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Taking stock of the implementation of the EU rural action plan (2021-2023)

Accompanying the document

Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward

{COM(2024) 450 final} - {SWD(2024) 451 final}

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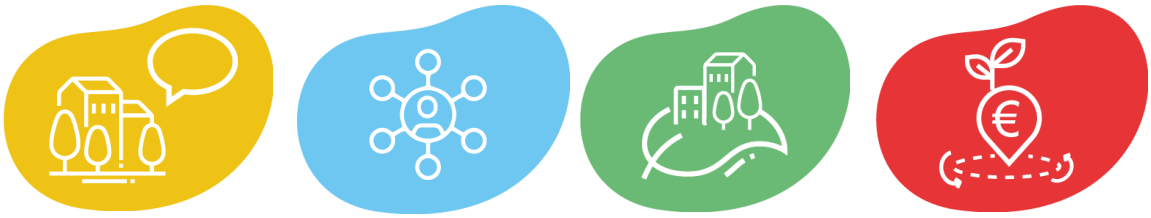
1. INTRODUCTION

Through its communication *'A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040'* (LTVRA) adopted in June 2021 ([1]), the European Commission put forward an **EU rural action plan** with flagship projects and tools contributing to achieve the shared goals of the rural vision, in synergy with support provided by EU-funded Member States programmes.



With 30 actions spanning across a wide range of EU policies and topics of importance for the future of rural communities, it is an unprecedented **joint effort from 14 Commission departments** called 'Directorates-General' (DGs) ([2]) to work horizontally, in coordinated ways, to address rural challenges and make the most of opportunities. This **cooperation** enhances **consideration of rural issues in various policy domains,** including agriculture and regional development, but also revitalisation, research and innovation, local development, youth, education and culture, creative industries, digitalisation, mobility, energy, climate, forestry, bioeconomy, social inclusion, gender equality and economic development among other themes.

([1]) COM(2021)345 final

([2]) Agriculture and rural development (AGRI), Climate action (CLIMA), Communication, networks, content and technology (CNECT), Education and culture (EAC), Energy (ENER), Employment and social affairs (EMPL), Eurostat (ESTAT), Internal market, industry, entrepreneurship and SMEs (GROW), Migration and home affairs (HOME), Joint research centre (JRC), Justice and consumers (JUST), Mobility and transport (MOVE), Regional and urban policy (REGIO) and Research and innovation (RTD).

The action plan is organised in two parts:

- **thematic actions** structured against the four action areas of the vision (**stronger**, **connected**, **resilient**, **prosperous**), including nine flagship initiatives and 15 accompanying actions; and
- **cross-cutting actions** that support the implementation of the action plan and aim at improving governance for rural areas.

This Commission staff working document (SWD) aims to inform on the key achievements under each of the actions, their expected benefits for rural communities and the next steps envisaged, complementing the overview provided in the report on the LTVRA key achievements and ways forward ([3]). It follows the structure of the action plan adopted in 2021. A second accompanying SWD '*Reviewed EU rural action plan'* (SWD(2024)451) provides an amended version of the initial action plan annexed to the LTVRA communication, indicating the status of each action and adapting the formulation of some actions and reordering them where relevant.

The Commission has invested in implementing all 30 actions. Implementation is ongoing for 21 actions. It is continuing beyond the completion of tasks initially foreseen for seven actions. Two actions are considered completed. For a limited number of actions, plans have had to be reviewed after reassessing their feasibility and relevance. Finally, for a few sub-actions that depend on the use of EU funds under shared management, it is too soon to report on the execution of programmes by the Member States as many of those have only just started. The Commission maintains its commitment to the development of rural areas and communities. It plans to keep implementing the EU rural action plan to achieve the objectives of the actions as described in the reviewed version. A further update may be considered from 2025 onwards.

([3]) COM(2024)450

2. THEMATIC ACTIONS

2.1. Stronger

2.1.1. Flagship: set up a rural revitalisation platform

Key deliverables

The rural revitalisation platform is an **online platform that assembles, in one place, information and resources useful for rural communities facing demographic decline**, and that provides them with tools to collaborate. To set up this platform, the Commission has:

- asked the European Network for Rural Development to facilitate, in the first semester of 2022, a **thematic group on rural revitalisation** which listed **enabling factors for rural revitalisation**, developed a **self-assessment tool** to assess the level of these factors**,** and made **recommendations**[3] on how to structure the future platform;

- held a **session at the rural pact conference on 15 June 2022**[4] to discuss the outcomes of the group with the stakeholder community;

- published a webpage in December 2022 and steered the **development of the collaborative platform** by contractors, including interviews with users, in the first semester of 2023;

- launched the platform at the Rural pact **policy lab "taking action to tackle rural depopulation" gathering 100 people in Brussels on 29 June 2023;**

- continued until now improving the tool with the release of additional features (good practices database, publications database, etc.) and improved the **user-friendliness** of the interface.

Considering the needs of the wider rural pact community for a collaborative space, the platform has been built as a sub-part of the rural pact community platform (see 2.5.5), accessible by choosing the focus "**revitalisation**" (around 75% of the content of the platform is relevant for that focus). On the platform, users can access information on events, good practices and projects, create and/or join self-moderated 'Community groups' on specific subjects, post and share their own news and events, in any EU language. The platform is populated with **good practices** (30 so far) produced by the Rural Pact Support Office and **links to relevant websites and databases** and **resources** such as publications of relevant organisations or projects. Other rural vision tools such as the **rural observatory** (see 2.5.2) or the **rural funding toolkit** (see 2.5.6) complement this platform.

Online collaboration has been complemented with **in-person exchanges** by dedicating one of the rural pact policy labs to tackling depopulation, with 100 participants working in or for communities facing depopulation exchanging in participatory sessions. The **High-level rural policy forum 'Shaping the future of rural areas'**[8], which was organised in Sigüenza on 27-29 September 2023, in the Spanish region of Castilla-La-Mancha, a hot spot of depopulation, also contributed to fruitful exchanges, including through the study visits organised by the local LEADER network, RECAMDER, allowing to see useful projects that can be conducted to revitalise depopulated rural areas.

Benefits for rural areas

The rural revitalisation platform:

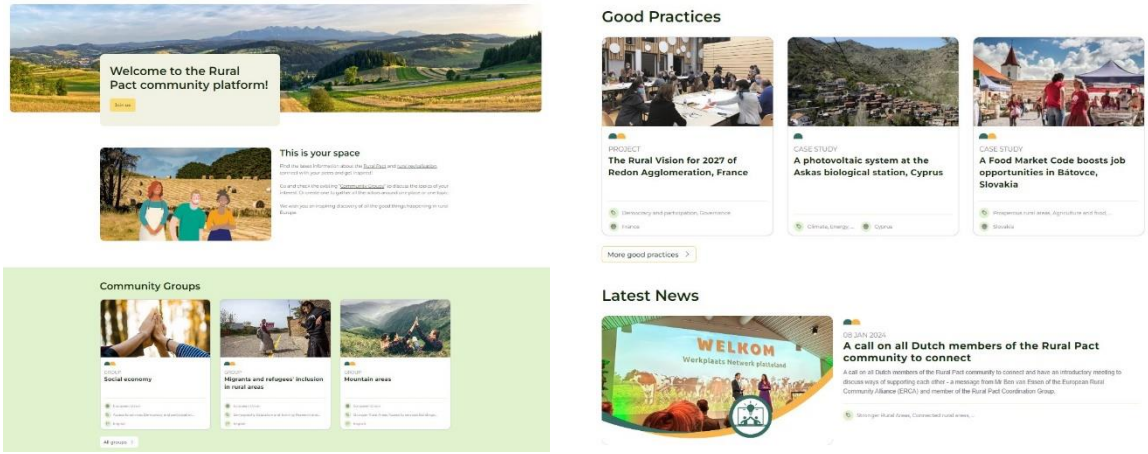
- **eases access** of people acting for rural areas affected by demographic and economic decline **to information**, best practices and tools that were scattered in different places;
- allows them to **exchange** with their peers on useful or innovative approaches;
- provides them with a **free tool** through which they can create **community groups** dedicated to specific themes, countries or regions, in English or in their **national language**, while connecting to other actors; and
- provides **access to information in all EU languages** through automated translation.

Since the launch in June 2023, the rural revitalisation platform has attracted over 12 000 visitors, of which 560 registered as members, which we consider as a good result for only nine months of operation. All these visits generated 60 000 page views, for a total of 4 900 downloads. The seven existing community groups initiated 30 different discussions.

Next steps

Challenges faced in the creation of the platform have shown the importance of **coupling the online tool with activities organised in person and allowing face-to-face exchanges**. They have also highlighted the need for efficient tools that are well adapted to stakeholders' skills and availability. We will **keep improving the user journey and interface with new functionalities and enriching the content of the resource section in 2024 and 2025**. The success of the platform requires a sustained effort in facilitating exchanges and keeping enriching it with useful practices and projects coming from the Commission or from the Rural Pact Support Office and from the users.

The platform has been in use for only nine months, and it is too early to say which evolution will be needed. However, it seems relevant to explore possibilities to enhance cooperation for municipalities most in need via in-person exchanges organised through the rural pact or other networking initiatives, and to increase the visibility of the tool thanks to targeted promotion. Embedding the rural revitalisation platform in the rural pact community platform is conducive to synergies in this respect.



Screenshots of the rural pact community platform

2.1.2. Flagship: research and innovation for rural communities

Key deliverables

Horizon Europe

Between 2021 and 2024, several actions were launched under the Horizon Europe work programmes (WP) 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 to implement the flagship '*Research and innovation for rural communities'*. Close to 30 topics (calls for proposals) with a **direct impact** on rural areas beyond farming were programmed under Horizon Europe's Pillar II, in clusters 2 (Culture, creativity and inclusive society), 5 (Climate, energy and mobility), and 6 (Food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and environment). The allocation of topics, budget and projects was divided as follows among these three clusters, representing a total of over **60 projects for a budget of EUR 253 million** contributing directly to rural areas.

60 projects for a budget of **EUR 253 million**

Cluster 2 (Culture, creativity and inclusive society): the 2021-22 calls included **five** relevant topics. These led to **nine projects** with a total budget of **almost EUR 27 million** which have relevant research on rural areas looking particularly at rural development, sustainability, and reducing regional inequalities. These projects focus on unlocking innovation in cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas, while addressing factors causing territorial inequalities. The projects identify effective policies at different governance levels to combat urban and rural decline, emphasising sustainability. They seek innovative approaches for rural areas to cope with global value chain shifts and reap their benefits. In the 2023-24 calls, **seven additional topics**, with a budget of **EUR 58 million,** are expected to fund **20 projects** with relevant research on rural socioeconomic development. Research will focus on fostering socioeconomic development in rural areas through cultural tourism, will address rural youth discontent in politics, by exploring social, cultural, and political identities, and will examine the impact of remote working on different regions. The projects will also aim to tackle inequalities in green and digital transitions, including in rural areas, as well as inequalities in STEAM education emphasising the participation of girls from socially disadvantaged and rural backgrounds.

Cluster 5 (Climate, energy and mobility): the 2021-22 calls included one relevant topic, with a budget of **EUR 15 million**, leading to **two projects** addressing environmental challenges, promoting sustainable practices, and creating economic opportunities, improving the overall well-being and resilience of rural communities. In the 2023-24 calls, a topic of **EUR 10 million** will focus on better infrastructure safety on urban and secondary rural roads through a combination of adaptable monitoring and maintenance solutions.

Cluster 6 (Food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and environment): the 2021-22 calls included seven topics, with a budget of **EUR 83 million.** These led to **15 projects** on strengthening evidence for tailored rural policies, capacity building for rural innovation, smart XG, last-mile and edge solutions for remote farming, forestry and rural areas, boosting women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas, assessing and improving labour conditions and health and safety at work in farming, empowering rural communities and smart villages to innovate for societal change, and assessing the socio-politics of nature-based solutions for more inclusive and resilient communities. The 2023-24 calls included eight topics, with a budget of approximately **EUR 60 million**. These should lead to fund **15 projects** that will work on enhancing social inclusion in rural areas,

territorial governance, societal perceptions and benefits of rural life and jobs, innovations for climate-neutral rural communities, new business and production models, circular bioeconomy start-up villages and the revitalisation of European local (rural / peri-urban) communities with innovative bio-based business models and social innovation.

In addition, several other topics and related projects funded under these three clusters, as well as Cluster 3 (Civil security for society) and Cluster 4 (Digital, industry and space) also have an **indirect impact** on rural areas. These include calls related to agriculture and forestry, circular economy and the bioeconomy sectors, development of bio-based alternatives like biopesticides, biofertilizers, and biodegradable polymers aiming to reduce environmental pollution and encourage cleaner farming, and innovative governance and digital solutions, for instance. Digital actions under Cluster 4 and the Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe' under Cluster 6 also contribute to the implementation of this flagship, but activities are reported respectively under the 'Connected' (see 2.2.2 and 2.2.4) and 'Resilient' action areas (see 2.3.3).

Research and innovation for rural communities was in focus in two major events:

- The Rural pact conference (June 2022), with a session on 'Rural research and innovation ecosystems'.
- The AgriResearch Conference 2023, with a session on 'Rural opportunities'.

A factsheet on rural research and innovation was published in May 2023 which provides a list of relevant research and innovation projects from Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe.

Startup Village Forum

The Startup Village Forum (SVF) initiative was launched in November 2021 with a high-level virtual meeting, focusing on rural innovation ecosystems, startup creation, and the role of innovation in rural development. Several meetings and events were held with villages, local authorities, and entrepreneurs to understand how innovation can address challenges in rural areas. The team coordinating the SVF initiative at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission has also collaborated closely with other Commission services and developed a conceptualisation paper on startup villages. The second annual SVF took place on 28 February 2023. Additionally, the SVF launched a mapping tool to assess enabling factors for innovation and entrepreneurship, the economic structure of villages, their innovative performance and the level of connectedness and collaboration between the main players of their innovation ecosystems.

