



# Making the Rural Pact happen in Member States

**Draft** Policy Briefing

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## 1 Introduction

This Policy Briefing outlines the key elements or “ingredients” that need to be put in place to mobilise stakeholders around the Rural Pact and foster concerted action towards the objectives of the long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas in specific Member States (MS) or regions. It also presents examples of how these ingredients are put into practice. This publication is intended primarily for public authorities at national level (and at regional level in MS where regional authorities have legislative or programming powers), civil society organisations (especially those involved in policy making or advocacy), as well as researchers, business organisations and other stakeholders with an interest in rural policies.



**If you are wondering how to make the Rural Pact happen in your country or region, this briefing is for you!**

## 2 Why is the Rural Pact needed?

As highlighted by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, rural areas are **essential** for the European identity and well-being. They play an important role in addressing major social and environmental **challenges** Europe is facing. Hence, for rural areas to thrive, a **coordinated effort** is needed by a wide range of actors and stakeholders at different governance levels.

The European Commission, after an extensive process of joint reflection and consultation with stakeholders, published in 2021 a Communication on the “**Long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas**” ([LTVRA](#)). An EU [Rural Action Plan](#) has been developed to achieve this vision articulated around nine flagship initiatives, fifteen accompanying actions, and six horizontal actions which reflect the commitment of the European Commission to achieve stronger, more resilient, more connected and prosperous rural areas by 2040. One of the horizontal actions envisaged by the Action Plan is to propose a **Rural Pact** – a mechanism to involve and encourage to act all relevant stakeholders and levels of governance who can contribute to the achievement of the long-term vision.

### Rural Pact Objectives



**Amplify the voice of rural areas and bring them up in policy agendas**



**Networking, collaboration & mutual learning**



**Commitments to act**

In June 2023, the European Commission set up the [Rural Pact Coordination Group](#) made of key rural stakeholders to steer the Rural Pact process over the next three years, coordinated by DG Agriculture and Rural Development, with DG for Regional and Urban Policy as co-lead. In addition, the Commission has set up the Rural Pact Support Office, which animates the Pact and help this community to achieve

its objectives by implementing key tasks such as the organisation of events, collection and dissemination of good practices, coordinating efforts with other EU policy networks, supporting the Rural Pact community platform, production of the Rural Vision Magazine, the Newsletter, policy briefings and managing the website and social media channels. All the EU-level activities are designed and carried out with a strong involvement of stakeholders. However, to achieve results, the **Rural Pact needs to trickle down from the EU level to reach stakeholders at national, regional and local levels.** National, regional and local authorities are responsible for a lot of the policy actions impacting rural areas, including choices made regarding the use of EU funds. The vision can only be achieved with their active participation and engagement. Moreover, the well-being and livelihoods of rural areas do not depend only on actors typically associated with agriculture and rural development: public authorities responsible for example for education, health, transport and other services, for energy, environment or digital infrastructure, as well as urban policy actors, businesses and researchers also have a role to play.

Thus, depending on the needs and organisational cultures across the EU, there are attempts to establish 'rural pacts' at various levels (national, regional, local) and in various institutional forms. It is, however, important that **no rural area in the EU is left behind**, but all can benefit from the coordinated effort to make them stronger, more resilient, more connected and prosperous. Therefore, stakeholders interested in EU rural areas should not only join the Rural Pact Community at the EU level and take practical steps in their own field of activity, but also look for the best ways to **translate the Rural Pact into action in their national, regional or local contexts.**

### 3 The Rural Pact ingredients

Already before the development of the LTVRA some EU Member States had a long tradition of having in place governance structures that enabled coordinated and comprehensive rural policies across various thematic domains similar to what is advocated with the Rural Pact (e.g. Finland); other countries have started implementing similar initiatives more recently, particularly triggered by negative trends such as rural depopulation, economic decline and discontent, or to take opportunities created by European funding (for example Spain, Czechia). Based on this experience, as well as on the process of the LTVRA at the EU level, it is possible to identify a number of **elements that Member States can implement and contribute to the Rural Pact objectives** at national or regional level. These elements are complementary to the eleven [OECD principles on Rural Policy](#), and include:



- > Structures and mechanisms to engage with rural communities.
- > A designated government member and dedicated services to deal with rural issues across policies.



- > Capacity building and networking support for a broad array of actors and stakeholders.



