



POLICY ACTION LAB

## Highlights report

# Taking action to tackle rural depopulation

### Summary

The Rural Pact Support Office's Policy Action Lab gathered 92 individuals from 19 EU Member States to address rural depopulation challenges through policy. The event, which built on the ENRD Thematic Group's work on [Rural Revitalisation](#), offered insights from practical case studies and expert panel discussions. Participants discussed effective policy design, coordination and integration, as well as local action. The gathering also marked the official launch of the Rural Revitalisation platform, aimed at enhancing collaboration and knowledge exchange as well as joint action among rural stakeholders.

**Organiser:** Rural Pact Support Office



29 June 2023



Brussels, Belgium



92 (policy makers, public authorities, local practitioners, researchers, advisors, businesses, producers, other EU-funded projects, etc.)



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



If you see this icon, click to watch the recording

## Setting the scene and the official launch of the Rural revitalisation platform



**Colin Scicluna** (Head of Cabinet of Dubravka Šuica, European Commission's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography) stressed the need for Europe's rural areas to attract more inhabitants without losing their rural character. For this, he outlined the need to create an ecosystem that would ensure the provision of mobility, education, care and other necessary services to rural areas; those areas can also be a good laboratory for innovative solutions. For effective policies it is particularly important to involve young people, for example through deliberative democracy. Colin Scicluna saluted all those who are working on this topic and thus contribute to achieving the long-term vision for EU's rural areas ([LTVRA](#)).



**Marie Lambert** (DG AGRI) presented the [Rural revitalisation platform](#), one of the flagship initiatives of the European Commission to implement the LTVRA. It is an online collaborative space where stakeholders can find the latest information about the Rural Pact and rural revitalisation, connect with peers, share or get inspired by good practices, or discuss specific topics within a community group.



**Urszula Budzich-Tabor** (RPSO) introduced the theme of the event and its agenda. Based on the work carried out within the ENRD Thematic Group in 2022 and summarised in its report on "[Enabling factors for rural revitalisation and the accompanying self-assessment tool for policy design](#)", she pointed out that, at policy design level, it is important to develop policies that are integrated, targeted, coordinated and ensuring stakeholder engagement. Only such policies can contribute to building the capacity of local actors, can foster linkages and enable innovation at the local level.

### Stakeholders' panel: "How can stakeholders make the most of the platform to combat rural depopulation"

A stakeholder panel moderated by **Pascale Van Doren** and **Patricia Martínez Sáez** (RPSO), and composed of **Erdmuthe Klaer** (European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy - REVES), **Juha-Matti Markkola** (National CAP Network, Finland), **Bojana Markotić Krstinić** (National Leader Network, Croatia) and **Marie Lambert** (DG AGRI) reflected on how stakeholders can make the most of the newly launched platform.



The panellists stressed that the platform could be a good tool to share information about work carried out by various organisations, to find partners and information about upcoming events. However, a considerable facilitation effort and stable long-term financing are needed. As not all rural stakeholders speak English, community groups in national languages might be a good solution. Panellists already shared ideas on how they could use the platform such as creating a community group (e.g. on social economy in rural areas).

## Taking action: Policy design, coordination and integration

### The national strategy to combat rural depopulation (Spain)



**Juana López Pagan**

(Ministry for Ecological

Transition and Demographic Challenge, Spain) outlined the national policy implemented in Spain since 2020 which brings together different departments and tries to integrate a territorial dimension into the national plan. The development of this policy has involved all the Spanish regions and required many meetings to ensure that all actors share a common commitment irrespective of political preferences. She stressed that rural depopulation is a core theme of the Spanish presidency starting on 1 July 2023.

### Integrating different policies and actors around rural depopulation (Finland)



Maa- ja metsätalousministeriö  
Jord- och skogsbruksministeriet  
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

**Auli Sihvola** (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry,

Finland) described, in a presentation prepared jointly with her colleague Maria McPartlin, a recent initiative complementing the already existing tools to coordinate different rural policies in Finland, namely a special Parliamentary working group on sparsely populated rural areas. The group has a cross-administrative secretariat and focuses particularly on social aspects of rural life, such as vitality, education, multi-locality and long-term rural aspects which need wider legislative processes. Finland is also progressing on rural proofing by raising awareness and training legislators.

### Lessons learnt from the national strategy for inner areas (Italy)



**Francesco Mantino**

(Italian Research Centre for Agricultural Policies and Bioeconomy, CREA) presented the results of a recent study evaluating Italy's Inner Areas Strategy. The analysis was based on 10 case studies across Italy and focused on various economic, social/relational and environmental impacts of the strategy as

well as on progress and limitations of managing the policy and involving stakeholders. Enabling factors identified in the study include planning (targeting funds to marginalised areas and political emphasis at national level), multi-level governance (co-design and dialogue between different levels), multi-fund approach to address different and complementary needs, and connecting actors at local level (including the crucial role of local agencies and cooperatives and the importance of connecting local knowledge with external networks).