Other initiatives supporting networking for innovation

Aside from the activities above foreseen in the action plan, other activities support rural innovation. The **European Innovation Partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability** has supported rural innovation through its main building block EIP Operational Groups – bottom-up innovative projects. In December 2023, 3 400 operational group projects had been reported in the Commission's database. Under the scope of the EU CAP Network several activities have supported innovation in rural areas, in particular the following ones can be highlighted:

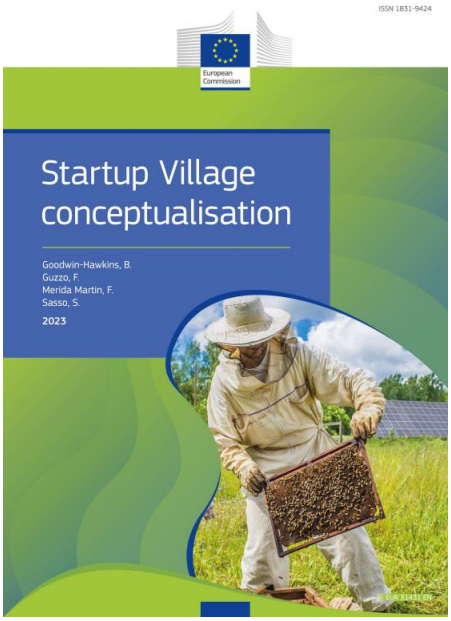
- Workshop on Young entrepreneurs - Engines of innovation in rural areas (November/December 2022);
- Focus Group 'Social farming and innovations'(Final report November 2023);
- Focus Group competitive and resilient mountain areas (ongoing).

Benefits for rural areas

The projects funded under Horizon Europe foster knowledge creation and exchange, and they engage rural stakeholders directly thanks to the 'multi-actor approach', building bridges between research and practice. The projects aim to foster sustainable development and regeneration, stimulate innovation, empower rural communities for change and reduce inequalities. They contribute to Horizon Europe's Strategic Plan 2021-2024 expected impact 31, namely that **"*Rural, coastal, and urban areas are developed in a sustainable, balanced and inclusive manner thanks to a better understanding of the environmental, behavioural, socio-economic and demographic drivers of change as well as deployment of digital, social and community-led innovations*".**

More specifically, the impacts of projects targeting rural areas and communities are expected across multiple domains. Firstly, they will leverage analyses of global changes, supply chain dynamics, and digitalisation to identify and **create employment opportunities in rural areas**, fostering **social inclusion** and **bridging the urban-rural divide**. Secondly, addressing inequalities in 'left-behind' areas, they will conduct thorough analyses to **identify drivers of inequality and develop place-based strategies to counteract socioeconomic stagnation or decline**. Thirdly, they aim to **enhance the innovation capacities of cultural and creative industries in non-urban EU areas** and to contribute to **protect cultural heritage** and landscapes in rural areas. Moreover, the Horizon Europe projects collectively provide **better evidence for tailored policies**, **emphasise the benefits of rural areas and communities** for the whole society, support an **inclusive green and digital transition** of rural areas, and enhance the overall **resilience, preparedness, and response to disasters and climate change in rural areas**. Finally, projects with a focus on agriculture and forestry are contributing to rural development through sectorial research and innovation (see factsheets).

The **Startup Village Forum** allows rural villages and stakeholders to **meet peers and other relevant actors** to exchange experiences and learn from each other. For instance, the second Startup Village Forum was attended by over **700 participants**, while over **20 villages** participated in the Startup Village mapping tool.



Next steps

Horizon Europe projects relevant to rural areas have been front-loaded in the first work programmes of Horizon Europe so that their results can **support the next policy cycle**. The Commission is now working to identify the needs to address in the preparation of Horizon Europe work programme 2025 and beyond and will continue to support actions benefitting rural areas. To enhance the monitoring of future actions and **keep the rural community's perspective** in the relevant topics, it is recommended to:

- explicitly **link the topic text to the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas** if the topic is intended to have a rural focus;
- keep the **multi-actor requirement** when relevant**,** which is important for rural communities to benefit directly from the projects and not only indirectly;
- reflect on possibly recommending **links with the Rural pact community platform**.

Concerning the **Startup Village Forum**, more research is necessary to improve our understanding of how innovative enterprises emerge and successfully grow in rural areas. In 2024, further work will be conducted to generate **new metrics and statistics capturing rural innovation** and to develop solid evidence on innovative enterprises in EU rural territories, by mapping their geographical distribution and analysing their determinants. A new edition of the forum is planned to take place at the end of 2024.

Horizon Europe projects on rural areas and rural communities*

Project acronym	Project title	CORDIS Factsheet
Cluster 2: "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society		
ReSChape	REshaping Supply CHAins for Positive social impact	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061729
TWIN SEEDS	Towards a World Integrated and Socio-economically Balanced European Economic Development Scenario	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101056793
RETHINK-GSC	Rethinking Global Supply Chains: measurement, impact and policy	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061123
EXIT	Exploring sustainable strategies to counteract territorial inequalities from an intersectional approach	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061122
Maplneq	Mapping inequalities through the life course	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061645
IN SITU	Place-based innovation of cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061747
MOBI-TWIN	Twin transition and changing patterns of spatial mobility: a regional approach	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101094402
Re-Place	Reframing non-metropolitan left behind places through mobility and alternative development	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101094087
PREMIUM_EU	Policy REcommendations to Maximise the beneficial Impact of Unexplored Mobilities in and beyond the European Union	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101094345
Cluster 5: "Climate, Energy and Mobility"		
PYRAGRAF	Decentralized pyrolytic conversion of agriculture and forestry wastes towards local circular value chains and sustainability	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101114608
VALUE4FARM	Sustainable renewable energy VALUE chains for answering FARMers' needs	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101116076
ECOLOOP	Ecoloop	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101118127
Cluster 6 "Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment"		
GRANULAR	Giving Rural Actors Novel data and re-Useable tools to Lead public Action in Rural areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061068
RUSTIK	Rural Sustainability Transitions through Integration of Knowledge for improved policy processes	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101061051
RURALITIES	Climate smart, ecosystem-enhancing and knowledge-based rural expertise and training centres	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101060876
XGain	Enhancing Competitiveness, Resilience and Sustainability of Remote Farming, Forestry and Rural Areas through Holistic Assessment of Smart XG, Last-mile and Edge Solutions' Gains	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101060294
COMMECT	Bridging the digital divide and addressing the need of Rural Communities with Cost-effective and Environmental-Friendly Connectivity Solutions	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101060881
FLIARA	FLIARA: Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084234
Grass Ceiling	Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation SystemS	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101083408
SWIFT	Supporting Women-led Innovations in Farming and rural Territories	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084561
SafeHabitus	Strengthening farm health and safety knowledge and innovation systems	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084270

FUTURAL	Empowering the future through innovative smart solutions for rural areas.	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101083958
RURACTIVE	Empowering rural communities to act for change	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084377
SMART ERA	SMART community-led transition for Europe's Rural Areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084160
TRANS-Lighthouses	More than green - Lighthouses of transformative nature-based solutions for inclusive communities	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084628
COEVOLVERS	Coevolutionary approach to unlock the transformative potential of nature-based solutions for more inclusive and resilient communities	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084220
NATURESCAPES	Naturescapes: nature-based solutions for climate resilient, nature positive and socially just communities in diverse landscapes	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084341
ESIRA	Enhancing Social Innovation in Rural Areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101136253
SERIGO	Social Economy for Resilience, Inclusion and Good life in Rural areas	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101136899
RURBANIVE	Rural-urban synergies emerged in an immersive innovation ecosystem	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101136597
PoliRuralPlus	Fostering Sustainable, Balanced, Equitable, Place-based and Inclusive Development of Rural-Urban Communities' Using Specific Spatial Enhanced Attractivenes Mapping ToolBox	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101136910
RIBES	Regional Inclusive Biobased Entrepeneurship Solutions	https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101134911

* This table includes projects for which grant agreements have already been signed.

2.1.3. *Networking for LEADER/ CLLD and smart villages*

Key deliverables

To enhance **networking for the current 2 800 LEADER Local Action Groups** (LAGs) across all Member States, the Commission, via the support of the EU CAP Network, has provided the wide range of activities below.

- Several dedicated **capacity building events** (2021 to 2023), in different formats – workshops, thematic groups, seminars, including project visits of selected LAGs. Relevant topics linked to LEADER implementation included, among others: simplified cost options; seven LEADER principles; multi-funded CLLD, added value of LEADER ([4]), evaluation of how to assess LEADER added value.
- A wide range of other **events organised by the EU CAP Network and the Rural Pact Support Office** such as those on gender, youth, depopulation, to mention a few, which LAGs and other LEADER stakeholders also attended.
- An EU **CAP Network governance body dedicated to LEADER**: the subgroup on LEADER and territorial development ([5]) (first meeting in April 2023).
- **Gathering and dissemination** – through the EU CAP network website and monthly **newsletters** - of best practices and inspiring projects in the areas of circular economy, mobility, rural depopulation, among other topics from agriculture and rural development; while also showcasing the EU CAP Network's latest publications and upcoming events not to be missed.
- A **quarterly LEADER newsletter** rounding-up the main LEADER-related activities facilitated by the EU CAP Network and its national partners, as well as inspiring LEADER stories from the ground (in three languages), adding to the monthly EU CAP network newsletter which also spreads LEADER-related good practices.
- **Facilitation of contacts for transnational cooperation** (TNC);
- A **LAGs database** to get in touch, network and cooperate with each other. The new LAGs directory listing LAGs selected under CAP strategic plans is under construction and will be ready in April 2024.

To enhance **networking for smart villages**, the Commission, at the initiative of the European Parliament, has supported two preparatory actions on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century: 'Smart Rural 21' (2020-2022) & 'Smart Rural 27' (2021-2023). Key deliverables of these initiatives are included below.

- A guidebook ([6]) on '*How to become a Smart Village'*.
- An online platform (www.smartrural21.eu) to inform participating villages;
- Online tools, such as the smart solutions database ([7]) and the roadmap toolbox **([8])**, which provide rural communities with practical ideas, methods and approaches for designing and implementing smart village strategies and solutions;
- The publication **of main findings and conclusions of the Smart Rural 21 project**, which focus on: usefulness to set up smart village strategies, needs for further

([4]) https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/assessing-added-value-leader_en;

([5]) https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/subgroup-leader-and-territorial-development_en

([6]) https://www.smartrural21.eu/guidebook/

([7]) https://www.smartrural21.eu/smart-solutions/

([8]) https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap/

capacity building for rural communities and policy makers, technical support required for launching smart projects, collaboration among rural communities through networking activities, full development of the future policy framework, and commitment of Member States and regions to take more actions to support local communities to become Smart Villages ([9]);

- The Smart Rural 27 project **online platform** (www.smartrural27.eu), which includes a geomapping tool presenting smart rural communities in the EU who have smart village strategies and at least one smart solution;
- A pilot European smart villages observatory ([10]) with three main components;
  - two **knowledge clusters of smart rural communities** aiming to support **exchange of practices and capacity-building among rural communities** interested and acting in the same thematic areas: one on renewable energy communities and one on digital services;
  - The **national and regional smart villages taskforces** aiming to improve policy implementation through practical exchanges among diverse stakeholders within a given national/regional context. These taskforces are country-specific and run in national languages.
  - The **European smart villages stakeholder platform** aiming to create exchange on smart villages implementation among stakeholders with similar responsibilities across Member States such as LEADER LAGs, Managing Authorities of the common agricultural policy, European and national networks.

The Commission also supported the implementation of **CLLD in fisheries and aquaculture areas**, targeting Fisheries LAGs and managing authorities (MAs) of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) and National Networks. Fisheries LAGs exchanged experience via transnational seminars, cooperation projects and good practices.

Benefits for rural areas

Networking for **LEADER** helped improving its delivery. Examples are provided below.

149 rural communities guided to create smart villages

- The workshop on simplified cost options resulted in these now being used to some extent in almost all Member States for LEADER interventions, resulting **in less bureaucracy for LAGs** and **more resources for animation** and capacity building.
- The work on the added value of LEADER has helped to build a **deeper understanding on intangible contributions of LEADER**, especially on the creation of social capital and local governance.
- Exchanges of insights on younger, smarter and simpler LEADER should improve the **quality of local development strategies** and their implementation in Europe, to the benefit of rural populations covered by the LEADER programme (65% of rural population in 2023-2027).

([9]) European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, Ocsko, E., *Preparatory action – Smart rural areas in the 21st century – Final report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, **https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2762/493890**

([10]) https://www.smartrural27.eu/european-smart-villages-observatory/

Networking for **smart villages** helped to **empower rural communities** to use this still new approach. Around 1 200 participants and 149 rural communities have benefited from Smart rural 21 activities, including more than 120 who attended the successful final conference of SmartRural21 on 17 and 18 October 2022 in Sopot-Gdansk (Poland) ([11]). The guidebook and resources provide actors involved in developing these strategies with a **step-by-step approach to favour success**. Tools for policymakers are also key to **build confidence of managing authorities** in this approach. More indicators on social capital and the quality of local governance in rural areas can be expected for both LEADER and smart villages as the work makes progress.

The support provided to CLLD in fisheries and aquaculture areas helped **MAs in designing efficient delivery systems** and led to many **innovative methods and practices on the ground**. In many remote or rural areas, fisheries CLLD was able to reach out to actors who previously had very limited access to EU funding, e.g. small aquaculture producers.

Next steps

The majority of local development strategies had been selected by the end of 2023 and the rest should be selected in 2024. It is important to get in contact with the LEADER/CLLD new national networks and LAGs selected for 2023-27 to best respond to their demands. Smart villages have been proposed in most CAP strategic plans, in many cases under LEADER, and in few cases outside.

The EU CAP network will continue working on LEADER. It will look and highlight good projects especially around social, digital, and environmental transitions in rural areas both in the project database and in newsletters. A **LAGs Directory for 2023-2027** will be developed in the first quarter of 2024 which should help LAGs to find partners for cooperation projects and exchanges. Planned for June 2024, a Young LEADER Forum should gather about 200 young people to search for and exchange inspirational ideas how to involve even more youth in planning and implementing local development strategies.

The Commission will explore possibilities to keep supporting networking for rural communities working on **smart village strategies and projects** by **listing concrete actions to be implemented** after the completion of the Smart Rural 27 project. A community group on smart villages ([12]) has been created in June 2023 under the rural pact community platform, which can be one place for interaction after the end of the project.

Within the Smart Village 27 project, a report, based on the analysis of CAP strategic plans and other programmes, presenting possible gaps and ways to improve the EU legal framework to achieve a comprehensive and consistent support for rural communities is planned to be published in 2024. The report will be complemented by **Member States factsheets** in both **English and national languages**, with specific information about the implementation of smart villages in each Member State. Another report is expected to be finalised by summer 2024 on smart villages contribution to the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies.