- > A forward-looking vision, implemented through a holistic strategy/action plan;
- > Effective rural proofing and adequate data systems.
- > Appropriate governance systems to facilitate coordination.
- > Mechanisms to coordinate the allocation of funding and ensure synergies.

Taken together, these elements constitute the 'ingredients' of a successful Rural Pact, although the **specific solutions can be adapted** to the national context, including the specific legal and administrative frameworks, funding sources, organisational culture and stakeholder capacities.



### 3.1 Structures and mechanisms to engage with rural communities

Rural change cannot be achieved without a strong involvement of the rural communities. It is well known that policies designed and implemented in a participatory manner have a much greater chance of success than top-down approaches: this is particularly true in the case of rural areas. Such involvement needs to go beyond the occasional "consultations": it should be **regular, systematic and ensure representative participation** of the most concerned stakeholders. It is important that these stakeholders are involved throughout the **whole policy process**, from conceptualising and designing the policy, drafting the legislation, down to implementation and evaluation of results.

For this, specific mechanisms are needed, adapted to the capacities and availabilities of the representatives of rural communities, and activities that foster open discussion, such as debates, workshops etc. A variety of institutional formats can be considered, such as the establishment of more

#### The Rural Parliament in Latvia

The Latvian Rural Forum (a national organisation bringing together key civil society stakeholders in rural development) organises every two years the Latvian Rural Communities' Parliament. In 2023 this event brought together around 300 representatives of local and regional authorities, businesses, policy makers (including the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Ministry of Welfare), academics, rural development professionals and enthusiasts. It involved exchange of experience and development of a Resolution that can serve as a road map for all decisions on rural areas for the next two years.

See more information [here](#).

or less formal structures, for example working groups or coordination committees involving different types of actors (as the Rural Policy Council in **Finland**), or the organisation of events facilitating the formulation and voicing of rural communities' needs. This can happen, for example, within the framework of **national rural parliaments**, which enable rural communities and civil society organisations to establish dialogue with policy-makers (see example from **Latvia**). Such rural parliaments have been organised in many EU Member States (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Netherlands, Romania, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania) as well as neighbouring countries

(Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Scotland in the UK), and they bring their conclusions to the biennial gatherings of the [European Rural Parliament](#).



### 3.2 A designated government member and dedicated services to deal with rural issues across policies

Rural development typically falls under the responsibility of a government ministry, which is often dealing also with agriculture, forestry and/or food economy. However, the decisions taken by bodies in charge of economic or regional development, education, health or transportation can have an equally important (or more important) impact on the rural life. Ensuring that all these services cooperate to achieve a positive impact on rural areas requires strong leadership, and having a **designated government member in charge of all rural issues** is key for rural people to feel heard. In addition, putting in place a special service dealing with rural matters may help to raise awareness on the importance of rural areas with all the relevant government bodies and to facilitate coordinated action. Inspiring solutions can be found in the examples from **Ireland** and **Finland**.

#### Finland's Rural Policy Council



In Finland it has been recognised decades ago that rural policy needs to involve all institutions whose decisions affect daily life and entrepreneurship in rural areas. Therefore, Finland has developed a structure that brings them all together and ensures collaboration: the Finnish Rural Policy Council. Its 34 members are appointed by the government and represent ministries, agencies, private sector and civil society organisations. They are supported by a Secretariate managed by the Secretary General from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, with three Vice-Secretaries General representing the public sector, civil society and research. Most of the work is carried out in thematic networks.

See more information [here](#).

Such a dedicated service can also be the first point of call for all stakeholders who would like to share

#### "Our Rural Future" in Ireland



Ireland's comprehensive policy for rural areas is underpinned by the national long-term development strategy Project Ireland 2040 and based on the vision of a thriving rural Ireland integral to the national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development.

To achieve this, a comprehensive set of policy measures has been designed, each with a specific government department responsible for its implementation. The process is coordinated by the Department of Rural and Community Development and led by its Minister, while progress is monitored by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment chaired by the Prime Minister.

See more information [here](#).

ideas or express concerns about rural issues. Ideally, this service should be staffed with people who can understand and communicate well with different types of rural stakeholders and with different administration departments, but also have experience with other sectors of the economy or civil society.



