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 European Parliament adopted by 465 votes to 29, with 131, abstentions a resolution on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

Challenges and opportunities

Parliament is convinced that policies and actions at EU level, combined with national, regional and local policies following a territorialised approach, are essential to ensure the prosperity and well-being of European citizens living in rural areas, as well as to address the challenges they face, namely population decline and ageing, higher risk of poverty and social exclusion, and fewer opportunities for quality employment.

Rural areas are crucial for food production and self-sufficiency, natural resources, landscapes and biodiversity, and cultural heritage. They can play a role in addressing social, economic and environmental challenges, providing ecosystem services to mitigate climate change and environmental degradation.

Despite their strengths, rural areas, especially remote and less developed rural areas, face major challenges, leading to growing discontent among rural people. They feel that their needs are not sufficiently taken into account in political decision-making, which creates a breeding ground for civic and political disengagement. Rural areas are also facing other problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

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

Members endorsed the objectives of 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 the implementation of 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.

Parliament recognised the need for a common EU-wide definition of functional rural areas. It welcomed the announcement of the creation of a rural observatory and stressed the importance of implementing a **rural test 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

Parliament 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, such as people with disabilities, older people and migrants, notably seasonal workers.

Rural communities must have equal access to services of general interest in order to ensure inclusive and equitable conditions of living and well-being, notably healthcare services, education, training for up- and

reskilling and lifelong learning, social care, child and elderly care, connectivity and mobility, and housing, as well as postal and banking services, social meeting places and cultural activities and infrastructure.

In this respect, Members stressed the importance of **public investment and public partnerships**, as well as improved cross-border cooperation and cooperation between rural and urban areas. 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 resolution 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 resolution 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, 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.

The Commission is invited to: (i) present in early 2023 a **targeted legislative proposal** to allow for the transfer of resources between all funds under shared management when supporting rural territorial strategies and to strengthen synergies between funds and programmes; (ii) continue simplification and reduce administrative burdens; (iii) ensure that all EU policies in the future apply the principle of "no harm to cohesion", in particular in rural areas; (iv) maintain a direct and structured dialogue with the different levels of governance involved in the management of EU policies which have a significant impact on rural areas.