**Group discussion:** Participants gathered in small groups to use a simplified version of the [self-](#)

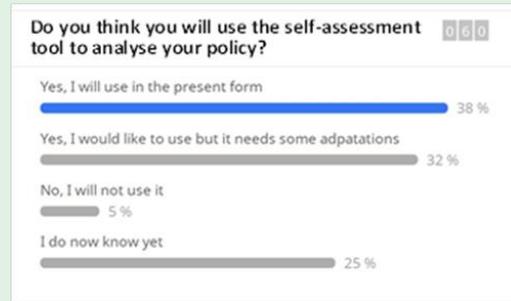
[assessment tool](#) for rural revitalisation policies to analyse the policy framework in their own context (or that of their peers) for tackling rural depopulation. The feedback provided in a Slido poll showed that a large part of the audience declared they found the self-assessment tool relevant and interesting, but that further work is still required to simplify it so it could, especially, be used by local actors.



## Stakeholder feedback on the self-assessment tool for rural revitalisation policies

Suggestions from participants in the Slido poll included the following ideas to improve the tool:

- > *"Ask a local community if it makes sense to them and is clear and easy to use."*
- > *"Test applications and discussions of the outcome with users."*
- > *"Make the language of the questions easier to understand. For someone "new" to this topic, it can be hard to integrate them."*
- > *"It may need to be editable to be more tailored to the local context, and in different languages."*
- > *"Include some more practical examples next to each question to guide the user."*
- > *"Change the form of it to make it more like a checklist. May need adaptation when looking at specific policy areas."*
- > *"More quantitative analysis of effects."*
- > *"1-10 measurement in some questions."*
- > *"More questions related with impact monitoring."*
- > *"Suggest to use it periodically."*
- > *"Integrate a section on normative framing of policies - e-g in what way the European Green Deal/sustainability is in the focus."*



## Taking action: Local empowerment, capacity building and innovation

In three working groups, participants had the opportunity to learn about examples of inspiring action taken by local actors to combat rural depopulation and to identify the characteristics of enabling policies that would facilitate such activity on the ground.

### Improving rural quality of life: territorial marketing and affordable services

Two examples were presented to start the discussion: **Blandine Camus** (Euromontana) told the story of the Basque village of Orexa (Spain) which ensures vital services (local shop, pub, on-demand bus connection as well as community-managed energy) for its population, combining different sources of public funding. The village successfully communicates its vision, local products and environment. **João Almeida** (Rural Move, Portugal) presented the work of this organisation, which assists people wanting to live, work or invest in rural areas, organises capacity building, matching events, research and advocacy.

### Boosting incomes through sustainable businesses

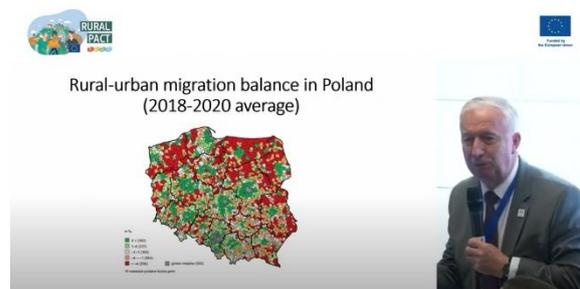
**Elisabet Acedo Labat** (Biblioteca Eduardo Pérez de la Fanosa, Spain) described how the small village of Busto in Asturias (Spain) created a library that has become the centre of numerous activities, promoting "circular micro economy" based on culture and on a strong community spirit. **Kate Carmody** (Hemp Cooperative, Ireland) explained the potential of boosting incomes and encouraging young farmers by building on traditional Irish crops such as hemp and flax, using the social cooperative not-for-profit model. **Tom Jones** (ERCA) presented a number of initiatives to bring incomes to rural areas, including the experience of the Plunkett Foundation (UK).

## Testing and piloting new approaches to tackle rural depopulation



**Ryszard Kamiński** (Kujawsko-Pomorski Agricultural Advisory Centre, Poland) shared the experience of how rural depopulation is addressed through local action. Notably, he highlighted the network of small community schools which not only offer quality education in remote villages but also play the role of community centres, and energy cooperatives supported by agricultural advisory centres in pioneering, testing and implementing pilot solutions.

**Christiana Gardikioti** (the Meraki People, Greece) explained how her initiative contributed to changing mindsets (from extractive to regenerative production models) and connecting local people, decision makers and practitioners to operate a 'Bio Fab Lab' and a virtual platform in a remote rural area and to promote biodiversity, tourism and learning experiences.



## Recommendations and action points to revitalise rural areas now and in the future



The discussion groups came up with a number of recommendations to improve policies which enable rural revitalisation at the local level:

### Building the capacity of local actors

- > **Human resources in rural areas can be scarce and policies need to build on and actively strengthen the existing talents and capacities.** Mentoring can be a good way of developing human resources at the local level. Women in particular are not just a stakeholder group to be involved, but an important asset.
- > **Policies need to identify and support the birth of very small-scale community initiatives and nurture them through a life cycle to become self-sustaining.** Several examples pointed to the need for providing advice and seed funding for very small-scale voluntary initiatives, the importance of supporting cooperative and social economy models and the critical role of intermediary organisations in providing more technical advice and funding for initiatives when they grow.
- > **LEADER Local action groups (LAGs) can play an important role in building local capacities,** reaching out to the actors and target groups most in need of support. For this, they need adequate human and financial resources and technical expertise. Furthermore, they should not be excessively burdened with administrative tasks.
- > **Funding frameworks need to be adapted to foster local ownership and decision-making.** Ideally, EU funding should be accessible directly to local communities. Taxation systems and state aid rules may have to be adapted to provide incentives for people and businesses willing to live, work or invest in rural areas.