### 3.3 Capacity building and networking support for a broad array of stakeholders

Participation of rural stakeholders is essential for achieving rural change, but many rural stakeholders may not be able to take part in the Rural Pact without support from intermediary organisations who have to provide explanation, encouragement, opportunities for discussion, experience exchange and formulation of opinions and positions. Such support may be particularly needed for inhabitants of small remote villages, small-scale farmers and micro-entrepreneurs, women and youth representatives. Starting from building trust and explaining key concepts in a simple language, a **long-term systematic effort** may be needed to secure the involvement of these 'unusual suspects'. Providing a budget to cover

travel costs to meetings may be of key importance, especially in bigger Member States (such as **Sweden**, see example). Beyond the support to networking and participation, it is also of great importance to ensure that rural actors are able to access funding and implement projects that contribute to the LTVRA at the local level. Animation, advice and help to meeting the funding requirements is an essential element of community support by many LEADER LAGs, but it can also be provided by specialised services (as in the **US** example).

To raise awareness of rural beneficiaries on relevant European funds, the European Commission will issue by the end of the year a toolkit on EU funding opportunities for rural areas, centralising information in one place accessible to local authorities, stakeholders, project leaders and managing authorities, helping them to use the new opportunities offered by the 2021-2027 EU budget.

#### Involving and building capacity of rural stakeholders in Sweden



The involvement of stakeholders in rural matters in Sweden is facilitated by the National Rural Network (NRN). National and regional rural stakeholders (irrespective whether they are involved in CAP implementation or not) are encouraged to apply for a formal membership and commit to actively participate in thematic working groups, and they can act as intermediaries that help transfer policy dialogue to the local level. To facilitate participation of civil society actors, the NRN has funding for travel costs, and even fees (in case of volunteers).

See more information [here](#).

#### Helping rural communities access information and funding



In the United States, federal agencies and commissions responsible for rural issues team up to ensure equitable access of rural communities to federal funding, and provide expertise to help them clarify local priorities and successfully apply for funding for job creation, infrastructure and community improvement.

See more information [here](#).



### 3.4 A forward-looking vision implemented through a holistic strategy/action plan

To address the challenges facing rural areas, decision-makers must have a clear vision which guides the direction to pursue in a long-term perspective. Rural communities and those who wish to invest, settle down or work in a rural area, especially young people, need to know that policy support will continue to be available many years from now. For this, a broad consensus is needed of all political groups as well as the civil society (including the urban interests), farmers, SMEs, and various economic and social actors. This consensus and involvement of key government services makes it possible to assure **long-term continuity** and to secure sufficient human, institutional and financial resources to make the vision a reality.

### Programme “France Ruralités”



Building on the implementation of its first national rural agenda, the French government launched in 2023 a comprehensive programme to boost rural areas. It has four pillars: technical support to municipalities on investment projects, increased biodiversity funding for the valorisation of rural environmental assets, practical solutions for daily life (mobility, education, health, culture, housing...) and new definition of Areas of Rural Revitalisation which benefit from tax relief.

The programme was launched jointly by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion, and the Deputy Minister in charge of local authorities and rural affairs. Practical indicators have been put in place to monitor results, such as percentage of vacant rural homes, number of new rural businesses or percentage of citizens considering rural areas a good place to live.

See more information [here](#) (in FR).

In addition, a holistic multisectoral strategy is essential for the vision to become a reality. Rural policies have to deal with multiple and complex challenges, so fragmented interventions are not an option: trying to address a single issue or support a single target group will not bring the desired results and can even be counterproductive. A holistic and integrated approach has shown to be efficient to take into account the complex fabric of social, economic and environmental aspects of rural life and which are in many cases interlinked (see example from **France**). A national or regional Rural Pact can be the first step of bringing together different policy strands and facilitating a **broader, more integrated view** of rural areas. This

should be translated into **practical steps** which form a coherent action plan, indicating clearly who should do what and how progress can be monitored.



### 3.5 Effective rural proofing and adequate data systems

Since rural areas are affected by a large number of legislative and administrative decisions, a mechanism is needed to maximise the positive and limit the negative impacts of these decisions on rural areas. Such a mechanism which identifies and assesses the impacts of new regulations, plans or programmes on rural areas is called ‘rural proofing’. It needs to be integrated into the entire **governance system** and tailored to the specific administrative structure of the country/region. In the **UK**, according to the [2020 Rural Proofing Report](#), each government department has nominated a rural proofing lead whose role is to champion rural proofing in the respective policy field. The government has also prepared [practical guidance to consider the outcomes of policies in rural areas](#). In **Finland**, rural proofing has been integrated into the Ministry of Justice’s Guidance on the impact assessment of government legislative proposals, and it is accompanied by the preparation of easy-to-use assessment methods and by training and **raising awareness of legislators**. The [ENRD Thematic Group on this topic](#) has prepared analytical framework and recommendations for rural proofing at national, regional and local levels.

