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THE EU LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

## Governance, policy instruments and future directions

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**ABSTRACT** In 2021, the European Commission published the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA), a key political initiative outlining a roadmap to help rural areas become stronger, resilient, connected, and prosperous by 2040. It consists of the EU Rural Action Plan, which incorporates specific initiatives such as the European Rural Pact, rural proofing, the EU Rural Observatory, and the EU toolkit on rural funding. Central to advancing this agenda, the Rural Pact Coordination Group issued a Declaration on the Future of Rural Areas, calling for more coherent multi-policy approaches, targeted funding within the EU budget, and enhanced local capacities through simplified access to resources, capacity-building, and community-led development. Further, the European Commission's proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework aligns rural priorities with National and Regional Partnership Plans, mandating active engagement of rural stakeholders in their design and execution. This article discusses the importance of turning the rural vision into action across national, regional, and local levels and highlights recommendations from rural stakeholders to influence the future of rural policies in Europe.

**KEYWORDS** long-term vision for rural areas; European Rural Pact; multi-level governance; Rural Pact Coordination Group; Multiannual Financial Framework

LA VISIÓ A LLARG TERMINI DE LA UE PER A LES ÀREES RURALS

### Governança, instruments de política i plans de futur

**RESUM** El 2021, la Comissió Europea va publicar la visió a llarg termini per a les àrees rurals de la UE (LTVRA per les sigles en anglès de long-term vision for the EU's rural areas), una iniciativa política clau que descriu un full de ruta per a ajudar les regions rurals a ser més fortes, resilients, connectades i pròsperes de cara al 2040. Consta del Pla d'Acció Rural de la UE, que incorpora iniciatives específiques com el Pacte Rural Europeu, informes del mecanisme rural de garantia, l'Observatori Rural de la UE i el kit d'eines de la UE sobre finançament rural. El Grup de Coordinació del Pacte Rural, que és fonamental per a avançar en aquesta agenda, va emetre una Declaració sobre el futur de les àrees rurals en el que sol·licitava enfocaments multipolítics més coherents, finançament específic dins del pressupost de la UE i capacitats locals millorades a través de l'accés simplificat als recursos, la creació de capacitats i el desenvolupament dirigit per la comunitat. Simultàniament, la proposta de la Comissió Europea per al Marc Financer Pluriennal 2028-2034 alinea les prioritats rurals amb els Plans d'Associació Nacionals i Regionals, la qual cosa requereix la participació activa dels actors rurals clau en el seu disseny i execució. Aquest article analitza la importància de convertir la visió rural en acció a escala nacional, regional i local i destaca les recomanacions dels actors rurals clau per a influir en el futur de les polítiques rurals a Europa.

**PARAULES CLAU** visió a llarg termini per a àrees rurals; Pacte Rural Europeu; governança multinivell; Grup de Coordinació de Pactes Rurals; Marc Financer Pluriennal

## Introduction

Launched in 2021, the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA) (European Commission, 2021) establishes a strategic framework to make rural areas stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040. Covering most of the EU's territory and a quarter of its population, rural areas face challenges such as demographic decline, service gaps and economic disparities. Developed through extensive consultations, the LTVRA promotes place-based, multi-level governance and focuses on four pillars: stronger communities, better connectivity, environmental and social resilience, and economic diversification and development.

Its implementation is driven by support for rural areas through EU policies and the EU Rural Action Plan, which includes the European Rural Pact, rural proofing, the EU Rural Observatory, and the Toolkit on EU funds for rural areas. These aim to incorporate rural needs into policymaking, strengthen cooperation, improve data availability and enhance access to financial resources.

The European Rural Pact, with over 3,500 members as of 2025, connects stakeholders across all levels of governance to amplify rural voices, facilitate networking, and encourage voluntary commitments towards the shared vision. Between 2021 and 2024, funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and cohesion policy European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund+ (ESF+), and European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) has supported infrastructure, economic diversification, and essential services. Nonetheless, demographic pressures, youth outmigration, and limited access to services continue to persist.

In their *Declaration on the Future of Rural Areas* (Rural Pact Coordination Group, 2024), the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG), the steering body of the Rural Pact comprising 30 European members, urges greater investment in local capacities, infrastructure, essential services, and innovation. Recommendations include allocating a fixed portion of the EU budget to rural development, boosting community-led initiatives such as LEADER and Smart Villages, streamlining access to funding, and increasing transparency through territorial tagging of EU funds.

