



European Network for
Rural Development

Rural Voices

June 2021

A qualitative analysis of the findings
from stakeholder workshops contributing
to the long-term vision for rural areas



EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Each Member State has established a National Rural Network (NRN) that brings together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. At EU level, the ENRD supports the networking of these NRNs, national administrations and European organisations.

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report records the concerns and hopes of more than 3000 rural citizens from 19 different EU countries who participated in a series of workshops in response to the proposal from Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, to build a long-term vision “*for and by rural Europe*”. Participants had to brave the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and hold nearly all the events in a virtual format. The workshops also had to be completed in a very short time period – between December 2020 and the end of February 2021 – in order to meet the timetable for consultations to feed into the Communication planned by the European Commission for the summer of 2021.

The fact that so many people were prepared to share their ideas, hopes and dreams is testimony enough to the energy and commitment that exists in rural communities for forging a new vision which recognises the full value of rural areas for the well-being of the whole of society. We are very grateful for the time taken by many busy people to share their ideas and recommendations for a brighter rural future. Especial thanks, however, must go to the National Rural Networks of many countries without whom many of the meetings would not have taken place. They communicated the information to their stakeholders, adapted the workshop methodology to their needs, organised and facilitated many of the meetings and, often, recorded and synthesised the results. A number of the responses expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to the rural vision process, and expressed the hope that citizens’ participation and ideas would be sought more frequently in future. Several commented on the wider value of the exercise for the local community and area, and that the outcomes would be useful for future initiatives.

Bill Slee, from the Rural Development Company, was responsible for analysing these results, synthesising them and writing the bulk of the text in this report. Zélie Peppiette, while working for the European Commission, developed the workshop methodology and made significant contributions to the analysis and the report. Both authors helped to identify the key statements and conclusions from the workshop reports and national summaries. In doing so they tried to give a voice to as many views as possible to reflect the huge diversity that exists across rural areas of Europe while at the same time identifying common strands and themes as input to the long-term rural vision.

With such a large number of varied contributions, this task necessarily involves a certain amount of subjectivity. It is also important to say that they had to base their work on the workshop summaries, and it was not always easy to distinguish direct quotes from workshop participants from the conclusions made by the organisers. The workshop statements that you will find in the different sections of this report are in most cases translations from the original workshop language and may differ slightly from the exact words used. Finally, the fact that a quote/or topic is attributed to one country or group does not mean necessarily that it was not raised elsewhere. Nevertheless, the statements do provide a valuable insight into the current concerns and hopes of rural citizens across Europe.

In order to reflect the richness and range of views emerging from the workshops we have included as many direct statements from the workshops as possible - while trying to avoid repetition. However, this makes the report quite long to read sequentially. So, to help readers navigate the report, we have provided an executive summary with the main general conclusions and a table in the Annex (page 49) which summarises the key thematic messages from the workshops. The blocks within the table correspond roughly with the chapters and subsections of the report, allowing the reader to go directly to those sections which interest them most for further details on a specific theme. At the end of the report, a section highlights over-arching messages and links that emerged across the thematic sections.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We need a more expansive view of what is rural” (Ireland)

This report provides a structured synopsis of the rural voices emerging from various forms of engagement undertaken by National Rural Networks (NRNs) and others who contributed to the European Commission's development of a long-term vision for rural areas (LTVRA).

Through the combined efforts of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and the European Commission, a pack of materials was prepared in December 2020 called “Welcome to our rural”⁽¹⁾ to support the organisation of participatory workshops with rural stakeholders. The aim was to elicit stakeholder views on the social, economic, and environmental condition of their own rural area, the scope for improvements and the policies needed to make such improvements.

There was particular attention on identifying the biggest gaps between stakeholder perceptions of their local area today compared to where they wanted to be in 2040, and on the interventions needed to close the identified gaps and fulfil their vision for 2040. The rural stakeholders involved in the workshops were asked to discuss and plot their conclusions on a ‘wheel’ of thematic axes including: infrastructure and services, technological and digital change, basic goods/food and energy, income work and jobs, social inclusion and vitality, the environment and climate change.

In order to meet the timetable for inputs to the Commission, the workshops had to be completed by the first week of February 2021. Despite a very short time frame (only two months), there was an impressive response from local stakeholders with 170 contributions received from workshops organised in 19 Member States plus one EU level association with a total of more than 3 000 people actively participating. In some cases, workshops were also shared live on social media, allowing additional people to follow and contribute. The NRNs in 16 Member States adapted the material to their local conditions and the time and resources they had available. Some NRNs and groups adhered to the templates very closely; some used them more loosely; and others developed additional and imaginative means to capture rural voices regarding their vision of the future of rural Europe in 2040. Because of the COVID 19 pandemic, almost all workshops took place virtually rather than face to face.

The sample from which the opinions are drawn is non-random. The voices mostly come from the contacts of known networks. Any quantitative interpretation of the findings of the workshops would be inappropriate for this reason. The distillation of the many voices is thus a qualitative task. It is also not possible to claim that these are the voices of all rural citizens. They are the voices of the engaged rather than the disengaged, of attendees rather than absentees, of active rural stakeholders rather than the marginalised. But despite this, there is a rich diversity of opinion alongside an authenticity that merits serious attention from policy decision makers.

The following are some of the important general points that emerge from the rural voices expressed in the workshops. The more detailed thematic comments and recommendations can be found in the summary table that follows this section.

Responding to rural diversity and the need for “action now”

- **Rural Europe is highly differentiated, and the nature of that differentiation is important in shaping local people's visions of the future. This should be captured and reflected in an EU Vision.**

There are very large disparities in wealth, well-being and environmental quality across rural Europe between North, South, East and West and between rural areas close to prosperous cities and remoter rural areas. The workshops covered small remote islands, mountain areas, the hot and dry interiors of the South, the eastern borders of Europe and areas with a difficult industrial legacy, as well as more densely populated areas in the more prosperous parts of Europe. The voices from the workshops recognise and reinforce the existence of these geographical divides and wider diversity across Europe. They also point out that areas such as the ‘advantaged’ hinterlands of cities also face some significant challenges, and that the remoter areas are not without hope and opportunity.

(1) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/ltrva-workshop-package-nrns-and-other-rural-stakeholders_en

- **Demographic change provides a barometer of possible opportunities.**

There are major differences between those rural areas which are attracting urban dwellers, young people, retirees, and migrants and those that are trying desperately to prevent young people from leaving, attract their diaspora back or welcome new members to their community. Areas with declining populations, unsurprisingly, tended to put more emphasis on the need for viable public infrastructure and services and decent jobs - in other words, the creation of a more equal 'playing field' with urban areas. Whilst a common theme from all areas was awareness of the need to address the negative impacts of climate change - in terms of droughts, floods, and fires, these areas put less emphasis on the potential role of rural areas in a low carbon future. Some also pointed out that their lifestyles were rather more compatible with the need for a sustainable existence on the planet than those of their affluent peri-urban counterparts.

In contrast, areas of increasing population in more prosperous countries were more likely to invoke a vision that was more post-industrial and vibrant with possibilities of more sustainable, collaborative, and creative lifestyles. In addition to levelling up, there were frequent references to ways of innovatively enhancing the distinctive advantages of living and working in such rural areas. Island communities also focused strongly on a positive future (see separate box).

- **Many of the actions and changes recommended for arriving at the "vision" are framed in the short and medium term rather than the longer term.**

Overall, the thematic structuring of the meetings engendered much reflection. However, as the recent past has been so turbulent and unpredictable due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is often hard to detect a vision of rural Europe 20 years into the future. Sometimes in the voices, there is evidence of a longer view being taken but, in practice, the problems and challenges of "*here and now*" predominate, with solutions mainly being framed through relatively modest adjustments to existing approaches or pleas for a change of current culture or ethos. At the same time, there is an expectation that the practical steps leading to the 'vision' should start now, even if they are relatively small, rather than being left as promises for a distant future.

Despite the diversity, a number of common strands and recommendations for change emerge from the workshops:

Common strands and step changes needed

- **The crucial importance of available, affordable and accessible high-quality digital infrastructure was reiterated constantly.**

This was recognised as a prerequisite for the development of many other activities, whether economic, social or environmental, and identified as one of the highest priorities for urgent action. Encouragingly, it was also one of the areas about which participants expressed the greatest optimism for the future, indicating a level of trust and expectation that existing gaps and disparities will be addressed to support/strengthen the development of new business models and meet social needs. However, remote and mountain areas were less hopeful.

- **Despite the differences, the voices from all types of area pointed to the need for putting in place the basic services and appropriate infrastructure for achieving their long-term vision.**

There were frequent references from across Europe to the need for better and more equitable planning of rural schools, housing, health care, mobility, productive and, of course, digital infrastructures and skills development opportunities. In other words, respondents recognised a need for establishing the base level of infrastructure and services to support the functioning of the rural welfare state. This takes rural development out of the comfort zone of traditional rural development policy and requires engaging with complex technical and regulatory issues related to policies dealing with transport, telecommunications, energy, health, housing, and education among others. To meet the challenge, many voices called for a more joined-up funding architecture at EU and national levels and far more integrated planning at local level.

- **There was frequent recognition of the strength of community spirit and the prevalence of volunteering for social support in rural communities. However, many groups stressed that support, recognition and capacity building are needed to maintain these activities.**

Needs identified included leadership development, training and facilitation, access to knowledge and financial and administrative support for voluntary community organisations and the provision of physical premises. The development of rural hubs to provide a base for a range of activities and services, and which can serve as a community focus, incubator and support networking and collaboration was raised frequently, irrespective of the type of rural area.

- **Building a stronger culture of social and technological innovation in rural areas has emerged as a need and an opportunity.**

Digital connectivity and skills are often mentioned as necessary but not sufficient conditions for truly vibrant rural areas. The 'COVID dividend' is seen as drawing the attention to the many distinctive advantages of living and working in rural areas in a low carbon and digital world. It has triggered the innovative capacity of many areas. But to fully realise the opportunity, actions were suggested to ensure infrastructure is available, skills are developed, and local innovation and knowledge is supported also by creating spaces and knowledge hubs, extending innovation partnerships and advisory services into the wider rural domains and investing in new models developed for running both services and businesses.

- **Significant concerns were expressed about climate change, environmental degradation and pressure from unsustainable agricultural practices.**

Climate change is highlighted as a key issue, but contributors do not consider that it is being sufficiently addressed. Better recognition of the contribution of ecosystem services to regional value creation is required in order to generate more benefits for the rural community and to increase the supply and quality of ecosystem services. It is seen as important to retain ownership, control and value in rural areas. Adopting agro-ecology or organic farming, diversifying or intensifying current systems were frequently cited as necessary but this shift to increased sustainability requires greater knowledge and new skills. Rural communities are considered to be well-placed to contribute positively to the green transition, but this requires implementing win-win solutions that maintain and enhance natural capital without exploitation or degradation, generate economic opportunities and protect the vulnerable.

- **The extent to which new regional and local territorial models were considered a platform for the future was striking and has been given a new impetus by the COVID pandemic.**

Many of the voices referred to the opportunities for relocalising economic activities and food value chains and renewable energy production as well as the new opportunities emerging from remote working. However, they considered that it was crucial to ensure that the value added from such activities is retained locally.

- **There were also many heartfelt pleas for new participatory models of governance, multi-actor partnerships and holistic place-based strategies as a desirable structure to frame interventions.**

There were concerns to increase participation in decision making, strengthening networking and connections, such as rural-urban linkages. Many contributions pointed to the value of holistic place-based strategies developed by and with the local community, at an appropriate scale. Appropriate policy, fiscal and regulatory frameworks that facilitate, rather than obstruct the implementation of positive approaches were commonly mentioned, for example in relation to renewable energy, local processing, social innovation, new business models and community-owned assets. Administrative and bureaucratic hurdles were highlighted as barriers to turning opportunities into reality.

The reaction of stakeholders to this very brief consultation exercise is reflected in one voice who said:

“The inspiring discussions and responses to the consultation on the Long Term Vision show just how much people care about building a more sustainable future and how they are pushing hard for multi-actor partnerships to drive a more integrated model of support for rural Europe. We must support them in this task.”

Finland

The main thematic conclusions of the workshops are summarised in the table page 49.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report gives an overview of the outputs of workshops organised in rural areas as contributions to the development of a long-term vision for EU rural areas. The need for such a long-term vision for rural areas was set out in President von der Leyen's political guidelines⁽²⁾, which commit to cherish and preserve rural areas and invest in their future to enable them to make the most of their potential. The importance of involving rural communities in the development of the vision was highlighted, and these workshops were one part of the public consultation activities undertaken.

With the support of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the European Commission prepared a package⁽³⁾, known as 'Welcome to our Rural', to provide an opportunity for groups of rural citizens to explore their vision for the future of their own rural area in a participatory workshop.

The package of materials was available online in 22 EU languages from November 2020 and consists of a template for a two-hour participatory workshop that can be organised and run autonomously by stakeholder groups, using a standard basic script and visual materials, together with a "harvest sheet" to record the workshop outcomes and provide input in a consistent format to the Commission and ENRD. Due to COVID restrictions the workshop was designed to be held virtually, although it could be adapted for in-person events (the vast majority of workshops were virtual). Organisers were encouraged to see the material as a starting point, and to adapt it to their local conditions and the time and resources available. Some groups followed the template very closely, whilst others adapted or built on it to suit their context.

In many Member States the National Rural Network (NRN) supported the exercise, promoting it, providing training sessions for workshop organisers, and in some cases hosting workshops themselves. Some NRNs adapted the material for their national context and introduced other innovative techniques and sources. A number synthesised the input from individual workshops and provided consolidated reports to the ENRD.

The standard workshop format started by agreeing on the territory being considered, and reflecting on what it means to the participants, with the area's characteristics and appeal captured in a wordcloud. In the next phase, participants considered how the area is likely to evolve between now and 2040, taking account of the impact of trends and drivers including climate change, digital and technological developments, demographic changes and shifts in globalisation or localisation of economic activities. Participants depicted their expectations on a visual canvas (wheel) using a qualitative scale from "poor situation" at the centre to "good situation" at the perimeter of the wheel. The wheel is divided into eight categories: infrastructure/services, social inclusion/vitality, income/work/jobs, basic goods: food/energy, digital/technology, impact of climate change on territory, impact of territory on climate change, environment. Each category covers several distinct elements (for example infrastructure/services includes health, education, housing and transport) which can each be considered and plotted separately.

Plotting the expected situation in 2040 on the visual wheel identifies which characteristics are thought likely to fall short of participants' aspirations, which leads on to discussion of the most significant gaps and opportunities. Groups then considered what would be needed to make the most of the area's potential and to shift predicted poor situations towards better outcomes. These enabling conditions, together with stories and examples of positive initiatives, formed part of the feedback provided to the Commission. Workshops concluded with participants reflecting on how they could influence the path the area will take over the coming years.

(2) Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2020, A Union that Strives for more. [political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/rlp/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf) (europa.eu)

(3) Available at: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/long-term-vision-rural-areas-workshop-package-nrns-and-other-rural-stakeholders_en

Who contributed?

This analysis includes inputs provided by the first week of February 2021. Despite this short time frame, there was an impressive response from local stakeholders, with workshops organised in 19 Member States⁽⁴⁾ and 170 contributions received, involving more than 3 000 rural people in active exchanges. In some cases, workshops were also shared live on social media, allowing additional people to follow. The contributions come from NRNs, Local Action Groups (LAGs), Europe Direct Centres, local authorities, citizens and community groups. Events were organised in a variety of formats, from small groups considering their immediate local area, focus groups of people from similar areas, up to national events bringing together people from across a Member State, and one EU-wide event (the European Small Island Federation). Some NRNs also explored imaginative techniques such as the use of a video game - Minecraft- with young people in Finland, the analysis of recent LEADER strategies in Sweden and surveys of various kinds. The map shows the areas represented in contributions received (blue dots indicate national level workshops where the contribution covered a wide rural area).