To assess impact of certain decisions on rural areas, and also to measure progress in the implementation of policies and strategies, access to **high quality data** on rural areas is essential. The Spanish region of Catalonia publishes a bi-annual comprehensive book with detailed statistics about rural areas of the region. This data is used by the steering committee of the regional rural [vision](#) to monitor new legislative proposals and assess impacts in rural areas (rural proofing). Evidence-based decision-making on rural issues can also be supported by the EU [Rural Observatory](#), launched in December 2022 by the European Commission to centralise, analyse and disseminate data related to EU rural areas.



### 3.6 Appropriate governance systems to facilitate coordination

Since rural development requires the involvement of many different policy actors, it is of key importance to establish a system that facilitates coordination, both **horizontally** (between different sectoral ministries), and **vertically** (between different levels of governance: national, regional, sub-regional and local). Such coordination should not only help avoid duplication of effort or contradictory actions, but also help create synergies. Mechanisms and incentives should be in place to ensure that different services and administrative levels communicate regularly, and that cooperation is not limited to the exchange of information but facilitates open participatory discussion and planning joint activities. It can be worthwhile to invest time in regular meetings of staff members responsible for different policy tools, ideally in an informal setting, to build **trust and a common understanding** of challenges and objectives. Clear lines of responsibility for specific tasks and strong legitimacy of the body in charge of coordination are also very important, as illustrated by the **Spanish** example.

#### Combatting rural depopulation in Castilla-La Mancha



In 2021 the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha passed a special law on economic, social and tax measures to combat depopulation and for the development of rural areas. The strong leadership of the regional Vice-President, with the support of a dedicated Commissioner for the demographic challenge, were key to ensure the mobilisation and involvement of all regional government departments (such as agriculture, education, health, transport) in the development of the law as well as in the implementation of the regional strategy to make it a reality.

The strategy covers a wide range of actions and mobilises EUR 3 322 million from regional, national and EU funds, including Next Generation EU. To coordinate the strategy, the Regional Council for the Development of the Rural Environment and the Fight against Depopulation has been created with the involvement of representatives from all Regional Government Departments, Provincial Councils and local bodies, as well as key socio-economic actors (e.g. trade unions, business, universities and civil society).

See more information [here](#).

#### Rural Development Concept in Czechia



Czechia already combined different EU Funds for rural areas in 2014-2020: its 178 rural LAGs covered almost all Czech rural areas and used the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and (most of them) the European Social Fund (ESF) as well as EAFRD, with ERDF providing most of the funding. Based on this experience, Czechia designed its Rural Development Concept in 2020 under the supervision of the Ministry of Regional Development and combining a variety of funding sources through territorial instrument and SMART strategies.

During the Czech presidency of the EU the **Czech Rural Pact** was initiated. It brings together citizens, local authorities, and other partners to promote rural development in the country.

See more information [here](#) and [here](#).



### 3.7 Mechanisms to coordinate the allocation of funding and ensure synergies

Effective support to rural areas does not only require good coordination between different bodies, but also **linking different sources of funding**, including European, national, regional and local funding sources, to ensure the various instruments, combined, are sufficient to address rural needs and adapted to the reality of target beneficiaries (small-scale projects, limited administrative capacity etc.). The European

Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF) are the basic sources



of EU financing for rural change, but several other funds (Resilience and recovery funds) or programmes (e.g. ERASMUS, LIFE etc.) can also play a role. These funding streams can also be **combined** through multi-fund approaches to create even more opportunities for action on the ground, as is the case in **Czechia**. National and regional managing authorities can facilitate access to funding for rural stakeholders by putting in place dedicated funding streams **targeting rural areas**, and designing simple, user-friendly rules for application, eligibility and reporting across the different funds. This was for example done by **Sweden** in the 2014-2020 period, when all CLLD funding for rural areas from four different EU funds (EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and EMFF) was managed by a single managing authority and implemented through a harmonised set of rules.

Another solution could be a one-stop-shop to support rural municipalities, businesses and NGOs in accessing public funding, established at local, national or regional level. In some Member States (for example in the [Tyrol region in Austria](#)) this role is played by LEADER LAGs.