The Commission will keep supporting CLLD in aquaculture and fisheries during 2021-2027, and possible approaches are already being considered for post-2027.

([11]) Smart Rural 21, *Final event of the Smart Rural 21 project summary report*, 2022, https://www.smartrural21.eu/wp-content/uploads/SR21_Final-Conference-Report.pdf

([12])https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/groups/community-group-smart-villages_en

2.1.4. Study on land use linked to sustainable farming

Key deliverables

In September 2023, the Commission launched a study on land use linked to sustainable farming, as part of the "stronger rural areas" block of actions in the Communication on the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas. The study aims to support rural communities to develop integrated policy solutions that are tailored to their local areas.

In March 2024, the first two interim reports were delivered and provide information on the agricultural landscape evolution since 1990 and land use changes in rural areas triggered by renewable energy demands in EU-27. This analysis was based on literature review and the data available.

Benefits for rural areas

The overall aim of the study is to provide a **comprehensive analysis of the main impacts of sectoral developments** (agricultural, forestry, energy, protection of natural areas, protection of water, urban sprawl and infrastructure, climate action, mining, consumption patterns etc.) **on land use in the EU's rural areas** and to identify recommendations for optimal land use, in particular to promote sustainable farming in light of other demands on land.

The study draws conclusions and recommends **novel, clear and practical policy measures** that could be implemented to promote the transition to more sustainable land use in rural areas, especially in the field of land use planning and zoning.

Next steps

The final report on the study will be submitted by the **end of October 2024**, and the main findings and recommendations of the study could be used as part of the work on the next common agricultural policy.

2.1.5. Support education, training, youth, sport and volunteering in rural areas

Key deliverables

Under the **EU youth strategy 2019-2027,** following a participatory approach, the Commission works to implement the 11 European Youth Goals in its youth policy. **Goal #6 'Moving rural youth forward'** aims at supporting opportunities for young people in rural areas.

For **Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps** the Commission has set up a **framework of inclusion measures** to better reach out to a wider number of people with fewer opportunities ([13]), among others **rural** residents **that face geographical barriers to participation**. The programmes also include mechanisms to **prioritise quality projects involving participants with fewer opportunities** and addressing the themes of inclusion and diversity. The National Agencies translate the EU general measures into specific actions on the ground and the Commission provides practical guidance on how to implement the measures under the 'Inclusion and diversity strategy'.

1200 activities contributed to the European Youth **Goal #6** **Moving rural youth forward**

Under the umbrella of the **European Year of Youth 2022** (EYY), different activities have been conducted for rural areas:

- Around **1 200 activities** contributed to the European Youth **Goal #6: Moving rural youth forward,** meaning nine per cent of the 12 977 activities implemented for the EYY were specifically for rural youth.

- Two of the EYY 2022 **policy dialogues** were connected to rural youth: the policy dialogue with Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski: "Young people in agriculture and rural areas" and the policy dialogue with Commissioner Elisa Ferreira: "Addressing brain drain: retaining and attracting talents in EU regions"

The '**EU-CoE Youth Partnership'** is the body in charge of monitoring the implementation of youth strategies for the European Commission and the Council of Europe. There is a priority topic for research and reporting on "young people in rural areas" under which studies, research, policy papers and reports from events on issues connected to rural youth are presented.

In 2021, the Youth Partnership presented the study "Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled". The new work plan 2024-2025 of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership foresees a new study on "**Opportunities for young people living in rural and remote areas in the EU in terms of non-formal learning, active citizenship and participation".**

([13]) 'young people with fewer opportunities' means young people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, due to their migrant background, or for reasons such as a disability or educational difficulties or for any other reason, including a reason that could give rise to discrimination under Article 21 of the Charter, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the Programme.

Benefits for rural areas

The inclusion measures provide opportunities for **specific financial support for rural people facing geographical barriers and in need of additional support, personalised accompanying measures, more flexible formats**, etc. The activities mentioned above are aiming to support education, training, youth, sport and volunteering activities in rural areas. They can **increase the participation of rural young people in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes**. The measures are meant to empower young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes - including leadership skills - they need for employment, social integration and active citizenship.

The stream of work 'young people is rural areas' under EU-CoE youth partnership favours knowledge production and dissemination as well as **specific policy attention to issues connected to rural youth.**

Next steps

The **inclusion measures** under Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps **are monitored** at national and EU level. The programmes are implemented in indirect management mode, allowing sufficient flexibility to **collect feedback and implement changes in the programmes on an annual basis**. The results of the mid-term evaluations will be examined to further improve the measures targeting inclusion.

The study on "opportunities for youth", which is part of the legacy of the EYY, will be published in the course of summer 2024. The study will focus on the **social conditions of young people in rural and remote areas, the issue of youth participation, the access to information** and the need for changes to encourage their engagement in EU youth policy implementation, especially in the post pandemic period.

2.2. Connected

2.2.1. Flagship: develop rural mobility

Key deliverables

During the Spanish Presidency of the EU Council, the **Barcelona Declaration on "Mobility for people: advancing social and territorial cohesion"** was adopted in September 2023. The Declaration recognises the importance of sustainable rural mobility needs in the regional and national transport system plans, as well as the need to increase investments in safe urban and rural road infrastructure and public transport systems.

A European rural mobility network engaging municipalities and multipliers

To support rural municipalities in identifying best mobility solutions, the Commission launched a two-year project that will be running from 2023 to 2024.

Called "**SMARTA-NET**", the **project focuses on sustainable rural mobility solutions for tourism and on capacity building at local level**. In particular, the project:

- created a **European rural mobility network** to engage rural municipalities and other rural areas;
- delivered **training programmes** on mobility solutions in rural areas;
- produced **practical tools**, such as the self-check on sustainable tourist mobility for rural regions and knowledge maps;
- produced **guidance documents**, such as on **good practices** and durable solutions, mobility in rural tourism communities, the rural dimension in the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) and access to financing sources.

SMARTA-NET builds on the previous two editions of SMARTA which analysed and tested solutions for sustainable rural mobility. Projects have been financed with the support of the European Parliament.

Regarding **multimodal digital mobility services**, the Commission conducted a first impact assessment study from January 2021 to October 2023. The main objective was to facilitate passengers' ability to compare, access, and book tickets and mobility products within and across modes, and thereby contribute to facilitating access to alternative transport solutions including in rural areas.

In addition, in November 2023 the Commission adopted a **Directive to set up a framework for the sharing of data**. ([14]) In this context, Member States are required to digitalise data. More specifically, to digitalise data on all bus stops across (i) the TEN-T network and (ii) extend it to the whole network.

([14]) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32023L2661

Benefits for rural areas

The objective of the **SMARTA-NET project** is to identify and **test sustainable, reliable and affordable transport solutions in rural areas** giving mobility options to citizens who cannot or do not want to use private cars to access services, work or leisure, such as elderly, young people or people with lower income who cannot afford cars. Rolling-out these mobility solutions can also help rural communities progress towards climate neutrality, despite the limited availability of public transport.

As for **multimodal digital mobility services**, the objective is to facilitate access to information and booking of mobility products. In rural areas, this can also help citizens **access information about all potential mobility offers** (e.g. car-pooling, car sharing opportunities) allowing them to make more efficient choices and better combine different parts of their – often long – journeys.

Next steps

The Commission will finalise the **SMARTA-NET project** with a **final conference in autumn 2024**.

The **creation of a group on "mobility"** as part of the rural pact community platform is being considered.

With regard to multimodal digital mobility services, the Commission is currently reflecting on how best to proceed with this initiative. Its relevance and the need to address identified problems remain unchanged.

Finally, the Commission is considering organising a session on the research aspects related to rural mobility as part of the "Transport Research Arena", which will take place in Dublin in April 2024.

2.2.2. Flagship: rural digital futures

Key deliverables

The rural digital futures flagship committed to improve 1) digital connectivity; 2) digital technologies available for rural communities; 3) digital skills; and 4) tools to measure progress towards closing the digital gap.

Digital connectivity

The Digital Decade Policy programme [15] confirmed the targets to have **gigabit connectivity for all EU households and all populated areas to be covered by 5G by 2030**, **including in underserved rural regions**. Since 2021, the Commission supports and will continue to support the deployment of Gigabit and 5G networks through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF Digital) with a **budget of EUR 2.1 billion over 7 years**. In addition, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) dedicates around **EUR 16,8 billion** to connectivity, including Very High-Capacity Networks (VHCN) and 5G roll-out in remote areas.

The Commission supports the implementation of the new **Union's Secure Connectivity Programme** 2023-2027 IRIS with a budget of EUR 2.4 billion, which also includes **satellite broadband coverage in rural areas.** The EU is also leveraging connectivity investments through the new **cohesion policy funds**, e.g. the ERDF (about EUR 2.36 billion) for regions, and InvestEU.

The **Connecting Europe Broadband Fund** (CEBF), an equity fund of EUR 555 million, is currently investing in state-of-the-art networks in predominantly greenfield areas (grey or white areas, typically semi-dense or rural areas) across the EU. The fund has invested in the roll-out of fiber to the home (FttH) to 1.7 million premises in the Union and it is expected to invest in the roll-out of many more.

EUR 23.50 billion to improve connectivity

Overall **total of EUR 23.5 billion in grants have been made available in EU programmes for the 2021-2027 period, most of which will go to rural areas** as state aid rules for broadband deployment allow only grants in market failure areas.

Digital technologies

Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe programme have supported innovation and deployment of digital technologies in rural areas, especially data and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

Digital Europe is funding the preparation and deployment of different **data spaces**, some of which may bring benefits to rural economies and communities. The **agricultural data space**, for which a preparatory action is already underway, will enable the trustworthy sharing of data between actors linked to agriculture. The evolving data space holds the potential to create new services for farmers, supporting them in their decision making and boosting their businesses competitivity on the market. The **tourism** and **smart communities data spaces** will also be crucial for rural communities to grasp the potential

(15) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-policy-programme-2030

of data economies to support sustainable realities and to tailor services to the needs of the local community. The **testing and experimentation facility for AI in agri-food** started in January 2023. It will help innovators to assess and validate AI and robotics solutions fostering sustainable and efficient food production and achieve market maturity.

Finally, the Digital Europe work programme is financing the '**European Digital Innovation Hubs'** (EDIH)**.** The 151 hubs already established offer services to public and private organisations across the European Union, combining the benefits of a regional presence with the opportunities available to a pan European network. 85% of the European regions host organisations forming the EDIH network and EDIHs services are available in nearly 90% of the European regions. This regional presence leaves them well-placed to provide the services local companies need, through the local language and innovation ecosystem. A high share of these EDIH focus on digital technologies in agri-food.

Digital skills

In addition to the support provided through the approved programmes of the European Social Fund + (ESF+) and common agricultural policy strategic plans, the Commission has highlighted specific challenges faced by rural areas in its **proposals for Council recommendations** on the **provision of digital skills** and on **enabling factors for digital education** adopted in April 2023, leading to Council recommendations adopted on 23 November 2023 ([16]).

A rural pact good practice webinar "**Strengthening digital skills of rural people to benefit from the digital era**" ([17]) (8 June 2023) raised awareness of the various funding opportunities in the **European Digital Education action plan 2021-2027** and good practices to improve digital skills in specific rural contexts.

Under the Digital Europe Programme, Strategic Objective 4, which focuses on digital skills, specialised education programmes and training will support the skilling of European future employees in selected digital areas (e.g. virtual reality, AI, data analytics and more) and their application in strategic sectors, agriculture included.

Finally, the preparatory action "**learning from the extremes**" ([18]) aimed at addressing inequalities of access to digital education by enhancing inclusion and by reducing the digital gap suffered by school communities from remote areas with low connectivity, limited or no access to devices and digital educational tools and content. In 2023, 76 pilot projects were supported, including 123 schools in rural areas in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, and Spain.

Tracking progress towards closing the gap

A "**rural in digital**" **index** showcasing the most relevant indicators of the Digital economic and social index (DESI) was published on 29 August 2022 as planned in the EU rural action plan. Decisions made after on monitoring progress towards the digital decade targets led to discontinue this index alongside other thematic indexes. The reports published in the

([16]) https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/23/digital-skills-and-competences-and-successful-digital-education-and-training-fit-for-the-digital-era/

([17]) https://rural-vision.europa.eu/events/strengthening-digital-skills-rural-people-benefit-digital-era-2023-06-08_en

([18]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/funding/learning-extremes

context of the digital decade however keep including a wealth of relevant indicators to allow tracking progress towards closing the digital gap in rural areas ([19]).

Benefits for rural areas

The DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index) report 2023 shows that at the end of June 2022:

- 73.4% of EU homes were passed by either **fiber to the premise (**FTTP) or cable DOCSIS 3.1 (increasing by 3.5 percentage points, representing a slow-down in growth compared with the previous study period 2022);
- **rural overall FTTP & DOCSIS 3.1 (the technologies supporting gigabit speeds)** coverage reached **45.1% of rural households, growing by 8.1 percentage** points in the twelve months to mid-2022;
- in absolute terms, 13.9 million rural households across the EU were passed by either FTTP or DOCSIS 3.1 networks at the end of June 2022;
- more than half of **rural households** (55%) were not served by any **fixed VHCN** network (despite progress in FTTB);
- **9% of rural households** are not yet covered by any fixed network;
- **65.3% of populated rural areas are not covered by 5G;**
- the EU is lagging behind the US in 5G coverage: EU 81% v USA 96%;
- very high-speed digital subscriber line (VDSL) services: EU 54.9% v rural 41.2%;
- long-term evolution (LTE): EU 99.8% v rural 99.2% ; and
- the gap between rural and urban areas in the digital skills of the population persists: only 46% of individuals living in rural areas have at least basic digital skills compared to people living in the predominantly urban areas (61%).

Next steps

Despite good progress over the last years, broadband coverage remains uneven between rural and urban areas, with large differences especially when it comes to very high-capacity networks (VHCNs). To improve the situation, the Commission is busy setting up a **predictable regulatory environment, providing the conditions to incentivise investment**. In addition, minimising deployment costs will continue to play an important role in accelerating the universal availability of gigabit connectivity.

The Commission also invites Member States to adapt strategies, steer investments and take policy initiatives to reach the digital decade connectivity targets, e.g. by:

- mapping connectivity gaps;
- exploring financing to complement private investment in market failure areas;
- focusing particularly on rural and remote areas and outermost regions;
- complement deployment efforts with take-up measures by private/businesses;
- fully implement the EU's 5G toolbox by applying restrictions on high-risk suppliers;
- put in place reforms, building on Resilience and recovery plans (RRP) measures, to lower the cost of network deployment;
- quickly adopt the Gigabit Infrastructure Act, to speed up benefits from new rules;
- boost efforts for a secure & resilient infrastructure (backbones & submarine cables).

([19]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/broadband-coverage-europe-2022

2.2.3. Support the roll-out of broadband in rural areas

Key deliverables

In April 2022, the Commission started a second contract for a **Broadband Competence Offices Support Facility** to provide support to the Broadband Competence Offices (BCO) Network ([20]) for the next five years. The BCO Network, is assisting in speeding up the planning and execution of public interventions for the provision of connectivity for areas where the market has failed to provide adequate coverage, such as rural and remote areas. This is achieved through capacity building and sharing of good practices.

On 12 December 2022, the Commission adopted the new EU State aid guidelines for broadband networks **for areas not served by the market ([21])**. The guidelines, published in the EU Official journal on 26 January 2023, clarify various aspects, including support for demand through broadband voucher measures and specific provisions for areas with low population density which face challenges with accessing subsidies for infrastructure and relevant wholesale products.

Benefits for rural areas

BCOs and the Networking Facility support local, regional and national authorities in understanding how they can best **benefit from and implement these funding opportunities**, as well as advising the authorities on all relevant legislation. On average, 88 people have participated in the weekly capacity building webinars, with a total attendance of nearly 1 500 persons since the renewal of the contract in April 2022. The focus of these sessions is accelerating broadband roll-out in rural areas. The BCO Support Facility is working in close collaboration with the EU CAP Network and the Rural Pact Support Office to bring together the stakeholders of broadband and of rural development.

The DESI 2023 report reveals that these activities continue to be highly needed as broadband coverage remains uneven between rural and urban areas, with large differences especially when it comes to very high-capacity networks (VHCNs), but also because of the costs associated with deploying these networks in rural areas. Despite the fact that the highest growth in 2022 took place in rural areas in the most important segment of the gigable supporting technologies (FTTP and DOCSIS 3.1), a large gap persists both in terms of urban-rural divide, which amounts to 28 percentage points, as well as in terms of internet use, as subscription rates in cities, towns and suburbs are comparatively higher. 4G is now widespread in rural areas (99.6%). To bridge the digital divide, the EU is providing extensive support through investments and over EUR 16 billion of RRF will fund reforms and investments in digital connectivity that have been approved for the next four years. BCOs are instrumental in enabling rural communities to benefit from these funding opportunities.

([20]) https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/bco-network

([21]) Commission, *Guidelines on State aid for broadband networks* (2023/C 36/01)

Next steps

In developing public policy for broadband investment in rural areas and balancing the demand and supply of ICT services, it is crucial to address the challenges such as low population density, difficult terrain, and challenging socio-economic conditions.

The forthcoming updated Broadband investment Handbook, planned to be published in the first quarter of 2024, will recommend a few measures to support demand, such as demand aggregation through self-subscription mechanisms for both private and public sectors. Demand from public administrations, such as local administrative buildings, schools, hospitals, libraries, etc.) can constitute anchor tenants supporting the viability of broadband investment, particularly in rural or remote areas with challenging conditions.

Territorial coverage is an area that will need to complement the data on household coverage.

2.2.4. Promotion of digitalisation in the agricultural sector

Key deliverables

Through the digitalisation strategies in National CAP strategic plans, **effective links between the CAP and Horizon Europe have been achieved** to boost the sustainable **digital transformation in agriculture and rural areas**. Finalised Horizon 2020 projects such as **Internet of food and farm** (IoF 2020) and **SmartAgriHubs** focused on Internet of Things (IoT) technologies in agriculture and probing the concept of 'Digital Innovation Hubs', respectively, and resulting in the development of **innovative solutions in the field of smart agriculture**.

With Horizon Europe, under the first work programmes for Cluster 6 (Food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and the environment) covering 2021 and 2022, the Commission launched or will launch **15 projects with an EU contribution of EUR 75 million** and focusing on drones, data economy, smart connectivity, and blockchain technologies in agriculture. For the Cluster 6 work programme for **2023/2024, 7 projects** with an EU contribution of **EUR 35 million are expected**. Themes include augmented reality to enhance working conditions in agriculture, markets for data infrastructure, open-source edge and cloud solutions and data technologies in livestock tracking.

Regarding Cluster 4 (Digital, industry and space), capacity building measures (e.g. in advanced digital skills) have been proactively promoted in the research and innovation (R&I) community.

Benefits for rural areas

Demonstration projects, podcasts and social media content, and use cases have made it feasible for the **agricultural community to see the benefits of novel technologies** in agriculture, such as efficiency gains, environmental protection, and cost-effectiveness.

The multi-actor approach, a requirement in the calls for projects that scientists work together with practitioners, made sure **scientists involved farmers and other end-users** in the innovation process. Many Digital Innovation Hubs intend to target farmers with their work. Linking R&I projects working on agricultural and rural digitalisation has also widened the discussion on synergies and cross-sectoral data use.

Next steps

The review of SmartAgriHubs revealed limited socio-economic spill-over effects to rural areas, but living labs contributed to capacity building in communities. R&I actions and innovation actions should be encouraged to achieve spill-over effects, along with interlinking projects about digitalisation in agricultural and rural areas. R&I projects should also assess social implications, not just environmental and economic ones. To convince farmers and encourage technology uptake, results need to be promoted among end-users in a feasible way and with hard figures.

The EU AgriResearch Conference 2023 identified R&I priorities concerning digitalisation for agriculture and rural areas. Member States can **increase the uptake of innovative solutions through CAP instruments** e.g. through training. The European Commission will take these elements into account when drafting the future calls for projects for 2025-2027.

2.2.5. *Highlight urban-rural linkages in the new EU urban mobility framework*

Key deliverables

The new EU urban mobility framework was adopted by the Commission in December 2021. It envisages specific actions to **better integrate the urban/metropolitan, peri-urban and rural linkages**, including through further development of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs).

An **updated EU concept for sustainable urban mobility plans** (SUMP) was published in March 2023 as part of the Commission Recommendation on national SUMP support programme. It includes aspects related to connectivity between urban and peri-urban and rural areas aspects.

The Commission re-launched an Expert group on urban mobility to discuss the opportunities to **further improve urban and rural mobility**. In particular, two sub-groups were set up:

- sub-group 1 on SUMP monitoring and implementation;
- sub-group 3 on public transport and shared mobility.

In October 2023, the Commission adopted the proposal for a European Declaration on cycling, recognising cycling as a sustainable, accessible and inclusive, affordable and healthy means of transport, including in rural areas.

Benefits for rural areas

This action benefits mostly **rural areas that are close to cities**, representing potentially one-third of the rural territory and half of the rural population. The Commission considers that the **revised sustainable urban mobility plans provide sustainable mobility solutions for rural inhabitants** travelling to cities and for city inhabitants willing to reach rural areas in a sustainable way. This **facilitates the permanent establishment of new inhabitants in rural areas close to cities as well as business development** related to the provision of recreational services to urban dwellers.

Next steps

The Commission expects that the deliverables of the Commission expert group on urban mobility will become available in mid-2024.

2.2.6. Accessibility of rural areas through the drone strategy 2.0.

Key deliverables

The Commission **drone strategy 2.0** has been adopted in November 2022. It highlights the **potential of drones to improve accessibility in rural areas** and launches a number of flagships.

Since the strategy's adoption, there has been good progress on some flagships of particular interest to rural areas:

- action 4: adopt rules for the 'certified' category of drone operations, addressing the initial and continued airworthiness of drones subject to certification; and the operational requirements applicable to manned vertical take-off and landing or 'VTOL'-capable aircraft; and
- action 7: fund the creation of an online platform to support a sustainable innovative air mobility (IAM) implementation by authorities, cities, industry and stakeholders.

Benefits for rural areas

In addition to **utility services** (field inspections and measurements), drones can improve accessibility in remote rural areas. They can be used for **delivery of small goods in rural areas** (e.g. small packages, prescribed medicine to patient homes, mail, food, small automotive parts, etc.) and provide fast and effective **responses in case of natural disasters**.

Envisaged uses cover high-risk operations, which could include agricultural use cases such as aerial spraying. **Precision agriculture** (monitoring of crops, spraying, environmental protection, planting, etc.) is one of the most promising use cases for drone operations, and it is **expected to become commercially viable within 2-5 years**.

However, the European Directive 2009/128/EC on the sustainable use of pesticides generally prohibits aerial spraying. It only allows it in special cases and under derogation to the EU rules. The derogations are possible only in those cases where, if compared to other spraying methods, the low operating altitudes of drones significantly reduce the possibility that the released products are dispersed outside the areas covered by the treatments.

Next steps

The description of this action was focused on adopting the strategy and this action is therefore considered as **completed**. Next steps include implementing the actions foreseen in the adopted strategy.

2.3. Resilient

2.3.1. Flagship: support rural municipalities in energy transitions and fighting climate change

Key deliverables

While working on implementing the flagship action to support rural municipalities in the energy transition and fighting climate change, the most important action taken was the **creation of a Rural energy community advisory hub** (RECAH) in July 2022. This was a two-year action (2022 – 2023) that the Commission added to the original rural action plan.

In this context, RECAH provided **assistance to 27 beneficiaries in developing energy communities** through the technical assistance programme. It also developed guidance documents on setting up and maintaining rural energy communities and organised six networking sessions and several conferences.

27 energy communities supported

The Commission has also taken steps to implement the flagship actions foreseen in the rural action plan, including in relation to:

The Covenant of Mayors

The **Covenant of Mayors (CoM) collaborated with the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)** to promote the CoM City in the Spotlight Awards call and share projects from rural municipalities in 2022. Within the Covenant of Mayors Office (CoMO)'s peer learning programme, CoMO highlighted the importance of the rural dimension and encouraged applications from rural municipalities, with ENRD helping to disseminate these opportunities. CoMO took part in a panel discussion on energy communities at the 2022 Rural pact conference.

On 8 June 2023, CoMO organised a **webinar focused on "Developing and implementing Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans in small and rural municipalities**." The webinar featured speakers from DG AGRI, DG ENER, and DG CLIMA who presented their respective policies with a specific emphasis on small and rural municipalities. The webinar also informed participants about the rural pact and its opportunities.

CoMO has held discussions with the Rural Pact Support Office in May 2023 to explore synergies and cooperation on various levels. This includes communication of opportunities, collaboration in upcoming events, dissemination of knowledge to local authorities, and exploring connections between Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans and the commitments of the rural pact. The collaboration materialised in the organisation of a webinar on the 'Energy transition in rural areas' in October 2023.

The new European Bauhaus (NEB)

In January 2023, JRC issued a progress report on the first two years of implementation of the new European Bauhaus (NEB), considering that rural areas play an important role. In this context, it was acknowledged that, within the **call on 'Support to New European Bauhaus Local Initiatives'**, cohesion policy is addressing the need to **build the capacities of local authorities to facilitate local transformation** processes through the NEB. This call was also focused on NEB transformations of physical spaces, including in rural areas.

The use of structural funding to finance the renovation wave

It is too early to have conclusive information on the execution of the structural funds to finance the renovation wave. In particular, the selection of local development strategies of LEADER local action groups is not yet fully finalised.

The common agricultural policy (CAP) supports the climate and energy transitions in rural areas particularly under its **specific objective 4: "contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation**, including by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing carbon sequestration, as well as promoting sustainable energy". Several **CAP interventions contribute** directly to help achieving this objective, including investments, LEADER and knowledge exchange and dissemination of information.

Benefits for rural areas

RECAH contributed to increasing the understanding and **capacity of citizens and local authorities to create renewable energy communities in rural areas**. It also provided a structured avenue for discussing and overcoming similar challenges, as well as for exchange of information, knowledge and best practices.

The **CoM** increased the understanding and capacity of small and medium-sized cities to make commitments under the rural pact. The events organised provided avenues for **exchange of information, knowledge and best practices**.

The **NEB** helped **20 smaller and medium-sized municipalities** in receiving tailored, multidisciplinary expert **support on the ground** to turn their NEB ideas into reality, with projects ranging from new art centres and creative working spaces to the inclusion of the Roma to regeneration of abandoned industrial sites.

Under the CAP **specific objective on climate change**, Member States have the opportunity to design interventions under their CAP strategic plans (CSP) to enhance the energy and climate transition in rural areas. **22 CSP include targeted interventions to support the production of renewable energy**, e.g. on-farm investments for self-consumption but also for diversification and investments for other rural businesses and small infrastructure in rural areas.

Next steps

The **Energy Communities Facility** will be set up in 2024 to merge some of the activities of the Energy Communities Repository and Rural Energy Community Advisory Hub. Cascade funding will be provided in the form of grants to energy communities to help design their business plans.

Whilst it is not foreseen to create a dedicated rural pillar under the CoM, **the Commission will keep exploring the synergies with the CoM to enhance the benefits for rural areas and small and medium sized rural municipalities** (e.g. through the organisation of events).

In addition, the Commission is exploring **follow-up activities and synergies with the NEB** and the Smart cities marketplace (e.g. the organisation of events) to include a more prominent rural dimension, which would also involve small and medium-sized cities.

2.3.2. Flagship: climate action in peatland through carbon farming

Key deliverables

Over the past two years the Commission has consistently **promoted action on peatlands** across its policies and policy instruments, notably by:

- **streamlining targeted support** for costs linked to **climate action on peatlands** (e.g. eco-schemes, rural development interventions, and advisory services and cooperation) in the context of the assessment of the common agricultural policy (CAP) strategic plans;
- developing an **EU certification framework** to certify **soil emission reductions** resulting from peatland restoration;
- developing **financing possibilities** through the **Just Transition Fund** to support peatland conservation and restoration;
- setting the **focus on carbon farming actions** on peatlands in the context of the **LIFE** yearly calls for projects.

The revised agricultural and forestry state aid guidelines, published on 21 December 2022, provide **increased support possibilities for climate-relevant measures**, including **protecting and restoring peat soils in forestry**. At the end of 2022, the Commission proposed an EU-wide voluntary framework to certify high-quality carbon removals. An expert group to develop certification methodologies on carbon removals, including peatland restoration, was established. The **expert group on carbon farming** held a thematic session on peatland restoration on 21 and 22 June 2023. In addition, in 2023 the Commission continued the **focus on peatlands** in the context of the **National and energy climate plans' update**.

Benefits for rural areas

These actions contributed to **making rural areas advance towards climate-neutrality**. The role of peatlands for climate and the environment is often underestimated and **restoration of these important organic soils leads to trade-offs** resulting from the loss of agricultural land that could where possible be addressed through support for paludiculture.

The certification framework can create **new business models to encourage climate-friendly use of peatland** through public subsidies or private finance. **Rural actors benefit from support** offered by the CAP, EU programmes such as LIFE, Horizon Europe, Just Transition Fund, and State aid, using lessons learned from research and pilot schemes.

The **CAP 2023-2027** introduced the new standard **'GAEC 2 Protection of wetland and peatland'** requiring protection of wetlands and peatlands under conditionality. **12 Member States started to implement this GAEC in 2023**, with others started implementing GAEC 2 as from 2024 or 2025 as mapping of peatlands and wetlands on agricultural land was not yet finalised in 2023. Most Member States proposed under GAEC 2 practices such as a ban or restrictions on drainage, reduced tillage, and ban on ploughing, whereas area-based interventions in certain Member States support the conversion of arable peatlands to grasslands, paludiculture, and extensive management of grasslands in wetlands. **35% of the EU's utilised agricultural land is set to receive support for reducing emissions** and increasing removals in soil and biomass over the 2023-2027 programming period. Additionally, some **Member States are financing actions to restore peatlands or support paludiculture outside of CAP**.

Next steps

EU action in this respect has been consistent and continuous, providing financing possibilities and stimulating uptake. The relevant policies are in place and need to be implemented.

During the course of 2024, the Commission will prioritise the **development of tailored certification methodologies for inter alia carbon farming**, which provide significant benefits including for the rewetting of peatlands.

2.3.3. Flagship: the EU mission 'A Soil deal for Europe'

Key deliverables

Horizon Europe

The mission 'A Soil deal for Europe' (or 'Mission Soil') was officially launched in September 2021. Since then, three work programmes (2021-2023) were adopted with a total budget of **EUR 301 million**, as described below.

Work programme 2021: EUR 5 million were allocated to a preparatory action and **EUR 62 million** were allocated to eight topics and two "other actions". Funded projects focus on soil monitoring, business models for soil health, regional soil needs, soil advisors and opportunities for engagement of regional and local stakeholders, and preparing the ground for the creation of soil health living labs.

Work programme 2022: EUR 95 million were allocated to ten topics. Grant agreements were signed in May and June 2023. Projects will promote actions focusing on all four operational objectives of the soil mission as well as addressing the **mission's hotspots "carbon farming", "soil biodiversity", "pollution and restoration" and "circular economy".**

Work programme 2023: EUR 126 million were allocated to 9 topics addressing on-site digital technologies, waste management, soil decontamination, desertification, spatial planning, engagement with creative industries and establishing the first wave of living labs among others. The work programme also includes two joint calls for proposals with missions "Restore our ocean & waters" and "Adaptation to climate change" on increasing landscape water retention capacity at regional scale and addressing nutrient pollution in the landscape-river-sea system in the Mediterranean sea basin.

Soil literacy, communication and engagement

Since the mission's inception in September 2019, it has been presented and discussed in interactive formats at **over 300 events across Europe and beyond**. A survey of citizens' perceptions of soils and soil-related challenges was also conducted, with more than 2 500 replies.

During the implementation phase, the mission is expanding engagement activities through dedicated actions and living labs to increase soil literacy and public involvement across practitioners and society. This includes creating **Territorial Management Agreements** to tackle soil challenges and mobilising schools and universities for soil literacy. The mission was also featured in the EU Soil Observatory Stakeholder Fora and a novel "European Mission Soil Week" took place in November 2023 under the Spanish Presidency of the EU Council in Madrid.

Benefits for rural areas

The activities funded under the mission are contributing to protect and restore soil health in many rural areas. The mission topics and projects below are also especially relevant for rural areas.

- **2021-SOIL-02-06 - Engage with and activate municipalities and regions to protect and restore soil health.** The project HuMUS is working with municipalities and regions to increase awareness and understanding of the importance and value of soil health and co-create territorial management agreements. It will identify EU funds that can be used for soil protection and restoration.
- **2022-SOIL-01-07 Foster soil education across society** - this topic highlights that activities should cover both urban and rural areas. The project LOESS will work with educational institutions, teachers, and students to improve soil literacy in society.
- **2023-SOIL-01-06 Soils in spatial planning** – projects funded under this topic will, among other activities, improve the knowledge on potential trade-offs regarding the provision of ecosystem services in the context of further expanding urban, peri-urban and rural areas.
- **2023-SOIL-01-07 Back to earth: bringing communities and citizens closer to soil** – this topic highlights that the project funded under it should contribute to the implementation of the long-term vision for rural areas.
- **2023-SOIL-01-08 Co-creating solutions for soil health in living labs** and **2023-SOIL-01-09 Carbon farming in living labs** are going to contribute to rural areas' resilience as many of the living labs are expected to be located in rural areas.

Next steps

The missions are all implementing the recommendations outlined in the 'Communication from the Commission on '**EU Missions two years on: assessment of progress and way forward**' ([22]), which was adopted in July 2023.

The work programme for 2024 is in its final stage with a publication foreseen in March 2024. It encompasses nine promising topics, to establish new living labs but also to assess and expand soil regenerative practices, including at international scale.

Co-creation activities for work programme for 2025 are expected to begin in mid-February 2024, with stakeholders able to contribute through public feedback. As the mission is a flagship initiative of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, the strong link between soil health and rural areas' resilience will potentially be highlighted even more in the future.

([22]) COM(2023) 457 final

2.3.4. Flagship: social resilience and women in rural areas

Key deliverables

The Commission adopted the **European care strategy in September 2022** to improve the situation for people in need of care and their carers, highlighting the challenges of those living in rural areas. The strategy is being implemented via horizontal EU actions and it is accompanied by two Council recommendations, on long-term care and childcare respectively, that should guide reforms and investments at the national level.

- The **Council recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care** (LTC), approved by the Council in December 2022, calls Member States to act to improve their long-term care systems, including by closing territorial gaps in the availability of and access to long-term care, in particular in rural and depopulating areas.
- The **Council recommendation on early childhood education and care** (ECEC) – the Barcelona targets 2030, adopted by the Council in December 2022, calls on Member States to address challenges for children and their families in accessing a suitable education and care facility by providing sufficient **territorial coverage of ECEC provision**. In particular, Member States should organise the provision of **ECEC adequately across urban and rural areas**.

The horizontal EU level actions carried out under the care strategy and presented below are relevant to addressing territorial inequalities.

- The self-assessment tool for Member States: the commission is working with the World Health Organisation (WHO) in developing a comprehensive **methodology to help Member States and regions to self-assess their long-term care policies. The tool may contain questions on territorial challenges.**
- **Toolkit to support informal carers:** the Commission and the World Health Organisation (WHO) are working on a toolkit to practically support informal carers in their care giving activities. This could be valuable in rural areas to many women providing LTC informally.
- **Research projects on territorial inequalities in care:** in 2023, the Commission published a call for proposals under the Horizon Europe programme on addressing territorial inequalities in care and research on integrated care solutions. The call is expected to generate at least three projects looking into the issue.

The **European Social Fund Plus** (ESF+) is the EU's main instrument for investing in people's employment, education and skills, and in social inclusion to support economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU. The ESF+ notably finances actions **supporting women's access to employment in all the Member States, including in rural areas**. Among others, the ESF+ supports education, and training measures under the **specific objective "3. promote a gender-balanced labour market participation,** equal working conditions and a better work–life balance, including through affordable care for children and other dependent persons".

The **common agricultural policy (CAP) supports gender equality in rural areas** particularly under specific objective 8, "promoting employment, growth, representation in decision-making processes, participation in farming businesses, social inclusion and local

development" which includes a reference to enhancing the position of women in farming and accelerating the social inclusion of rural women. The Commission organised a number of **networking activities** focusing on gender equality in rural areas including:

- an EU CAP Network workshop on "advancing gender equality in rural areas" on 15 and 16 November 2022;
- a **session dedicated to women** in rural areas at the High-level rural policy forum "Shaping the future of rural areas" in Sigüenza, Spain, on 28 September 2023 jointly organised by the European Commission and the Spanish presidency of the EU Council with the Rural Pact Support Office.
- The European Commission and Mission of Canada to the EU organised jointly the event titled 'Incentivise, Inspire and Include: Transatlantic views on supporting women in agriculture' on 27 October 2023, to discuss the challenges of women in farming and agri-food sectors in the transatlantic context and to reflect on solutions.
- a Rural Pact Support Office good practice webinar on "enhancing access to health services in rural areas" in partnership with the WHO and the European Rural and Isolated Practitioners Association (EURIPA), 30 November 2023;
- an EU CAP network **workshop** on "mental health and well-being of farmers and farming communities", 27 February and 28 May 2024.

Benefits for rural areas

Care services, education and training providers as well as social partners set up a **large-scale skills partnership for long-term care** in April 2023. The partners committed to train at least 60% of the long-term care workforce (3.8 million workers) every year by 2030. Ensuring that workers have the right skills is key to provide high-quality long-term care also in rural areas.

A new **European social dialogue committee for social services** was established, bringing together employers and trade unions of the sector. This will contribute to improving working conditions and wages in the sector, hence increasing sector attractiveness and reducing labour shortages which are higher in rural areas. The Commission is funding social innovation projects in long-term care. Two of the projects, based in Poland and Spain, directly address the challenges of providing long-term care in rural depopulating areas.

Under specific objective 8 of the CAP, Member States have the opportunity **to design interventions under their CAP strategic plans to enhance the participation of women in farming and foster social inclusion for women living in rural areas**.

Two good examples of **gender mainstreaming in CAP 2023-2027** can be found in the CAP Strategic Plans for Spain and Ireland.

- Spain has included a top-up to the complementary income support to young farmers in the case of young female farmers.
- Ireland has provided a higher level of support for women in the on-farm capital investment scheme.

In addition, the majority of Member States committed to include at least 50% of women in the decision making bodies for LEADER

The debate at the high-level policy forum in Sigüenza prepared the ground for Council conclusions adopted by the Council in November 2023, which highlight the importance of rural women and social services in rural areas.

Next steps

The Commission will continue to pay special attention to rural areas in the implementation of the care strategy. Member States are looking at how their long-term care policies need to be strengthened in line with the Council recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care **and will report to the Commission on actions taken or planned to implement it in 2024. The actions should address territorial challenges in long-term care, as called for in the Recommendation.**

Under the 2023-2027 CAP, the collection of gender disaggregated data will be strengthened to enable monitoring of progress in the field of gender equality.

2.3.5. *Analyse spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe*

Key deliverables

Between 2021 and 2023, three research and innovation projects have been funded under the Horizon Europe Cluster 2 topic "*The impact of spatial mobility on European demographics, society, welfare system and labour market*" with a budget of **EUR 9 million**. These projects are the following:

- PREMIUM_EU '*Policy recommendations to maximise the beneficial impact of unexplored mobilities in and beyond the European Union'*, that will develop a **regional policy dashboard** to assist policy makers in vulnerable regions [(23)];
- MOBI-TWIN '*Twin transition and changing patterns of spatial mobility: a regional approach*' that will focus on the **impact of global transitions on rural areas ([24])**;
- Re-Place '*Reframing non-metropolitan left behind places through mobility and alternative development*' that will study the **impact of spatial mobility on non-metropolitan left-behind areas** ([25]).

All three projects aim to improve local development and wellbeing and address the complexity of spatial mobility's role in the future of peripheral places.

Benefits for rural areas

The projects funded under this special action will produce **new knowledge on the impact of spatial mobility on rural areas.** They will develop new tools and methodologies to help policy makers formulate policies that enhance regional inclusive growth, wellbeing, and alternative local development. Participatory research and co-creation will reframe existing narratives and reinforce a sense of place for residents and newcomers in vulnerable rural areas.

Next steps

The projects have a duration of three to four years. Launched in spring 2023, they will end between mid-2026 and the beginning of 2027. Outputs and knowledge produced by the projects will be promoted through the rural vision and rural pact communication channels. Following the completion of the project, needs for further research will be analysed and fed in the preparation of the following work programmes of the European framework programme for research and innovation.

Considering that this action relies on three research and innovation projects, the decision has been made to move it under the flagship 'research and innovation for rural communities' under the area of action for 'stronger rural areas' in the reviewed EU rural action plan, to streamline reporting. A reference remains under the 'resilient' action area for the record.

([23]) https://premium-eu.org/

([24]) https://mobi-twin-project.eu/

([25]) https://replace-horizon.eu/

2.3.6. Study on the working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers

Key deliverables

The Commission has launched a study on the working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers.

The call for the tender was published in 2022, offers were submitted in the second half of 2022. The assessment of the offers is completed. The **study started in September 2023** and has a duration of 19 months. The final deliverables will cover four themes, and they will analyse case studies based on quantitative and qualitative research.

- Theme 1: Overview and mapping of current **state of play**
- Theme 2: **Effectiveness of the enforcement systems** in place
- Theme 3: **Obstacles and possible enlargement** of social conditionality scope
- Theme 4: Baseline and collection of **quantitative data**

Benefits for rural areas

Agriculture workers in rural areas can benefit from the social conditionality starting from 2025 under the common agricultural policy. The Commission has undertaken to assess the mechanism after the first two years. This study will serve as a baseline to this ex-post assessment of social conditionality in 2027.

Next steps

The study results will be published in the first **half of 2025**.

2.3.7. Inclusion and integration of people with a migrant background in rural areas

Key deliverables

The Commission has explored options to build rural partnerships to promote social inclusion and integration of migrants via the following actions.

- Funding under the asylum, migration and integration fund (AMIF) Union Actions the **transnational project SHARE**: **Expanding Social Orientation & Integration for Newcomers in Rural Areas** (SHARE SIRA), which ended in 2023.
  The SHARE SIRA project aimed to **build innovative and effective approaches to engaging local communities in actions to improve the social orientation of newcomers in rural territories** across Europe. It focused on creating positive early integration outcomes, engaging new stakeholders and piloting new approaches and building positive relationships, social networks and mutual understanding between newcomers and local community members. Coordinated by International catholic migration commission (ICMC) Europe's SHARE Network of Cities and Regions in partnership with the International organisation for migration (IOM) and three national partners, the action was implemented in four countries, working in 10 predominantly rural regions:
- At the 2022 European Week of Regions and Cities (EWRC), a session on "**Exploring partnerships on the inclusion and integration of migrants and refugees in rural areas**" took place. Rural networks in social inclusion were discussed during this session. Experts from all around Europe could listen to the presentations on the connections between inclusion, networks and rural areas, from policy and research angles, with interventions from the Commission, the SHARE Network and a rural development example from Slovakia.

Benefits for rural areas

Exploring rural partnerships in rural areas is a core element in the development and implementation of inclusion and integration policy. The existence, number and quality of these networks have a huge impact on the integration of newcomers, migrants and refugees. More specifically, the workshop during the EWRC contributed to strengthen the synergies between the Action Plans on Inclusion and Integration and the Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas.

Next steps

The Commission will continue to involve rural areas when supporting local and regional authorities for measures related to migrant integration, such as **funding for transnational projects under Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund** or actions taken in the framework of the **Urban Agenda Partnership** in the inclusion of migrants.

2.3.8. Equal opportunities for children in rural areas

Key deliverables

The objective of the **European Child Guarantee (ECG)** is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need to a set of key services. By the end of 2023, all Member States had submitted their **national action plans for implementation of the ECG**. Most action plans refer **to the rural-urban divide in access to key service**s covered by the ECG. This aspect is most prominent in the action plans of Romania, Lithuania, and Croatia.

As regards rural areas, the 2021 Council recommendation establishing a ECG §6(d) calls the Member States to "**address the territorial dimension of social exclusion, taking into account the specific needs of children** according to distinctive urban, rural, remote and disadvantaged areas, based on an integrated and multidisciplinary approach".

As part of the preparatory action for child guarantee, carried out by UNICEF between July 2020 and April 2023, several pilot projects were implemented in Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, and Italy. In Bulgaria and Croatia, projects included **early childhood interventions and parenting support in rural areas with sizable Roma communities**. More information here.

Benefits for rural areas

Despite delays in several Member States (mostly due to complex governance structures and consultation processes taking longer than expected), the implementation of ECG seems to be on the right track. In response to Council recommendation §6(d), several Member States have planned **policy measures targeted at children in rural areas**. Among others are the following.

- Bulgaria prioritises children in rural areas when improving digital inclusion and promoting equal access and availability of online services and connectivity.
- Croatia is putting emphasis on rural and underdeveloped areas in its efforts to improve the primary health care system and provide quality integrated health services.
- In Greece, children living in non-urban, remote, rural and mountain areas, will benefit from better internet connection, meant to improve their access to education. To improve their access to health, Greece has planned the establishment of mobile paediatric, ophthalmology and dental services units, with adequate technical equipment and staff.
- Lithuania is updating its system for the collection of statistical information on children, with a view to better detect urban-rural disparities and implement relevant correctional actions.
- Romania focuses on disadvantaged/rural areas when developing early childhood education services and increasing the number of school counsellors and mediators.

Next steps

By 15 March 2024, the **Member States are expected to report to the Commission on their progress in implementing the ECG recommendation**. Member States for which the urban rural divide is of specific prominence, are expected to report on the topic.

2.3.9. Address the needs of people with disabilities in rural areas

Key deliverables

In March 2021, the new 'Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030' was adopted. The strategy highlights that older persons with disabilities living in rural areas are more prone to the insufficient provision of social and health services. Besides, it acknowledges that, as the prevalence of disabilities increases with age, older persons living in rural areas face particular challenges due to a lack of availability of appropriate healthcare and persistent staff shortages.

There are several actions for the implementation of the strategy. Those below have paid attention to rural areas or have a territorial angle.

- Decent quality of life: under independent living, the **Commission is working on guidance for independent living** Member States, that includes good practices in rural areas.
- The **expert group 'disability platform'** was created to work in closer cooperation with Member States and organisations of persons with disabilities in the implementation of the disability strategy. A monitoring of the implementation of the actions of the disability strategy is available.
- In 2023, the Commission has provided g**uidance and recommendations to Member States improvements on independent living and inclusion** in the community.

Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities constitutes a priority for Cohesion Policy. Under policy objective 4. The ERDF supports investments, also in rural areas, for independent living such as housing, day centres, transport that improve access to people with disabilities. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) supports investments to enhance the equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services in health and long-term care. It supports the development of community-based services to facilitate the transition from institutional care to these services, including in rural areas.

Benefits for rural areas

The Commission supports the implementation of the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 in Member States, **including measures taken to ensure persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, facilities and services both in urban and in rural areas**. This will enable persons with disabilities to live independently and to fully participate in all aspects of life.

Next steps

The **Commission is working on guidance recommending to** Member States improvements on **independent living and inclusion in the community**, that will include examples of promising practices in rural areas. The guidance will be published in 2024.

Building on the existing voluntary 'European Quality Framework for Social Services', the Commission will present, by 2024, a specific **framework for 'Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities'**, to improve service delivery for persons with disabilities and to enhance the attractiveness of jobs in this area including through upskilling and reskilling of service providers. In addition, later in 2024 the Commission will publish a mid-term report on the implementation of the strategy.

2.4. Prosperous

2.4.1. Entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas

Key deliverables

The Commission promotes **retail in rural areas** by co-creating with a large community of stakeholders **a pathway for a more resilient, digital and green retail ecosystem**. Within this process, specific attention is being paid to **SMEs retailers** in rural areas. Since 2018, the Commission supports the **digital and green transition of small retailers** through actions **under #Revitalise Retail**. In December 2021, **a workshop** under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council discussed the digital transition of small retailers with a focus on rural areas.

The **social economy action plan (SEAP)** was released in December 2021 and the Commission undertook a series of actions which are beneficial also to social economy entities and social entrepreneurs in rural areas.

1. The Commission encourages Member States to act in a wide range of social economy areas via the adoption of the **Council recommendation on "developing social economy framework conditions"**, adopted on 27 November 2023. It recalls that social economy can alleviate the consequences of demographic and economic challenges in remote and rural areas with fewer opportunities and encourages Member States to support the key role of the social economy in local development.
2. In November 2022 the European Commission published the '**transition pathway for the proximity and social economy**". The transition pathway is a co-created action fostering the transformation of industrial ecosystems and aims to enable actors in the ecosystem to deliver on the twin digital and green transition while fostering a more sustainable and resilient economy in the EU. For example, it makes available good practices and success stories.
3. The Commission launched in September 2023 a call for proposals under the Single Market programme (SMP) that will select up to **four projects that will focus on supporting social economy initiatives in rural areas to ensure community resilience and better living conditions.**
4. The **social economy gateway**, launched in June 2023, is an online platform informing about EU funding programmes and resources for social economy entities.

Silicon Vilstal is a non-profit initiative from Lower Bavaria and is part of the ESER scheme. It promotes open social innovation and makes digital opportunities in rural regions tangible. Silicon Vilstal has been awarded as one of the ten best entrepreneurship initiatives in Germany and is a learning example for rural entrepreneurs from Asia and Africa. Currently, Silicon Vilstal is also a partner of the New European Bauhaus initiative.

Good practice in the green transition: In Central Catalonia, the municipality of Saldes wanted to deploy a social economy approach to revive a former mining area. Since 2019, the municipality in cooperation with local inhabitants, has been setting up a broad alliance for the creation of a local energy cooperative. The cooperative will establish and run a solar park producing energy for 42 households and the income of the sold surplus will provide a new revenue for the cooperative.

5. The Commission has also **facilitated peer learning**, **cooperation** and **community building** among regions and local authorities. The European Social Economy Regions initiative has provided financial support for mutual learning sessions involving local authorities and social economy stakeholders.

Benefits for rural areas

SMEs retailers in rural areas are important from an economic viewpoint in terms of employment, support to local supply chains and to maintain lively rural environments. The actions taken by the Commission aim at **exchanging best practices and discussing success stories** of retail SMEs which have managed to embrace the twin digital and green transition to allow retailers to get inspiration and diffuse good practices.

Social economy business models bring value to local economies and societies by promoting **inclusiveness, resilience, and sustainability**. They serve local communities, retain population and foster local economic activities.

The implemented actions support local economic development in sectors like **agriculture, food value chains and the blue economy**. They initiatives fostered short value chains, climate action and the circular economy, while also contributing to social inclusion in rural areas.

Next steps

The Commission **will keep promoting retail in rural areas:**

- The Commission is conducting **a study on barriers to the green and digital transition of SMEs** retailers paying specific attention to rural areas. It includes 20 success stories and Member States' factsheets with background on the economic landscape and the uptake of digitalisation and sustainability practices by retail SMEs with examples in rural areas.
- A **joint project from the Commission and the OECD** will build indicators on the competitiveness of retail SMEs at the local level and identify best policy practices. Joining forces will allow the sharing of knowledge and dissemination of results to a larger audience through peer learning events.
- The creation of **a European Capital of Small Retail**. The Commission will implement the preparatory action "European Capital of Small Retail" for 2024, to showcase cities having supported the green and digital transition of small retailers and kept their city centres vibrant.

The **social economy action plan** will keep supporting rural areas, by:

- Encouraging Member States to set up **local social economy contact points within Member States.** The objective is for them to **offer peer-to-peer support in rural regions**. Their role includes **facilitating access to EU and national funding for social economy enterprises** and liaising with authorities managing EU funds. This call on Member States to set up national, local and regional social economy contact points was included in the Council recommendation on social economy.
- Ensuring synergies with **activities developed under the rural pact on social economy, in line with the webinar organised in May 2023.**
- Publishing a study of the benefits of embracing digital and green transition, including examples of rural areas under the **transition pathway process**.

2.4.2. Encouraging Member States to increase education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas under the Youth guarantee and the European Education Area

Key deliverables

Youth guarantee: Member States have **continued implementing the reinforced youth guarantee** at national, regional and local levels. The youth guarantee was reinforced in 2020 with the aim to alleviate the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis. The follow-up of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee is monitored through:

- annual data collection at national level (based on an indicator framework); and
- a review under the Employment Committee (EMCO) every two years.

The latest **EMCO review on the implementation of the reinforced youth guarantee took place in November 2023.** The review allows to follow the progress in the implementation in Member States and is largely based on Member States' self-assessment reports.

Reaching out to young people in rural and remote areas and offering services to them has been acknowledged as an important issue to tackle. Even though the EMCO review has shown positive developments in some Member States, offering employment and social services for young people in rural and remote areas remains a challenge in most Member States.

Dedicated content on school education in rural areas

European Education Area (EEA)*: The EEA aims to* remove barriers to learning and improving access to quality education for all. There are different actions under the EEA contributing to rural areas:

- On November 29, 2021, the **Council adopted a recommendation on blended learning approaches for high-quality and inclusive primary and secondary education**. *The recommendation recognises that access to schools must be guaranteed, and that blended learning approaches are an opportunity for rural and remote areas.*
- Finally, on November 28, 2022, the **Council recommendation on pathways to school success,** acknowledged specific challenges for rural and remote areas. It also emphasised the need of equal access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for rural and remote areas.

The **implementation of recommendations** is done the via the **working groups** with the Member States on different topics.

The **working group on equality and values in education and training** took place in Paris (France) in December 2022 and focused on the theme of 'addressing social and territorial inequalities in and through education'. It touched upon the **rural-urban divide in terms of educational inequalities**, as both urban and rural schools come with their specific challenges.

Benefits for rural areas

The **reinforced youth guarantee focuses** on disadvantaged young people, including those who do not yet have access to necessary services. This is particularly important in rural areas, where the implementation of the Youth Guarantee can significantly benefit young people. The current indicator framework monitors progress at national level, however, the biennial EMCO reviews offer a possibility to capture progress on specific issues. Some targeted questions, for example on rural circumstances, are usually included in these EMCO reviews. In addition, Eurostat gathers data on different aspects of rural youth.

Working towards a **European Education Area by 2025**, the Commission is collaborating with Member States via **working groups to foster the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems**, which will have an impact on rural and remote areas. They enable the **exchange of good practices**, for example on blended learning and inclusive education.

The following tools support the work of the EEA in rural areas:

- The European School Education Platform is the central online hub for school education professionals. It features **dedicated content on school education in rural areas**, including good practices, articles, and expert opinions.
- In addition, eTwinning – the online community for teachers – includes **a priority on rural and outermost areas of Europe**. A discussion group on small/remote and rural schools was launched end of 2022 to help small schools share practice examples, discuss teaching and learning methodologies and find support for professional development.

The **Working Group on Equality and Values** in Education and Training addressed territorial inequalities in education, focusing on challenges faced by urban and rural schools, such as poverty, segregation, and limited resources. Concerns were raised about **teacher shortages and lack of access to extracurricular activities for young people**. Digital tools like hybrid learning and online platforms were seen as solutions, but reliable internet, devices, and digital skills are needed. Balancing online and offline learning was emphasised for effective implementation in remote areas.

Next steps

Youth Guarantee*:*

The horizontal and the country-specific conclusions from the November 2023 EMCO review of Member States' progress in implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee are planned to be endorsed by the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer affairs (EPSCO) Council in 2024.

European Education Area:

The interim evaluation of the EEA planned in 2025, will cover all key elements of the overall approach to developing the EEA set out by the 2020 EEA Communication and the 2021 Council resolutions and reviewed by the 2022 EEA progress report:

- strategic priorities for reform and European cooperation;
- EU-level EEA-actions to support Member States in implementation;
- mobilisation of EU funds for national reforms in line with EEA objectives; and
- reformed governance (EEA strategic framework) for cooperation and co-creation;
- EU-level targets and indicators to measure progress.

2.4.3. Development of a sustainable bioeconomy, including the EU forest strategy and the carbon faming initiative

Key deliverables

The key deliverables below can be highlighted:

- The Commission published the **progress report on the EU bioeconomy strategy** in June 2022 and organised an EU high-level Bioeconomy Conference in October 2022.
- The Commission adopted the **EU forest strategy** in July 2021 with a number of actions to support forest owners and managers in the EU and provide new business opportunities.
- The European CAP Network set up of a **thematic working group** to promote a **network** of **forest-dominant rural areas** and **municipalities.** In 2023, two meetings took place (16 March 2023 and 31 May 2023).
- The Commission proposed the **R&I partnership "Forests and forestry for a sustainable future"** in December 2023. It is a research and innovation-oriented transdisciplinary instrument that supports the EU forest strategy simultaneously with climate targets and the biodiversity strategy.
- Under Horizon Europe, the Commission has set up the **Circular Bio-based Europe (CBE JU) partnership**, the successor of the Bio-based Industries Joint Undertaking (BBI JU), to advance the competitive and circular bioeconomy. The partnership plays a central role in developing inclusive business models that better integrate primary producers and other rural actors in novel and bio-based value chains.
- The Commission adopted a proposal for the **EU regulatory framework on carbon removal** in November 2022, introducing carbon removal certificates and contributing to carbon storage, including the bioeconomy (for more actions, see under flagship on carbon farming).
- The Commission approved the **28 CAP strategic plans** by end of 2022, which started their implementation from 1 January 2023. Depending on the Member States' needs, and strategic choices **targeted funding** is provided for sustainable land and forest management practices and investments and cooperation related to bioeconomy, forestry and carbon farming.

Benefits for rural areas

EU-level actions are benefiting rural areas by creating **new business opportunities and jobs in the bioeconomy sector**. The EU certification methodology for carbon removal will support the development of voluntary markets for carbon credits in the land sector, as well as provide additional income for land managers.

The thematic group on forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities provided **opportunities for networking** and representation among rural stakeholders, local authorities and researchers.

Under the CAP, the ongoing promotion and support for sustainable land and forest management practices and for investments and cooperation related to bioeconomy and carbon removals contribute to the development of rural areas and can provide new business opportunities and jobs. Around 140 000 rural businesses are expected to receive support by 2029 and land managers are incentivised to store carbon in soil and biomass and reduce emissions on 35% of the EU's agricultural area through appropriate management practices, such as extensive grassland management, growing of leguminous and catch-crops, organic fertilisation or agroforestry.

With regard to forestry related measures under the CAP, a budget of approximately EUR 4 billion for the period 2014-2022 was provided and a similar amount is expected to be allocated to forestry interventions in the period 2023-27.

Next steps

In relation to the bioeconomy strategy, the Commission organised a conference on 13-14 March 2024 whose title was "Bioeconomy changemakers Festival".

Monitoring of the CAP Strategic Plans is necessary as the implementation has recently begun, and data on the impact of actions on rural areas will become available in the future.

2.4.4. Strengthen producer organisations of geographical indications

Key deliverables

Local producers play a vital role in strengthening the social fabric and improving the standard of living in rural areas, and geographical indications (GIs) represent a valuable opportunity for employment and economic development, benefiting trade, income and local tourism.

The European Commission has registered more than **3 500 product names as GIs** (171 new GIs since June 2021) and foresees the adoption of a Regulation on European Union geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products, and quality schemes for agricultural products in 2024. The objectives of the Regulation include, amongst others, to promote fair competition, ensure a fair income for producers and contribute to rural development policy objectives.

The Commission has organised mini-conferences to promote the benefits of GIs, and has been developing a web-based toolkit for GI producers, and maintained active communication with GI producers through fairs, events and specific outreach initiatives (e.g. Food for Europe podcasts).

Benefits for rural areas

The increasing number of registered GIs in Europe positively impacts the economic and social sustainability of rural areas by ensuring fair income for farmers, facilitating diversification activities, and creating employment.

With more than 3500 GIs registered by the reporting date, including a yearly average increase of more than 65 new GI names, an analysis by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission indicates a positive effect on the economic performance of the agricultural sector, particularly for registered food products and rural areas. ([26])

Next steps

Introducing targeted technical assistance opportunities within the strategic programming of rural development interventions, and specifically related to the actions on quality schemes and cooperation measures, would be beneficial in assisting farmers and producers to establish producer groups, develop product specifications and launch GI applications.

The GI review process aims to help strengthening the position of producers in the value chain, notably by promoting fair competition in the marketing chain and a fair income for producers. Given that producer groups play an essential role in the application and management of geographical indications, the review process clarifies the role of producers and empowers them to better enforce their intellectual property rights against unfair practices, in particular in relation to protection of GIs in the online environment.

The Commission will keep organising mini-conferences to address the role of producer organisations and their contribution to rural development to promote the adoption of GIs.

([26]) https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC135467

2.5. Horizontal actions

2.5.1. Rural proofing

Key deliverables

The European Commission committed to put in place a rural proofing mechanism as part of the "Better regulation" agenda, to assess the impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas. The Commission has revised its better regulation guidelines, in November 2021, which include the following provisions:

- the **assessment of any significant impact on territorial and rural issues** when developing an initiative;

- the **gathering of evidence from various types of territories** when consulting stakeholders on the development of these initiatives.

The Commission also provided its line Directorates-General (DGs) services with tools to guide them, including tools to identify potential impacts when evaluating the necessity for territorial impact assessments (TIA) and tools to conduct these. These rural proofing provisions applied to all legislative initiatives requiring impact assessments throughout 2022 and 2023, nine of which the rural vision team in DG AGRI and DG REGIO followed more closely, based on a screening of the annual Commission work programme.

In addition, the Commission guided its services on how to explore implications for rural communities in **more qualitative ways** when developing initiatives that do not introduce new rules or new funding instruments, such as communications or proposals for Council recommendations, and therefore do not require impact assessments but may prepare the ground for future legislation. **15 initiatives** have been flagged for this more qualitative rural proofing over 2022 and 2023.

The Commission also encouraged **national and regional governments which do not have rural proofing in place to create rural proofing mechanisms for their own legislative activities**, with success in some countries (e.g. Spain). It facilitated exchange of best practices through an ENRD thematic group on rural proofing (March-June 2022) that produced a rural proofing framework. It interacted with the Committee of the Regions on its approaches to rural proofing and with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) on "rural proofing for health".

Benefits for rural areas

The conduct of a full **territorial impact assessment** did not come out as necessary in any of the legislative initiatives developed by the European Commission in the course of 2022 and 2023. However, territorial impacts (including for rural areas) were considered when revising the **waste framework directive**, when developing a **framework for income taxation in the EU**, and a **directive on activities of cross-border associations** among other proposals still under preparation. In all these cases, the provisions included in the law were not considered likely to impact rural areas more than others.

When implemented early enough in the development of the initiative, the **more qualitative approach** applied for initiatives not undergoing impact assessments delivered tangible benefits for rural areas through:

- the **better recognition of rural specificities and opportunities** in texts such as the '*Strategy for the EU's outermost regions'*, the '*European care strategy'* and associated proposal for a *'Council recommendation on long-term care'*, the revised '*State aid guidelines for broadband networks'*, proposals for Council recommendations on '*Improving the provision of digital skills in education and training'* and on '*Enabling factors for digital education*', the Communication '*Harnessing talents in Europe's regions*', the communication '*A comprehensive approach to mental health'*, the proposal for a '*Council recommendation on social economy framework conditions'* and the '*Communication on the learning mobility framework'*;

- the **formulation of specific actions to improve the situation of rural areas**, such as but not limited to requesting the collection of more granular data on rural areas, the need to provide capacity building activities and the need for investment in connectivity.

Although these are non-legislative initiatives, the fact rural areas and needs tend to be mentioned more often than before is likely to materialise in positive developments at later stages if and when legislative action is taken. Experience has shown that succeeding at rural proofing requires efficient **coordination and communication mechanisms** that enable identifying the initiatives to rural proof at an **early stage**. It requires **data** to support the identification of challenges and opportunities linked to the initiative. Finally, it also requires **building capacities** of the services to understand how the future initiative would unfold in a rural context and adapt the proposed actions to improve their relevance for these rural contexts.

Next steps

The Commission will **keep using the rural proofing mechanism for its own regulatory process**. It also aims at improving coordination and strengthening capacities of the Commission services to carry out rural proofing, also for non-legislative initiatives, with the aim of integrating rural issues in EU policy making. Rural proofing will benefit from the improvement of rural statistics and data and from the development of the EU rural observatory. The Commission will also keep up **dialogue with Member States** on the development of rural proofing mechanisms at national and regional levels, building on the framework developed by the ENRD thematic group on rural proofing at national, regional and local levels and on Council conclusions on the LTVRA which call to strengthen rural proofing at all levels. On 30 November 2023, the **Council approved conclusions on the Future of Cohesion Policy**, calling for general awareness of "*doing no harm to Cohesion*" and inviting the Commission to make wide use of TIAs in legislative proposals to address territorial impacts on regions. The Commission will also keep interacting with international organisations such as the OECD and the World Health Organisation on issues related to rural proofing.

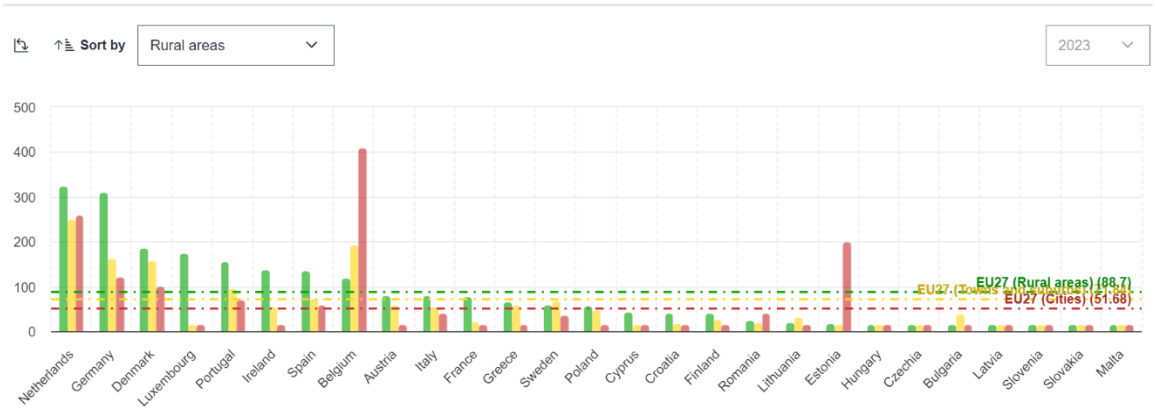
2.5.2. *Rural observatory*

Key deliverables

The rural observatory is an online platform launched on 8 December 2022 and accessible from the rural vision website. It aims to make available data, support knowledge production and disseminate quantitative information and analyses related to EU's rural areas. This is achieved by collecting, producing and analysing indicators related to economic, social and environmental dimensions, at the highest granularity available (sub-regional, municipal and grid level at 1 km^2 resolution). It serves as a data platform providing access to a broad collection of rural indicators and offering attractive visualisations (interactive graphs and maps). The rural observatory also releases scientific publications with elaborated analyses focusing on prominent rural topics.

Three main tools are available in the rural observatory:

- "**Rural focus**", which displays how rural areas compare to cities;



- "**My place**", which provides a 360 degrees overview of Member States, regions, sub-regions and municipalities;

- "**Trends**", which offers a map showing the evolution of a specific indicator over time.

The rural observatory showcases 35 indicators by degree of urbanisation (under “Rural focus”), 70 indicators at the regional level, 32 indicators at the sub-regional level, 11 indicators at the municipality level and several thematic analyses (‘Rural Europe’, challenges and opportunities in remote rural areas, definition of functional rural areas in the EU, renewable energies in rural areas).

Benefits for rural areas

The rural observatory helps in understanding **how rural areas perform and how they compare to one another and to cities as well as towns and suburbs**, highlighting areas that require policy focus. It also provides scientific knowledge and data to **support rural proofing, which should lead in fine to legislation and policies working better in rural areas.** Since its launch in December 2022, the Rural Observatory has been accessed by more than 5 000 visitors, generating more than 61 000 page views.

Next steps

The observatory will continue its work on:

- Improvement of functionalities based on feedback from users and stakeholders.
- Inclusion of more relevant indicators from the Eurostat database and other databases– with particular focus on those available by degree of urbanisation (around 200 available).
- Production of more indicators at the municipality level and by degree of urbanisation, downscaling to the sub-regional level of indicators available at the regional level (where this is deemed feasible).

In 2024, the focus of research activities will be on interactions between economy and demography, as well as on housing and energy efficiency.

2.5.3. Enhancing availability of statistics on rural areas

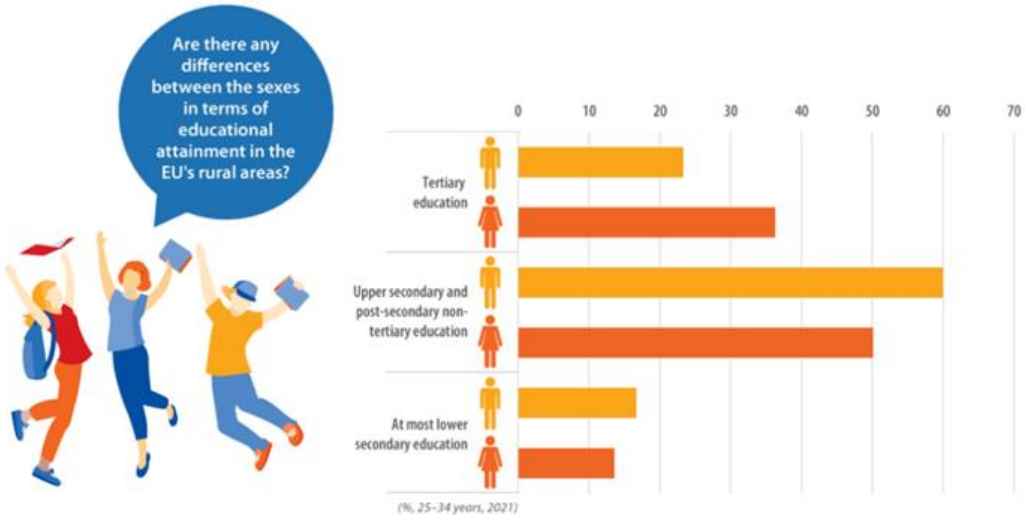
This section is split up into four different sub-actions.

2.5.3.1. Making available new detailed data collected in the framework of the 2021 round of population and housing censuses in the EU

Key deliverables

Data from the **2021 population and housing censuses on total population** at the level of a standard Europe-wide **1km^2 grid** were published on 30 March 2023. Data are available for all EU Member States and three EFTA countries (excluding Iceland). A series of interactive maps and visualisations is also available.