The European Commission's proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (European Commission, 2025c) integrates rural priorities into National and Regional Partnership Plans, which shall involve rural actors and address territorial needs. The plans aim to promote cooperation between the EU, national, regional, and local levels, strengthen territorial services, and improve the attractiveness and living standards of rural areas. Negotiations between EU institutions will determine final provisions, making active engagement from rural stakeholders essential to ensure that the upcoming budget framework supports a sustainable, inclusive, and competitive future for rural Europe.

## 1. The long-term vision for rural areas: a roadmap for 2040

The European Union (EU) has long recognized the importance of rural areas, which constitute over 75% of its territory and are home to nearly 25% of its population (European Commission, 2025a). However, these areas face ongoing challenges, including demographic decline, limited access to services and economic disparities. In response, the European Commission introduced the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA) (European Commission, 2021) as an ambitious political framework to support rural communities. Developed through extensive public consultations, expert analyses, and targeted workshops in 2021, the rural vision reflects the voices of various rural stakeholders, including local authorities, civil society organizations, businesses and citizens. The rural vision acknowledges the diversity of rural territories and the need for place-based policies. It acts as a framework for EU, national, and regional rural development strategies to foster more coordinated governance. The LTVRA is founded on four key pillars:

1. Stronger rural areas: enhancing access to services, fostering rural well-being, rural innovation and strengthening local governance to empower communities.

2. Connected rural areas: improving digital and physical connectivity, ensuring better access to broadband and transport infrastructure.
3. Resilient rural areas: promoting environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and the circular economy, as well as social resilience, diversity and equity to mitigate risks and adapt to changes.
4. Prosperous rural areas: encouraging sustainable production, economic diversification, supporting local businesses and entrepreneurship.

To support these pillars, the EU introduced the EU Rural Action Plan, which operationalizes the rural vision by proposing concrete initiatives for implementation by the European Commission. These actions comprise nine flagship initiatives and 15 supporting measures aimed at achieving this vision and its 10 shared goals. Additionally, the plan incorporates six cross-cutting actions to address issues across various themes and sectors within the rural vision, such as the European Rural Pact, rural proofing, the Toolkit on EU funds for rural areas, improved statistics, and a new EU Rural Observatory to enhance access to rural evidence and data.

- The European Rural Pact fosters multi-level governance, promoting cooperation among institutions, governments, and rural communities. It aims to enhance policy synergies and funding mechanisms affecting rural areas.
- Rural proofing is a tool that requires policymakers at all levels to evaluate the potential impact of new legislation and policies on rural communities, ensuring that rural considerations are integrated into the decision-making process.
- The EU Rural Observatory is a platform that functions as a knowledge hub, providing the latest data and analysis on demographic, economic, social, and environmental trends impacting rural Europe.
- The Toolkit on EU funds for rural areas is a practical resource designed to improve information and access to the European Union's financial instruments, while also sharing best practices that support the financing of rural development.

## 2. The European Rural Pact: strengthening cooperation for rural development

Launched in 2021, the European Rural Pact provides a framework for cooperation between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens at the European, national, regional and local levels. It helps achieve the shared goals of the LTVRA by fostering interaction on rural matters. Its objectives are:

- Amplifying rural voices and bringing them higher on the political agenda;
- Structuring and enabling networking, collaboration, and mutual learning;
- Encouraging and monitoring voluntary commitments to act for the vision.

It creates spaces to listen to the needs of rural actors and influence policy agendas. It also offers access to a collaborative platform and events, such as webinars, policy labs, and conferences. Additionally, it connects members for knowledge sharing, provides updates on key EU rural policy developments, and promotes voluntary actions by stakeholders committed to supporting the rural vision.

## 3. Translating the rural vision into action at national, regional and local levels

The European Commission's efforts have resulted in significant progress towards creating stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, as highlighted in its report *The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward* (European Commission, 2024). Between 2021 and 2024, digital connectivity in Europe has improved, with better broadband infrastructure, although rural areas still trail behind urban regions. Funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) has supported infrastructure, economic diversification, and essential services. The report also emphasizes the vital role of rural areas in the energy transition. They produce 72% of Europe's renewable energy and hold 78% of untapped potential, reinforcing their importance in sustainability efforts.

Demographic challenges continue to be a concern as rural areas face ageing populations and a decline in young people, especially in employment, education and training. Few people in their twenties reside in mainly rural regions, indicating they leave for study or work. Nearly all age groups up to 50-54 show more males than females, with the largest gap among those aged 20-24 and 25-29. These patterns may reflect gender differences in post-secondary participation and, among working-age adults, the limited employment opportunities for women in rural areas (Eurostat, 2024). To tackle these issues, EU funds have supported initiatives to support young farmers, entrepreneurship and job creation.