## Creating linkages among people, organisations and territories

- > **Local initiatives to strengthen social networks and build trust need to be enabled and encouraged at policy levels.** Many examples demonstrated the key role played by local hubs, for example small community schools, which can play the role of a meeting space, organise events and effectively involve different groups of stakeholders, including young people.



- > **Policies need to support initiatives that strengthen linkages along the food value chain.** The discussion helped identify multiple opportunities for activities connecting producers and consumers, for example school meals from locally sourced food or companies consuming raw material produced locally are an important driver of local economies. Public administration can play an important role at creating such linkages, encouraging co-creation of services by the local community, and fostering circular solutions.
- > **Quadruple helix (science, government, businesses and citizens) cooperation involving all sectors is important.** Where possible, it should go beyond the most typical activities such as agriculture or tourism. Links with the academic sector need to be particularly encouraged, including the involvement of young scientists in practical action on the ground. Intermediary organisations that help create linkages (including LEADER LAGs) can play a vital role in rural revitalisation.

## Fostering local and community-led innovation

- > **Participatory processes to find solutions to local challenges and community-based innovation need to be systematically supported by policy.** Small-scale ('frugal') initiatives may have a high impact at the local level. Incubators and platforms for local innovation can offer space to exchange ideas, provide the necessary expertise, build skills and offer inspiring examples. Legal and financial frameworks need to be adapted to enable innovators to launch their initiatives without excessive bureaucracy.
- > **Social innovation needs stable, long-term (rather than short-term, project-based) support.** A substantial body of evidence already exists on social innovation in rural areas, e.g. the [SIMRA](#) project, and can be a source of ideas and good practice examples. Indicators to measure success of (social) innovation should not only look at quantity, but also quality of the results, as highlighted in the [evaluation manual](#) produced by the SIMRA project.
- > **Being connected with organisations outside the rural area is an important condition for innovation.** Digital and online solutions are important but must be adapted to the needs of people living in remote rural areas and combined with in-person interactions.

More information from group discussions can be found in photos uploaded on the [website](#).

The feedback from working groups was complemented by a panel composed of **Cristina Amaro Costa** (Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Portugal), **Konstantinos Antonopoulos** (CIVICS, Greece), and **Blandine Camus** (Euromontana). They shared their reflections on the event and ideas for future action. They stressed the importance of bringing revitalisation policies down to the local people, even in the most

remote rural areas, and of creating linkages within communities, but also connecting science with local knowledge. Intermediaries and advisory mechanisms can play an important role, and the recently developed tools such as the toolkit for EU funding, the rural observatory and the Rural revitalisation platform are very needed.

### Ideas for community groups within the Rural revitalisation platform

In a quick interactive session, a number of **ideas for community groups** that could be set up on the platform were identified. They cover such topics as: mountain areas, transport and public services, educating farmers, culture (including cultural landscapes) and environment, bio-based economy for sustainable consumption and production, rural entrepreneurship and incubators, social innovation in human ecology perspective, health care in rural areas, public policies, planning and strategies (a cross-cutting topic). Interested European and national stakeholder organisations and institutions can submit an expression of interest to create a Community Group by filling in the following [form](#) and submitting it to [info@rural-pact.eu](mailto:info@rural-pact.eu).

### Concluding remarks



**Marc Bournisien de Valmont** (OECD) stressed that rural depopulation needs to be at the core of policy making at all levels. The rural revitalisation platform is a good answer to tackle this challenge and has the potential to engage all kinds of actors. He also reminded the audience about recent OECD work such as the [Regional Recovery Platform](#), the report on "[Delivering Quality Education and Health Care to All](#)" and a project on shrinking smartly and sustainably.



**Serafin Pazos Vidal** (AEIDL) pointed out the importance of having a common understanding of the problem of rural depopulation; the collaborative platform can contribute to achieve this. Although it may not be possible to reverse the demographic trends, there are already good practice examples of multi-dimensional, holistic and well-targeted policies. Social capital is an essential condition for those policies to succeed and foster innovation on the ground.



In closing comments, **Mario Milouchev** (Director, DG AGRI) thanked the audience for their active participation in the event. He stressed that the European Commission is already taking some steps to address some of the topics that have emerged from the discussion, such as improving the accessibility of online tools and material in national languages, considering tax incentives or strengthening urban-rural cooperation. Further action will follow, taking into account the conclusions on the rural vision which will be developed by the EU Council under the Spanish presidency in autumn 2023, as well as on the work already carried out by the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.

**Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform**

[https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member\\_en](https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en)



<https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu>