A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own-initiative report by Isabel CARVALHAIS (S&D, PT) on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

Rural areas are crucial for food production and self-sufficiency, natural resources, landscapes and biodiversity, as well as cultural heritage. Members are convinced that they can play a central role in addressing today's major societal challenges by providing ecosystem services to mitigate climate change and environmental degradation, promote sustainable food production and enable a just green and digital transition.

Despite their strengths, rural areas, especially remote and less developed rural areas, face **major challenges**, leading to growing discontent among rural populations. They feel that their needs are insufficiently taken into account in political decision-making, which creates a breeding ground for civic and political disengagement. Rural areas are also struggling with other problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas

Members welcomed the Commission's communication on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas and stressed that the development of rural areas must remain a top priority for the EU. They called on the Commission and the Member States to give the highest priority to implementing the proposed **Rural Action Plan** by setting clear binding quantitative targets to be achieved, to ensure that it is accompanied by the necessary resources for its effective implementation and to ensure that rural areas are indeed stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040.

It also stressed the importance of implementing a **rural proofing mechanism** for EU initiatives to assess the coherence and complementarity of EU policies and their potential impact on rural areas.

A path for the future of rural areas for 2040

Members insisted that rural citizens must benefit, like any other citizen, from equitable conditions for achieving their professional, social and personal goals, with a particular focus on more vulnerable groups, and insists that the European Pillar of Social Rights be applied. In this respect, the report stressed the **importance of public investment and public partnerships**, as well as improved cross-border cooperation and cooperation between rural and urban areas.

Special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups living in rural areas, such as people with disabilities, the elderly and migrants, including seasonal workers, ensuring that their specific needs are being addressed. In addition, targeted interventions **supporting young people** and fostering effective generational renewal should be a priority, in order to encourage young people to stay in rural areas.

The report highlights the importance of:

- recognising the important role that small and medium-sized farms and family farms play in maintaining rural populations and in preserving land and landscape management;

- supporting cooperation initiatives in the field of agriculture and social economy as a tool for rural development;

- promoting EU quality schemes;

- addressing the serious problem of unfair trade practices in the agricultural sector through additional measures to improve the distribution of value in the chain;

- promoting access to appropriate investment, research and innovation for sustainable agriculture;

- taking concrete steps to ensure the balanced coexistence of humans and large carnivores in rural areas;

- putting in place measures to support a just transition and diversification of the rural economy and encourage the creation of quality jobs in rural areas;

- making efforts to strengthen rural tourism;

- urgently developing and implementing measures to address gender gaps, including in relation to pay and pensions, and take targeted measures to address the specific problems women face in the labour market;

- highlighting the central role of rural areas in the transition to a circular and carbon-neutral economy, including a sustainable bioeconomy and forestry;

- mobilising all available instruments to reduce the risks of a widening rural digital divide and to improve the full roll-out of 5G networks, with particular support from EU cohesion policy funds and Member States' Recovery and Resilience Facility plans;

- considering smart villages as a flagship project of the EU Rural Action Plan.

First steps for defining a vision and strategy for rural areas

The report called on the Commission to ensure that the **integrated and Community-led rural territorial dimension** is properly addressed by all Member States and to assess its implementation and impact in the common agricultural policy strategic plans, the cohesion policy programmes, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund programmes and the Recovery and Resilience Plans.

Member States are urged to (i) address the specific challenges of rural territories and their communities during the implementation of the current multiannual financial framework programmes; (ii) make effective use of the various funding opportunities, in particular to improve the prospects of SMEs in rural areas, and (iii) make better use of all available tools to support rural areas, including tax incentives for individuals and businesses looking to settle in rural areas.

Shaping the future beyond 2027

Members noted the Commission's intention to take stock by mid-2023 of the measures taken by the EU and Member States to support rural areas and to draw up a public report on this basis in early 2024. They believe that this evaluation could pave the way for a rural strategy based on the mid-term review and a rural action plan in the **2028-2034 programming period**. The Commission is invited to directly involve all relevant stakeholders and managing authorities in this evaluation.