While significant progress has been made in implementing the Rural Action Plan to meet the LTVRA goals at the EU level, the success of the Rural Pact ultimately depends on how effectively it is adapted at national and regional levels. Member States and regional authorities play a vital role in tailoring the rural vision to national, regional and local contexts. To support this process, the Rural Pact Support Office has produced two policy briefings: *Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States* (Rural Pact Support Office, 2023) and *Empowering communities to take action for the rural vision* (Rural Pact Support Office, 2024).

The policy briefing *Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States* highlights seven essential ingredients for mobilising stakeholders around the Rural Pact and encouraging joint action towards achieving the objectives of the LTVRA within the specific context of each Member State or region. These ingredients include establishing structures to engage rural communities, designating dedicated government roles for rural issues, offering capacity-building support, developing holistic strategies, implementing effective rural proofing with adequate data systems, ensuring coordinated governance and aligning funding mechanisms to ensure synergies. The briefing also showcases inspiring examples of how these elements are practically applied.

The briefing *Empowering communities to take action for the rural vision* focuses on the critical role of local communities in achieving the objectives of the rural vision. It stresses the importance of local leadership, inclusive organizational structures, and the development of shared visions and action plans tailored to the specific needs of communities. This briefing also details supportive measures that higher authorities should undertake, such as recognizing local leaders as partners in governance, enabling capacity-building initiatives, encouraging coordinated policy measures, and making access to funding easier by reducing bureaucratic barriers.

Together, these briefings emphasize the need for enhanced collaborative and multi-level governance approaches, integrating efforts from local communities to national authorities to realize the EU's rural vision.

## 4. Ways forward for future rural policies

Challenges persist despite these advancements. Rural areas still face demographic pressures, including ageing populations and youth migration, while gaps in infrastructure and service provision remain significant barriers to development. Moreover, fragmentation in governance across different administrative levels hampers the effective enforcement of rural policies.

To guide discussions, the European Commission outlined nine key questions to stakeholders in its report *The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward*:

- What are the main challenges caused by depopulation, ongoing transitions and structural changes for which EU interventions provide added value?
- What are the most effective ways to address them specifically, considering the different needs of various rural communities?
- How can financial support for rural areas and communities be enhanced through EU, national and regional funds, with a focus on improving synergies and complementarities between them?
- What is needed to improve financing, quality of delivery and effectiveness through territorial tools such as CLLD/ LEADER?
- How can the monitoring and assessment of resources allocated to rural areas and communities from various EU funds and programmes be improved?
- What is needed to enhance access to support for the final beneficiary through simpler rules, streamlined procedures and improved administrative capabilities?
- What can be done for wider and more efficient implementation of the rural proofing mechanism at the EU, national and regional levels?

- What are the most effective policy tools to ensure institutional, governance and integrated support for rural areas at all levels?
- At the EU level, would converting the rural vision into a strategy add value in terms of meaningful actions on the ground?
- How can the EU further support Member States, regions and local communities in developing national and regional rural strategies and action plans?
- How can the availability of policy-relevant rural statistics and data be enhanced without adding to the administrative burden?

Building on the above questions and existing rural challenges, the Rural Pact has organized a series of participatory Policy Labs to gather the views of its community.

#### 4.1. The Rural Pact Coordination Group issues a Declaration on the future of rural areas

In response to the questions posed by the European Commission and to strengthen rural communities' voices in policy-making, the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG) has issued a *Declaration on the future of rural areas and rural development policy within the European Union*, offering strategic recommendations for upcoming rural policies (Rural Pact Coordination Group, 2024). The RPCG was established by the European Commission (DG Agriculture and DG Regional and Urban Policy) to further develop the Rural Pact and guide its process. It comprises key EU-level organizations and institutions representing the stakeholders of the Rural Pact. The RPCG Declaration stresses that the future of rural areas concerns society as a whole, since rural regions play a vital role in the EU economy, help address climate change and enrich European social and cultural life. Therefore, rural areas must be recognized as essential to the wider EU development agenda.

Addressing rural challenges demands urgent action, especially on demographic changes, the digital and green transitions and economic resilience. The RPCG calls for increased investment in local capacities, infrastructure, essential services and innovation. Enhancing community-led local development (CLLD) and streamlining funding rules will empower rural communities to shape their future. The Declaration advocates for a broad, multi-policy approach to rural development beyond just agriculture. Rural proofing should be strengthened to ensure that rural needs are integrated into all policies. The RPCG suggests allocating a specific percentage (e.g., 30%) of the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) to rural development, separate from agricultural support. It also recommends a mandatory portion of funds – such as 10% – dedicated to rural development initiatives (CLLD) like LEADER and Smart Villages.

