus on real local problems**.

To benefit most, members need to show up regularly, share honestly, and be open to small experiments and to travel. Practical activities so far include informal exchange sessions. Looking ahead, our priority is to gradually shift towards **supporting trans-European projects between rural civil society organisations**.

Klaus Ehrlich, Rural
tourism group



By transforming individual experiences into collective knowledge and action, the Community Groups provide a trusted space for exchange, networking, peer learning and collaboration across regions and countries. **Active participation grows when members see clear opportunities** to contribute expertise, share and discuss new ideas, and benefit from others' knowledge.

They **focus on concrete needs and practical outcomes**, such as project development, sharing of best practices, joint advocacy or identifying solutions to common challenges. These can then either be scaled up at European level or scaled down to specific local conditions.

In our group, we have created **thematic working groups** and a knowledge repository and organise **face-to-face events**. Strengthening evidence-based decision-making through research, cross-sector collaboration and practical peer-to-peer matchmaking are key priorities for the future.

Join a Community Group: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/join-community-action_en

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