The sample from which the opinions are drawn in this report is non-random. A majority of the voices come from the contacts of NRNs. Any quantitative interpretation of the findings of the workshops would be inappropriate for this reason. The distillation of the many voices is thus a qualitative task, not one that lends itself to quantification. Nor is it possible to claim that these are the voices of all rural citizens. They are the voices of the engaged rather than the disengaged, of attendees rather than absentees, of active rural stakeholders rather than the marginalised. But despite this, there is a rich diversity of opinion alongside an authenticity that merits serious attention from policy decision makers.

Figure 1: Visual wheel used in workshops



Figure 2: Map of workshops organised around Europe



(4) AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, EL, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, PL, SE, SK.

Overall, the thematic structuring of the meetings engendered much reflection, but it is often hard to detect a vision of rural Europe 20 years into the future when the recent past has been so turbulent and unpredictable due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sometimes in the voices there is evidence of a longer view being taken but, in practice, the problems and challenges of 'here and now' predominate, with solutions mainly framed through relatively modest adjustments to existing approaches and/or pleas for a change of culture or ethos. At the same time, there is an expectation that practical steps leading to the 'vision' should start now, even if they are relatively small, rather than being left as promises for the distant future.

The workshops were held at a time when the European Green Deal had been launched and when the proposed changes to the CAP were being closely scrutinised by experts regarding their fit to Green Deal objectives. Throughout the evidence from the workshops, there is a widespread belief that the current policy architecture was not fit for purpose and that if rural areas were to fulfil the needs and expectations embodied in the European Green Deal, some significant changes are needed.

2. REFLECTING THE DIVERSITY OF RURAL EUROPE

There are very large disparities in wealth, wellbeing and environmental quality across rural Europe, as well as between rural areas close to prosperous cities and remoter rural areas. These differences shape people's visions of the future and need to be reflected in an EU vision. The voices from the workshops recognise and reinforce the existence of this geographical diversity. They also point out that areas like the 'advantaged' hinterlands of cities also face significant challenges, and that the remoter areas are not without hope and opportunity.

Based on the workshop outcomes, we caution strongly against thinking in terms of the average conditions in any spatial category to describe the possible future for any one of these types of rural area. There are, of course, structural forces impacting on all areas which create differences of wealth and opportunity. This can be ameliorated by generic public policies to a degree but, equally, there are more local factors that can make a large difference in outcomes.

Several types of areas are reflected in the workshops:

- **Small remote islands** face particular challenges which include outmigration, poor connectivity and high costs of living and the highly seasonal nature of tourism. The influx and temporary settlement of large numbers of refugees has impacted some small islands very severely (see box on inputs from Islands below).
- **Remote and inaccessible mountain areas** form another distinct set of regions. Limitations caused by slope and altitude impact on farming systems and some mountain areas have lost large numbers of people, especially from isolated individual dwellings and small villages.
- **Hot and dry regions**, becoming drier and hotter under the impact of climate change, face a growing challenge of liveability and often have poor services, weak infrastructure, high outmigration, compromised farming and forest systems and high wildfire risk. They include parts of inland Spain, Italy and Greece.
- **Eastern Borderlands**. These rural areas of post-socialist Member States are some distance from prosperous agglomeration economies and have seen substantial population movements out of the region, or at least out of rural areas towards urban settlements.
- **Rural areas with a difficult industrial legacy** of mining and power production or brownfield sites with residual pollution and decaying industrial structures.

Some relatively remote regions have also prospered because of retirement migration and tourism. They are often coastal or mountain areas. Such areas may experience the same types of tension between incomers and locals found in more prosperous areas, perhaps even more so because of their prior remoteness. Where there are distinctive cultures or cultural and environmental assets, tourist developments may revalorise them in unwanted ways.

Affluent rural areas in the hinterlands of prospering cities are subject to considerable development pressure for housing and infrastructure and many villages have effectively become dormitories for nearby urban settlements. These rural areas predominantly have opportunities for economic growth through new residential developments and providing goods and services for the existing and new populations. However, there may be tensions between old residents and new, between those embedded in the village and the incomers and between landscape planning regulations and market preferences where values, interests and cultures may not coincide.

Farming systems can be intensive, limiting access to rural greenspace and compromising biodiversity. The affluent lifestyles can increase a region's carbon footprint and compromise environmental sustainability. Nimbyism may arise to protect property values and privatise recreational space. Public space is often scarce because of high private land values, but in significant demand. Adaptive management by the traditional population can potentially benefit from affluent incomers enhancing demand for local products and leisure space.

Despite the huge diversity of rural Europe, the workshops show that rural communities are concerned with many common issues. The following chapters provide evidence of the current concerns, opportunities for the future and actions identified by workgroup participants for progressing towards their vision of the future.

3. MAIN THEMATIC MESSAGES

In this chapter we summarise the main messages emerging from the workshops following the thematic axes or characteristics of the wheel used to structure the discussions⁽⁵⁾. For each theme, we provide a general introduction and describe the main issues which participants said needed to be addressed in the vision. Then for each of these issues we provide a range of statements directly from the workshops firstly about the existing gaps perceived by participants and secondly about the opportunities for responding to them. Finally, at the end of each thematic section we describe the main step changes that participants mentioned as being important for progressing towards the vision.

Before entering into the messages for each thematic category, in the box below we provide an example summarising the views and perspectives from island communities.

AN ISLAND PERSPECTIVE

This box presents a summary of the views and perspectives from island communities across the EU (including participants from Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Sweden⁽⁶⁾), the majority from small islands with a population of less than 5 000, and some with only one or two families permanently resident.

Overarching messages

Each island, its community and activities should be considered as a whole, highlighting connections and synergies. A holistic vision for the island should be developed by its residents. "Island proofing" policies was recommended to take account of the particular situation and needs of islands.

Becoming self-sufficient in energy and increasing self-sufficiency in food provision are important and attainable objectives intertwined with climate change and the environment and bringing multiple benefits.

Islands need more than a short tourist season to stay alive, but tourism will remain a major source of jobs and income, and must be in balance with the environment and local capacity.

Geographic isolation means that island communities need to be self-sufficient to thrive. There is a need to move from being "part of" the community to "participating in" the community.

All respondents were highly concerned about the negative impact of climate change, and recognised the need to move towards climate neutrality. Rising water levels, more frequent and extreme storms, floods, droughts, threats to biodiversity, production capacity and infrastructure are already evident and expected to worsen.



Source: Wordcloud generated during the workshop organised by the European Small Islands' Federation

© European Small Islands' Federation

(5) However, for simplicity we have dealt with the two climate change axes in one single block.

(6) The contribution from the European Small Islands Federation also included participants from Scotland

Assets and opportunities

- ▶ Strong sense of community and identity, including the diaspora.
- ▶ High quality of life.
- ▶ Close connection to nature/natural environment, including the marine environment, landscapes, culture and identity.
- ▶ Building a circular/self-sufficient economy and community (renewable energy, food, local products and processing, sustainable tourism, inter-generational support, community skills) strengthens the community, creates new income opportunities, reduces carbon footprint and protects the natural environment.
- ▶ New economic opportunities which allow people to stay and new people to come: working from home (WFH); Sustainable agro/ecotourism; New/restored farming practices and food processing; Valuing local food and traditional crafts.

Enabling conditions

3 essential prerequisites: **Broadband, Housing, Community Building.**

Broadband: Quality digital access is essential to open up opportunities (jobs, networking, connectivity, smart applications, e-services, education and health)

Housing: More housing is needed to enable increase of permanent population, which will allow new activities and provide a base to maintain services and support a thriving community. A shift from seasonal use to permanent homes should be incentivised.

Community building: More cooperation, collaboration and capacity building are needed to support the development of sustainable thriving communities.

Increase democratic representation. Promote participatory budgeting and involve young people in decision making roles.

Strengthen social capital and social economy, building collectives, cooperatives (e.g. for renewable energy production and food sourcing (grocery coop)). Encourage networking (including with other island communities and the diaspora, and to support tourist activities and integrated transport).

Develop existing facilities (e.g. clinic, school, church, community centre) into community hubs providing a range of services, including support for new residents to integrate into self-sufficient community lifestyles (e.g. register of skills/services available within the community, support and training to develop skills).

Organise community activities to engage youth and families (e.g. park run, activity clubs).

Develop services to support WFH (such as childcare).

Improve access to training/education, including for new opportunities (WFH), and for transforming food and energy systems. Hybrid education systems can maintain quality provision for small school populations.

Promote green physical connectivity, linking islands to the mainland, with each other, and with transport options on the island, including harmonised timetables and tickets.

Transforming food and energy provision to increase self-sufficiency and sustainability. This requires:

- ▶ changes in land management. This could be facilitated through contracts recognising the role of land management in maintaining traditional landscape, quality of the environment, biodiversity, reducing pollution.
- ▶ Revival of old skills and development of new ones.
- ▶ Most island farms are smaller than the average in the country, so schemes and support need to be tailored to their needs.
- ▶ Reducing bureaucracy (particularly for food processing and energy generation).
- ▶ Community involvement and commitment (e.g. residents buying, and hospitality showcasing, local products).

“Even if the European Commission does not listen to the true voice of citizens from the various rural-island regions, the opportunity for citizens and civil society organisations to discuss VISION2040 for attractive, prosperous, sustainable rural areas is an excellent opportunity for another perspective of “bottom-up” planning and implementation by local structures.”
(Cyclades, Greece)

3.1. INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES⁽⁷⁾



Introduction

The workshop discussions signal a widespread concern that insufficient attention is given to providing infrastructure in rural areas to match cities, often coupled with a feeling of discrimination against rural areas in public service provision (ES). Consideration of what public services should be available across rural Europe merits attention. Responses from the workshops concerning the expected situation in their area in 2040 varied considerably, both from group to group, and in relation to different elements of infrastructure and services. In general, more remote areas tended to be more pessimistic than those closer to larger towns and cities.

'Local community groups require more infrastructure in areas such as transport, childcare services and broadband in order to make rural society a good place to live and work' (IE). 'The (Polish) countryside is still struggling with numerous white spots in terms of infrastructure - roads, transport, sewage and water supply' (PL). Some argued that 'Infrastructure and services must be the same as in the city!' (EE). But it is expensive to provide everyone with equal access to all aspects of public infrastructure. Austrian respondents recognised the difficult choice: 'We want by 2040 to have been able to counteract the negative consequences of an uncoordinated overprovision of infrastructure through comprehensive regional planning and the joint definition of development focal points' (AT). Equally, 'retaining and attracting population in rural areas will depend on ensuring adequate infrastructure, primarily local road networks, as well as access to services related to healthcare, education, culture, entertainment and employment opportunities' (EL).

Six main themes were identified by workshop participants as gaps which need to be addressed with respect to the infrastructure and services. To reach their desired vision in 2040 they pointed to the need to overcome:

- Poor quality public services, schools, health, social care and infrastructure,
- Overly urban-centric transport structure and mobility,
- Lack of vitality in village and town centres and hubs,
- Neglect of historic and industrial buildings with heritage value,
- Insufficient and inappropriate housing to meet current needs,
- Inadequate water supply and treatment as well as flood and drought management.

Digital infrastructure is seen by almost all communities as essential to their future functioning. This topic is detailed in section 4 on digital and technological change.

► PUBLIC SERVICES, SCHOOLS, HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

'A general lack of basic services' (ES) was widely reiterated. Groups from Germany were concerned about the continuing loss of education and health services and pointed out the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in rural areas. In many aspects of social infrastructure, there is a trade-off between the provision of e-services and direct provision. However, unless the digital infrastructure is in place, e-services are unachievable. An adequate digital infrastructure for business activity, service provision and social life can perhaps be regarded as a basic right. It must, though, be recognised that e-services can reduce face to face community interaction which is generally deemed a desirable feature of rural life.

Gaps

In many areas, the closure of small schools was widely noted as a concern and the need for accessible educational services was asserted: 'basic education must be available nearby, supporting community schools and other alternatives' (EE). In Spain it was noted that 'the loss of services (school, medical, financial, transport, etc.) and infrastructure is exacerbated in rural areas and to a greater degree in smaller localities.' Also, there is a 'lack of local services (leisure, culture, specialist healthcare, gyms, physiotherapy, etc.). There is a lack of professionals and there are not enough basic services in the smaller villages. The infrastructure has also deteriorated' (ES). Similar concerns were raised in Germany and Italy.

'Local administrations, health services and schools are often understaffed. This is especially problematic in remote mountainous areas and small islands' (EL).

'The biggest gaps in the desired and probable future can be found in the provision and funding of public services, as well as the basic digital infrastructure and skills that enable the use of digital services' (FI).

(7) The source (country) of some specific comments is signalled in brackets, but they are representative of the range of views received.

Opportunities

In addition to levelling up investment, many opportunities for improving the quality and accessibility of services were seen. These included **digital innovations, the creation of service hubs of various kinds and recognising the central role of rural schools.**

Finnish respondents were relatively optimistic about future service provision suggesting that: 'the reachability of services in rural areas (will have) been improved (by 2040). Excellent digital connections cover the entire country. There are a lot of digital services and solutions (e-doctor, multi-service centres in self-driving cars, delivery drones)', and 'the greatest potential is seen in the innovation of digital services, nature-based well-being services and use of digitalisation in basic services and education' (FI).

There were numerous suggestions for how to improve service accessibility, for example by 'creat(ing) telemedicine medical centres in each community, improving health service provision using new technologies', 'establish(ing) lifelong or distance learning centres where residents can access new technologies and digital literacy training' (EL), 'improving school/education/training infrastructure in rural communities' (SK), and decentralising higher education (DE).

Rural schools were important beyond basic educational provision as 'a school in the countryside is a central place of local activity which effectively shapes local communities' (PL). Belgian respondents proposed a revitalisation of caring based on a 'strategy for strengthening medical services: information for the population on community health projects, attraction of caregivers, creating energy for home care rather than rest-homes, and mobility support platforms to be boosted as generalised services' (BE).

Spanish respondents wanted to see public authorities 'invest in education and healthcare, basic infrastructure and services, social work, etc' but also 'explore and seek alternatives, in line with reality - to offer these services remotely' (ES). Repurposing existing buildings to provide improved social infrastructure was a proposal from Germany.

► A RURAL TRANSPORT AND MOBILITY SYSTEM

Transportation infrastructure includes roads, bridges, ferry terminals, airports, inland waterways whilst services cover public transport and alternative mobility services. It was recognised during the workshops that life in rural areas is becoming more and more difficult for those without access to private cars. A lack of metalled roads and the distance of many settlements to trunk routes is understandably perceived as a source of disadvantage to the rural residents concerned. Lightly populated and relatively poor remote areas undoubtedly face major challenges in delivering basic mobility-related services to their populations because of rising costs and long distances. Many groups referred to scope for alternative mobility solutions such as electric cars, community organised public transport, better cycling services and infrastructure, and the restoration or establishment of rail services. One group from a mountainous region of Germany had hopes that the future transport situation would be good but expressed concerns about other aspects of infrastructure and services.

Gaps

Even in one of the most densely populated countries in the EU: 'mobility/ accessibility remains a huge issue, the lower levels of government cannot be expected to organise public transport. Essential services become less and less reachable' (BE). In remote regions in Greece: 'apart from those that are close to urban centres, most rural areas (especially mountainous areas) have very poor road networks' (EL). 'Poor road condition(s)' were reported in Latvia and in Slovakia where 'transport infrastructure (is) generally in a bad situation - quality of roads, insufficient public transport network - both buses and trains, missing bike trails and other alternative transport means' (SK). In addition, 'weak secondary communications and the rural road network (and), lack of public transport services' (ES) were a major issue. In Poland, there are: 'white spots in terms of access to public transport - this is a restriction not only for residents who must go, for example, to a doctor, but also for tourists who, without a good road network, can choose a better-connected place for their vacation' (PL). Respondents noted the 'very poor quality of roads and local infrastructure in rural Ireland' (IE). In Germany, even in areas where public transport is available, the cost was recognised as a limitation for some residents.

