

Strengthening rural areas in the EU through cohesion policy

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Denis NESCI (ECR, IT) on strengthening rural areas in the EU through cohesion policy.

Despite occupying 83 % of the EU territory and being home to a quarter of its population, rural areas are facing serious difficulties as a result of major demographic, economic and social challenges. These difficulties can be seen from the GDP per capita figures, which are well below the European average and point generally to the persistent disadvantage of rural with respect to urban areas.

With its aim to reduce regional disparities and foster balanced development, EU cohesion policy has a key role to play in securing a sustainable future for these areas at risk of being left behind as a result of population ageing, youth emigration, a lack of services, and limited job and social opportunities.

Rural areas are essential for food production and security, serving as guardians of landscapes, living rural heritage, social and cultural traditions. They play a key role in promoting the strategic autonomy of the EU through the agricultural sector, which remains a strategic priority of the EU. However, their significance remains under-appreciated and inadequately funded.

In this regard, Members emphasised the need for increased investment in research and innovation for rural areas, particularly in the fields of sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, digital transformation and innovative mobility solutions, to enhance the competitiveness and resilience of rural regions and create energy self-sufficiency and new employment opportunities.

Post-2027 rural strategy

Members called on the Commission to devise a rural strategy for the post-2027 programming period and urged the Commission and the Member States to ensure the incorporation of a rural dimension in relevant policies and to make sure that the strategy promotes the economic and social development of rural areas and to allocate specific resources to the modernisation of agriculture, supporting rural small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-up and promoting short supply chains in order to make rural areas more connected, competitive, resilient and attractive to young people and investors.

In order to ensure the long-term prosperity of rural areas and support a strong agricultural sector to maintain this prosperity in rural areas, it is essential to strengthen the **synergies** between EU Structural and Investment Funds and Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship research and innovation programme, and the CAP in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF).

Agriculture

The report stressed the key role played by agriculture and the agri-food sector in food production, ensuring food security in the EU and job creation. The Commission and the Member States are called on to take strong and targeted action by **reducing excessive regulatory burdens** and ensuring fair market conditions, to mitigate the decline in the number of farms and encourage generational renewal.

Culture and tourism

Members recognised that tourism is a major source of income for many rural areas with the potential to draw in growing numbers of visitors curious to discover their culture, nature and traditions through the unique experiences on offer. Investing in rural tourism, in synergy with the agricultural, food and cultural sectors, means not only improved accommodation facilities and a better supply of activities with which to showcase the local produce, culture and identity, but also fresh economic opportunities for local communities, encouraging job creation and entrepreneurship while keeping local traditions alive.