Preliminary **population data with a breakdown by age and sex at the level of NUTS3** regions were also published for all EU Member States except Ireland and all EFTA countries on 30 March 2023. This data can be accessed via the Eurostat Data Browser (see Eurostat datasets [cens_21ag] and [cens_21agr3]).



Source: Eurostat (edat_lfs_9913)

Benefits for rural areas

The population and housing census provides a valuable source **of information on the size, demographic structure, education, employment, citizenship, migration characteristics and housing** of the population, households and families. Data are available at national and regional levels down to local administrative unit (LAU).

The 2021 EU census programme is the first for which data is also disseminated on a mandatory basis for a common Europe-wide 1 km^2 grid. The population grid data allows to conduct analyses to be made for flexibly defined areas that are not possible with statistics for NUTS or LAU areas. There are advantages for rural and other sparsely populated areas. For example, it is possible to define areas that are more than a certain distance away from facilities and services such as hospitals or transport hubs or for the work on functional rural areas. Areas for analysis can be defined to meet specific user needs, including areas that cut across regional or national boundaries. The grid data allows population numbers to be shown, as well as population densities.

Next steps

The **complete data from the 2021 EU census** programme will be published in the second quarter of 2024. This will include detailed data on persons, households, families and dwellings for regions and municipalities. At the same time, further population grid data will be released, with selected data on age, sex, country of birth, place of residence 12 months ago, and, as far as possible, employment for a 1km^2 grid.

Data will be available as a series of **pre-defined tables on the Eurostat Data Browser and via the Census Hub** – an online tool that allows users to prepare detailed customised tables in real time. Grid data will be accessible online in a format suitable for further user analysis using Geographic Information System software. These online outputs will be complemented by thematic Statistics Explained articles on the 2021 population and housing census.

2.5.3.2. Developing Pan-European geospatial datasets

Key deliverables

Eurostat has published datasets based on:

a) experimental data collection for **healthcare and education services** (2023 hospitals geo-localisation and 2023 primary schools geo-localisation);

b) an annually updated data collection of addresses providing a geocoding services– the European register of addresses; and

c) population distribution on the 1km^2 grid basis.

Benefits for rural areas

Grid-based population distribution and the consecutive update of the degree of urbanisation enables the production of statistics and other descriptive and analytical indicators specifically focused on rural areas, when relevant.

This **strongly improves the analysis of the differences or impact in terms of development of rural areas** (e.g. vs urban areas) and hence can support **the development of policies and programmes better adapted to rural areas** (rural proofing).

Similarly, the datasets on education and healthcare facilities allow the production and publication of statistics on accessibility of health (hospitals) and education services (schools), providing detailed information on key aspects for the quality of life of rural areas.

Next steps

Grid-based statistics and other geospatial products need continuous updates, Eurostat GISCO aims at annual updates to these datasets. Eurostat will continue the developments in the field, to **support the production of the data infrastructure** allowing a detailed and specific analysis of the situation in all aspects of life within the EU, at various levels of action (EU, Member State, regional, local), including in rural areas. Eurostat continues its work to develop and update geospatial data infrastructure based on pan-EU core data sets: administrative units, addresses, buildings, parcels, transport networks.

Based on the new 1km^2 population grid (2021), a **new NUTS 2024 urban/rural classification, a new dataset for urban/rural clusters, and a new definition for degree of urbanisation level 2 covering the extent of the grid** (which defines rural areas on a more granular basis) will be available by 2024.

2.5.3.1.Modernising the legal framework for EU demographic and housing statistics.

Key deliverables

The evaluation and impact assessment of **European statistics on population and housing** (ESOP) was finalised in April 2022. On 20 January 2023 the Commission adopted the proposal for a new framework Regulation on European statistics on population and housing (COM(2023) 31).

Benefits for rural areas

The evaluation and impact assessment, supported by the findings from the stakeholder consultation, have pinpointed the **current statistical gaps in demography and migration statistics regarding rural areas.** This includes a lack of clear **delineation between rural and urban areas** across the statistics published, but also **a lack of infra-annual statistics to trace seasonal variations** of relevant population trends such as migration to rural areas or internal mobility between rural and urban areas.

The **Commission proposal** for a new legal framework acknowledges these gaps and includes **effective provisions to enable improved European statistics** in the future. For instance, the proposal includes semestrial publications of population stocks and quarterly publications on international immigration, in addition to richer annual and multi-annual statistics including at municipality (LAU) and at 1 km^2 grid level. The proposed framework would also provide the flexibility to classify most of the statistics at low geographic detail (NUTS 3 or below, incl. by degree of urbanisation) and to capture internal mobility between regions and from rural to urban areas.

Next steps

The Commission proposal for a new framework regulation has **entered the ordinary legislative procedure** and the European Parliament and the Council are now discussing it. In parallel, Eurostat has started an in-depth collaboration with statistical experts from the Member States to **already prepare implementing rules for data collections** under the expected new framework. This will minimise the delay between adopting the new legal framework and publishing the first new statistics.

2.5.3.2. Mainstreaming the degree of urbanisation

Key deliverables

Twice more indicators than in 2021

Eurostat enriched the data offer by **increasing the number of datasets using the degree of urbanisation classification** which is a typology that classifies local administrative units (municipalities, communes, parishes or wards, etc.). The datasets are related to health, lifelong learning, education, living conditions, welfare, labour market, tourism, digital economy and society. There is a dedicated page listing all datasets by degree of urbanisation for easy user access.

Eurostat released a specialised publication titled 'Rural Europe' in January 2023, focusing on rural areas and rural regions. The publication consists of nine chapters: education and training, labour market, income and living conditions, digital society, economy, demographic developments, women and men, and quality of life. The publication was promoted by a number of news articles that were released on the Eurostat website and on all Eurostat social media platforms, featuring: Income gender gap; and digital skills divide.

Benefits for rural areas

Eurostat with its publication on Rural Europe and activities related to the promotion of the publication increased the visibility of the data on rural regions and rural areas and highlighted some opportunities but also challenges of people living in rural regions and rural areas. This is of utmost importance for the policy making processes related to rural areas in the EU. For example, indicators on demographic developments indicate that almost nine out of ten predominantly rural regions of the EU reported negative crude rates of natural population change during the period 2015–2020.

Next steps

Eurostat held several stakeholder consultations where it received feedback on the Rural Europe publication. These will be taken into consideration in the next edition.

The list of indicators by degree of urbanisation will further expand as new datasets become available.

The update of the degree of urbanisation classification, based on the results of the 2021 population census, is planned for 2024.

The proposed new framework European statistics on population and housing (section 2.5.3.3) aims to provide flexibility for future demographic and census data collections to classify most of the statistics by degree of urbanisation.

2.5.4. *Defining functional rural areas*

Key deliverables

The Commission has worked in several steps to define functional rural areas:

The draft methodology for defining functional rural areas was developed and first presented during the Rural pact conference in June 2022.

A paper presenting this methodology, forming part of the analytical work of the Rural observatory, was circulated for comments inside and outside the European Commission in early 2023, including with the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank (WB) and Horizon Europe projects RUSTIK and GRANULAR.

A revised paper was submitted to the 3rd European rural geographies conference in Groningen (NL) in June 2023. It was also presented to the OECD working party on rural development, to the EUROSTAT working group on regional statistics and the Regional Studies Winter Conference, all three in November 2023.

This consultation of a wide range of stakeholders has helped to refine and better target the method.

The resulting final paper "**Developing a definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU**" was published on 23 November 2023. The result of this methodology can be visualised on a public website: FRAs Demo (Experimental)

Benefits for rural areas

The goal of functional rural areas is **to better capture demographic change and access to services** in areas that differ from administrative boundaries of municipalities, which vary a lot in size across EU countries and limit possibilities to analyse and compare trends across Europe. The idea is to capture and delineate areas within which rural people live, to support the design of adequate and improved policies, in particular in the field of service delivery.

Next steps

Tests leading to the current version of the methodology have been carried out with the population grid for 2011, but the final method will be applied to a range of population grids, including the population grid for 2021, to see how these geographies have changed over time.

The Commission will continue working and further refining the methodology, in dialogue with partners, such as national statistical offices, scientists working on functional geographies (e.g.: GRANULAR and RUSTIK), the World Bank and the OECD. An OECD project on functional rural areas financed by the Commission has started in the second half of 2023. It will test the value of the approach for non-EU OECD countries.

2.5.5. Propose a rural pact

Key deliverables (end of February 2024)

The rural pact is a framework for cooperation at the **European**, **national, regional and local level** to achieve the shared goals of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas by facilitating interaction on rural matters between all concerned players: public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens. By involving all the stakeholders and all governance levels, the pact contributes substantially to the holistic approach towards rural communities. To launch and develop this rural pact, the Commission has:

- launched in December 2021, the creation of the **rural pact community**, strong of over 2 350 members, grouping all the individuals and entities willing to contribute;
- worked collaboratively with **other EU institutions**, **stakeholders** and the rural pact community in the first semester of 2022 to develop an **operational proposal that was endorsed** at the rural pact conference on 15 and 16 June 2022, attended by 475 people;
- created an **inter-institutional online space for the rural vision and rural pact** launched in December 2022 (170 000 views), completed in June 2023 with the rural pact community platform**,** twinned with the rural revitalisation platform, and providing a common space to collaborate;
- set up a "Rural Pact Support Office", contracted for three years (December 2022 to December 2025) to facilitate activities of the rural pact community and expand it (meeting with 20 other networks and participating in 28 stakeholders' events);
- set up in June 2023 a Rural Pact Coordination Group to steer and govern the pact;
- worked collaboratively with successive **presidencies of the Council** to mobilise Member States around the Rural Pact (conferences in Uppsala and Sigüenza), ending with the adoption of Council conclusions on 20 November 2023.

Benefits for rural areas

According to its **three objectives**, the rural pact is expected to have the impacts below.

- **Amplifying the voice of rural people** and making them better heard in policymaking: the launch of the rural pact at EU level has already led several national and regional governments to adopt new rural Pacts, laws or agendas (e.g. Czechia, Catalonia) and/or to enter in a reflection on what to improve. Activities largely contributed to the adoption of Council conclusions in November 2023 that invite all Member States to engage in the pact.
- **Structuring and enabling networking, collaboration & mutual learning**: the rural pact events and activities made over 2 350 people benefit from monthly information, learn from nine publications, interact and exchange in seven events and seven online community groups and learn from 40 good practices.
- **Encouraging voluntary commitments to act** for the vision: since the endorsement of the Pact, around 120 commitments have been received.

Next steps

Next steps include **sustaining the facilitation efforts in 2024 and 2025 through the Rural Pact Support Office** and exploring ways to continue after that (prolongation of Rural Pact Support Office, evolution of the rural pact governance, further development of the collaborative platform, coordination with other initiatives). After a first year putting

priority on the national level, efforts in 2024 will be directed to local level actors (see the report on the LTVRA key achievements and ways forward for more information).

The Rural Pact in figures

One EU-wide community

2 350+ Rural Pact members from **30+** countries

> assisted by **1** Support Office

> steered by **1** Rural Pact Coordination Group with **30** members

> engaging through policy & networking events, including: **2** Rural Pact Conferences; **1** High-level Policy Forum; **2** Policy Labs; **4** Good Practice Webinars

> represented at **35** stakeholder events

> connected with **20** networks

With a clear ambition

Amplify rural voices through
> Rural Pact Conferences & Policy Forum
> Policy Action Labs, high-level conferences and fora
> **1** Policy briefing in **24** languages

Enable networking through
> **1** online community platform
> Policy Action Labs and Good Practice Webinars
> **1** magazine in **3** languages

Encourage commitments to act
> **121** commitments to act towards the Rural Vision goals
> **70%** expressed by organisations – **30%** by individuals

A community taking action!

121 Commitments to act through

Number of commitments contributing to Rural Vision objectives

Connected and informed through an online Community Platform...

> with **550+** registered members

> working at the international (**16%**), European (**28%**), national (**19%**), regional (**18%**) and local (**18%**) levels

> compiling:
» **110** news (**75%** relevant for rural revitalisation)
» **85** events (**50%** relevant for rural revitalisation)
» **40** good practices (**75%** relevant for rural revitalisation)
» **7** community groups and **9** publications

> attracting **1 500** monthly web visitors and followed by **2 470+** people & organisations on social media

> with automated translation in all EU official languages

* This infographic contains the most recent data available to the RPSO as of 15 Feb 2024.

2.5.6. *Rural funding toolkit*

Key deliverables

The Rural toolkit is the comprehensive **guide to EU funding and support opportunities for rural areas** in the European Union. It aims to help local authorities, institutions and stakeholders, businesses and individuals to identify and **take advantage of existing EU funds**, programmes and other funding and support initiatives, and to foster development in rural territories. It shows how initiatives and practices supported by EU funding schemes and policies can help rural communities revitalise their territories.

All Directorates General and Agencies of the Commission were surveyed, as well as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Investment Fund (EIF), to identify which of the instruments and support mechanisms can be relevant for rural authorities and local stakeholders.

In order to validate the platform design, two workshops with representatives from key European rural stakeholder associations were organised, one in June 2023 (in DG REGIO) and one in October 2023 (during the European Week of Regions and Cities). The aim was to test the user-friendliness of the tool and its completeness. These led to a continuous improvement of the platform also comprehending the identification of some additional functionalities (e.g. auto-translation in all EU languages, demo video explaining and promoting the tool, etc.)

The rural toolkit was launched on 6 February 2024, and it is available via this link:

https://rural-vision.europa.eu/toolkit

Benefits for rural areas

By applying the *rural lens*, several funds and programmes, both directly managed instruments at the European level and those in shared management with the EU Member States, were selected for the Toolkit.

The 'Funding finder' section is structured with search filters on the different potential beneficiaries, activities and types of support. The search shows fiches for each fund, funding programme and instrument, placing particular emphasis in explaining why they are relevant for rural areas.

In the '**Inspire yourself' section, the platform offers practical examples where rural local authorities or stakeholders successfully used such funds for rural revitalisation**.

The '**Resources'** section offers available guidance on the integrated approach to local development and examples of funding guides on multiple topics relevant for such rural areas. In the home page these is a short promotional video that explains the objectives and potentialities of the tool. Such video has been designed also in a vertical format to be shared through social media.

Note: The rural toolkit provides practical information, examples and direct links to existing support schemes, but funding applications must be submitted via the official webpages of each initiative.

Next steps

This action is completed.