Islands face specific challenges: 'the Aegean islands suffer from poor connectivity between them and the main ports, particularly during the winter months. Increased transportation costs make the islands less competitive' (EL). Spanish island respondents also reported infrastructure challenges.

Opportunities

There are a number of suggested opportunities that can be adopted to address transportation issues. Properly paved roads were a priority in countries like rural Hungary. But responses were moving beyond basic improvements in road surfaces

towards wider **'sustainable rural mobility approaches'** which suggest a shift away from the reliance on cars, a focus on public transport and links between different modes, on-demand services and the benefits of new technologies:

'Transport (requires) a change in the approach to movement, the transition from individual transport to public transport' (PL).

'In terms of mobility, development of self-driving cars, home deliveries, etc. offer scope for mobility enhancement' (BE). But there is still a need for realism: 'it is impossible to equip all hamlets with all basic facilities, but it is possible to connect the villages. The emphasis (should be) on public transport and alternatives (carpooling, bicycle route networks including for e-bikes and slow roads' (BE). Alternative mobility solutions were stressed by groups in Germany, including smart networking and community organised services such as transport.

Mobility improvements involve a multistranded approach: 'improvement of transport infrastructure – the enhancement of accessibility of rural territories with a focus on alternative transport which is more friendly to the environment, such as development of bike trails, public transport, local railways, road and pedestrian construction and reconstruction' (SK).

In both Belgium and Finland, there was perceived to be scope for developing driverless cars and drones to improve delivery of services. In Belgium, the case was made for a 'switch from car to bike: convert roads into cycle tracks so they will no longer be usable (by cars) in 20 years, reinforce cycling network and multimodality' (BE).

Hungarian and German respondents also sought improvements in the cycle path network, whilst in Italy new/restored rail routes were mentioned as sustainable transport solutions.

► THE REVITALISATION OF VILLAGE AND TOWN CENTRES AND HUBS

Austrian respondents saw the importance of town centres in 2040: 'lively town centres are attractive core areas for the local and regional economy, society and culture' (AT). There is also a widely recognised need for multipurpose hubs, which are seen as not only as a base for providing a range of services in themselves, but also drawing people into the village and generating a multiplier effect. There is a need 'for physical meeting places (which) can be utilised to create space for a variety of purposes – education, youth, civil society, private leasing, co-working spaces, innovation, cultural activities etc.' (SE).

Gaps

Many respondents were aware of the loss of services from village and small-town centres with the resultant loss of vibrancy and activity. They saw a need for revitalisation of these hubs, sometimes as part of a managed retreat as services were rationalised (EE), and sometimes as a preparation for an increase in population (SE). Physical spaces (hubs) and capacity building and administrative support were identified as practical ways to support and maintain services. In Italy, the knock-on effect of lack of services on a community's ability to develop supply chains was noted. German groups highlighted the need for better recognition and resourcing of community services, including those provided by volunteers.

Opportunities

Respondents considered that there were many opportunities **for imaginatively revitalising village centres, creating vibrant human spaces and hubs for community activities and using abandoned buildings and brownfield sites.**

'(A) shrinking community needs (a) new centre. Renewing the living environment to be modern and interesting, new solutions (are needed in) cooperation with architects and designers to create exciting solutions. In shrinking communities there is a need 'to gather the necessary in the centres, to demolish the unnecessary, to create a new quality by linking it with historical values' (EE). A similar repurposing of buildings was deemed desirable in Slovakia.

Part of the solution to village vibrancy lies in 'phasing out the policy of building outside the core of the rural centres/municipalities. Continue to focus on public space (village centre renovation and village houses/meeting centers' (BE). 'Stimulati(on of) village hubs (meeting, shopping, quality of life and mobility)' is needed (BE). But the hub is not just about service provision. It requires the 'development of a community dimension, a means of working on the feeling of pride in the living environment' (BE). There is a need to think in terms of the 'creation of third(-sector) spaces and relocation of culture and social links (hybrid places); multifunctional spaces; spaces for young people; enhancement of existing buildings, multi-purpose community spaces.' (BE). This concept of multifunctional spaces, providing a range of services, including supporting volunteer community activity, was referred to by a number of Italian and German groups, some of whom also proposed renovating existing buildings for the purpose.

There was 'support (for) alternative use (of) the abandoned buildings (brownfield sites), both private and public (e.g. former agricultural cooperatives, farms, old community cultural houses) and create space for small businesses, for free time and social activities (cultural, sport, hobbies) of local NGOs/various civil associations etc.' (SK). More generally in these hubs, there was a need for 'greater respect and support for historic buildings' (ES).

► BUILDING ON HISTORIC AND INDUSTRIAL LEGACIES

Many respondents referred to a large stock of empty and poorly maintained historic buildings in their area both as a problem and an asset.

Gaps

In both damaged industrialised landscapes and in village landscapes there are stranded assets and liabilities relating to former uses which require transformation. Many areas reported old buildings in need of repair and renewal.

'The large amount of derelict properties in existence in rural villages and towns throughout Ireland is a real concern, and something that must be addressed moving forward in order to ensure the future survival, viability and vibrancy of rural society' (IE).

Opportunities

Respondents pointed to the opportunity of **giving abandoned buildings new uses which build on past history and help forge a stronger local identity** and avoid encroachment on green space.