To implement the LTVRA, the RPCG recognizes that its principles must be translated into clear national, regional, and local strategies, aligned with EU priorities and involving stakeholders. Strengthening the Rural Pact can enhance policy coordination and collaboration among national and regional ministries (e.g., through interministerial groups) and European Commission directorates.

The RPCG emphasizes the importance of capacity-building and local involvement. It calls for more technical support, networking, and training to aid rural communities in accessing funding and developing projects. The Declaration also urges seed funding for project planning and simpler applications, adopting results-based and performance-based funding models. Furthermore, it highlights the need for improved monitoring of EU rural spending and suggests the use of territorial tagging of EU funds to ensure transparency and accountability. Implementing these recommendations will help secure a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient future.

#### 4.2. The European Commission unveils the 2028-2034 EU budget proposals that will shape the future of rural areas

In 2025, three key policy initiatives from the European Commission stand out. In January 2025, the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development published the Vision for Agriculture and Food to set the political agenda to boost the agri-food sector's competitiveness, attractiveness, sustainability and fairness. Aligning with the LTVRA and the RPCG Declaration, it highlights the strong links between agriculture and rural development. Besides sector-specific actions, it proposes to enhance synergies among EU funds, update the EU Rural Action Plan, strengthen the Rural Pact, promote rural proofing, and reinforce participatory tools like LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages (European Commission,



2025a). In February 2025, the European Commission published the communication *The road to the next multiannual financial framework* (European Commission, 2025b), paving the way for discussions on the future EU budget.

In July 2025, the European Commission launched its proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, which set out a EUR 1,985 billion budget (European Commission, 2025c). Member States would program the largest part of the budget through National and Regional Partnership Plans covering economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture, rural and maritime prosperity and security.

Among the proposed objectives for the Plans, the following are particularly relevant for rural areas:

- Enhancing the attractiveness of territories to uphold the right to stay, including support for strategies fostering the integrated development of urban and rural areas, including support to territorial services and infrastructure.
- Enhancing attractiveness and living standards, including access to healthcare, in rural areas.

Member States would have to demonstrate how their proposed Plans contribute to all objectives in a comprehensive and sufficient manner. This would involve indicating how they address the specific needs of each type of territory – including rural areas – and how they effectively support the use of cooperation and integrated territorial development tools, including LEADER.

The Plans would be developed and carried out in close collaboration between the European Commission, Member States, regions, local communities, and all other relevant stakeholders. The proposed regulation on the National and Regional Partnership Plans explicitly names rural actors among those who must be involved in the process.

The Commission's proposals are due to undergo negotiations with the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. Once finalized in accordance with the agreed provisions, Member States will prepare their Partnership Plans in collaboration with local and regional stakeholders before submitting them to the European Commission for approval.

While fixed amounts of funding have been proposed for less developed regions and to support the incomes of farmers and fishers, rural development allocations remain open. Rural Pact stakeholders are encouraged to actively participate in the negotiation process to ensure rural areas fully benefit from the new support framework. Rural voices must be heard in such important political processes to make sure their needs and demands are taken into account.

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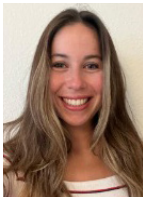


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With nearly 15 years of specialist knowledge and senior-level experience in project management and consultancy, Enrique Nieto has a deep understanding of European and regional policy issues related to rural, regional and local territorial development. He also has extensive experience in EU networking, policy evaluation, programme and project monitoring and foresight activities. Enrique currently serves as a Senior Policy Officer at AEIDL and is currently the Deputy Team Leader of the Rural Pact Support Office since December 2022. Before this role, he managed AEIDL teams and coordinated activities under several Horizon 2020 projects, including DESIRA, SHERPA, MOVING, CODECS and GRANULAR. He has also worked on initiatives such as the Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development, FARNET, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the CAP Network.



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#### Junior Communications Officer at the Rural Pact Support Office

She is a communications professional with extensive experience in international organizations. She has worked at the United Nations and the European Commission, gaining valuable skills in information management, communications and project coordination. Since 2024, Sophie has been with the European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL), where she is responsible for cross-cutting communication activities – from writing articles, webpage management, and social media content creation to supporting the team in event planning activities. For the past year, she has been actively involved with the Rural Pact Support Office, deepening her expertise and interest in rural development policies across Europe. Sophie holds a master degree in International Development and a bachelor degree in Sociology.

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