

Strengthening rural areas in the EU through cohesion policy

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The European Parliament adopted by 622 votes to 24, with 21 abstentions, a resolution 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. There are still disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of cohesion policy funding, with urban areas receiving three times more funding than rural areas.

Key role of cohesion policy

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.

Revitalising rural areas

Members stressed that the Union must promote genuine revitalisation and regeneration of these territories, by redoubling its efforts to provide rural areas with the right tools to overcome the considerable long-term challenges they face. Parliament recommended:

- strengthening **short supply chains** and promoting the use of labelling systems to recognise the quality and variety of traditional products from rural areas;
- consolidating the role of **small and medium-sized towns** as development centres in rural areas;
- taking measures to combat poverty in rural areas;
- increasing **investment in research and innovation** in rural areas, particularly in the areas of sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, digital transformation and innovative mobility solutions, in order to strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of rural regions and create energy autonomy and new employment opportunities;
- ensuring **equal access**, particularly for vulnerable people and people with disabilities, to all healthcare, transport and connectivity services, specific plans for affordable housing, water services, education and training services, digital infrastructure and other basic services such as postal and banking services;
- improving the quality of transport and digital connectivity so that citizens can easily access work, schools, hospitals, public services and employment opportunities, and accelerate investments in broadband connectivity.

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.

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).

Future cohesion policy

Parliament called on the Commission to ensure that the future cohesion policy is **firmly and comprehensively focused on the development of rural areas**, so that all strategic initiatives contribute to the objective of reducing territorial disparities. It stressed the need for an **integrated European strategy** for the revitalisation of rural areas, including through the development of bio-districts, recognising their potential for diversifying the rural economy by targeting fiscal, economic and social measures to maintain the active population.

Member States are invited to make full use of all support measures for **rural, inland, mountainous, island and outermost regions**, as well as for cross-border regions and regions situated at the external borders of the Union, including those bordering Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Support policies

Parliament stressed the importance of promoting priority policies that support **young people**, as the main actors of the rural exodus, and called on the Commission to ensure them an effective application of the 'right to stay' through targeted measures, designed to stem the demographic decline in rural areas. It also urged the Commission to adopt measures to protect the family farming model that underpins the rural territory, is more environmentally friendly and guarantees food security in the EU. In the context of a more sustainable model, 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.

The Commission is also called upon to ensure that trade agreements respect European agricultural standards and guarantee a level playing field for EU farmers.

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.