'The focus has to be on preserving the identity / character of these rural villages and municipalities, which is largely, but certainly not entirely, based on the historical development, building types, landscape characteristics, ... For built heritage, there is a need to encourage new interpretations when this loses its original function' (BE).

In Hungary, 'the transformation of the former mining and industrial area into an attractive urbanised landscape in recreational areas' (HU) was sought and this message was repeated elsewhere. Equally, 'empty farms, charming buildings and churches can be used for convenience stores, meeting places, etc.' (BE) and there is a case for reconversion / restoration of part of the rural built heritage in collective places' (BE).

► APPROPRIATE HOUSING

The existing stock of housing was frequently insufficient and unsuited to contemporary demands. There were also issues about whether housing was rental or owned, and about availability. Existing local residents expressed concerns about finding affordable housing in areas attractive to tourists or new residents, whilst there were also worries about the pressure new building could put on land use, services and existing communities.

Gaps

In Sweden, it was observed that 'there is an increasing interest in the rural lifestyle but few houses available for those looking to move to our area and it is difficult to acquire building permits in attractive locations' (SE) and in Spain: 'housing/infrastructure development (is needed) in villages and support of in migration to rural areas' (ES). In Estonia, 'there are people who would like to move to the countryside, but there are no residences, there is no rental market! Not everyone is ready to buy or build a house' (EE). Affordable quality housing for rural residents (e.g. young people) was also identified as a problem. Lack of housing was identified as particularly problematic in island communities.

Opportunities

Many respondents referred to the importance of **increasing the priority given to creating adequate rural housing adapted to evolving population needs**.

There is a perceived opportunity for 'developing different types of housing; adapted to the needs of different groups, e.g. apartments for youth and the elderly wanting to stay in their area. Local communities should cooperate with the municipality, investors and construction companies and map 'abandoned' and shabby houses to get them on the market' (SE). Similarly, the 'restructuring of empty buildings into residential buildings' (LV) was desired. To achieve these objectives, new models of housing development were needed such as 'joint building ventures/cooperative building' (SE). It is important that there is 'affordable housing both for rent and purchase' (ES). In Germany, groups that highlighted housing shortages pointed out multiple advantages of converting existing buildings rather than new build (land saving, climate and resource benefits, job creation, preserving heritage).

► ADEQUATE WATER SUPPLY AND TREATMENT AS WELL AS FLOOD AND DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

Wide-ranging issues surround water supply, water treatment and responses to floods and droughts. There was recognition that EU policies had helped: 'European programmes and funding have been used to a satisfactory degree in support of cultural activities, infrastructure projects, water supply works, utilisation of building stock, etc.' (EL), but much remained to be improved.

Gaps

'Significant investments are required in water and waste management' and there was a 'lack of irrigation, as well as lack of access to water and electricity (which were) bottlenecks for agricultural and livestock production development' (EL). In Nordic countries, 'infrastructural systems such as transportation and water and sewage systems (and) schools must be in place in order for a population increase to take place' (SE).

Opportunities

Investments in water management are seen as a priority in many areas, including areas subject to drought and floods.

Water management investments were needed for 'ensuring the supply of drinking water and effective waste-water treatment' (SK) and to 'support investments focused on irrigation and flood protection infrastructure' (EL). In the drier regions of Spain, there was a need to: 'build infrastructure to store water in winter, when it is plentiful, for use in summer, when there are shortages' (ES). In Italy, using "grey water" for irrigation was proposed. The value of traditional techniques such as domestic rainwater cisterns was highlighted (EL).

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

Depending on whether the region has an expanding or contracting population solutions will likely differ, but the importance of rural infrastructure and services to support the living space and the economy is widely noted. However, digitisation and on-line access to services and new transport models all change the parameters of the challenge to provide services.

- Decisions regarding a base level of infrastructure to support the functioning of the welfare state in rural Europe need to be considered. This applies to schools, public transport, water supply, waste-water treatment, health and social services, etc. Some respondents seek benchmarking against urban provision. Others point out the value of green infrastructure in rural living space as something not available to city dwellers. What is beyond doubt is that the infrastructure of key public services in many rural areas is not adequate to meet contemporary demands.
- Support for a modal shift from private cars to public transport and alternative mobility and from hydrocarbon to post-carbon transport systems is crucial. Digital services can help to facilitate the organisation of flexible community transport solutions. Rural hubs and mobile services can reduce the need for rural residents to travel to access services.
- Remodel settlement centres and target support on historic and traditional buildings that are no longer fit for purpose and help to transform them for alternative uses, including multi-functional service hubs.
- Enhance water infrastructure resilience to climate change in relation to drinking water supplies, sewerage, flood management and irrigation.
- Capacity building and support for community/volunteer services.

3.2. DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE



Introduction

A consistent message emerging from the workshops is that in today's world, access to affordable quality digital infrastructure is an essential service, and the lack of it is a significant disadvantage. Frequent references in the sections related to the other workshop topics illustrate that adequate digital access is a prerequisite to overcome many of the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities identified in other areas of rural life. It is both important for all kinds of monitoring activity and central to many citizen concerns and was the focus of contributions under this topic. So too is the scope for technology to remove the drudgery of repetitive tasks. Other technological aspects considered by workshop participants included the bioeconomy, circular economy, genetic advances and renewable energy.

However, many rural people are (and clearly feel) at a distance from technical innovation which is seen as having an urban bias. As was noted in one of the reports, 'The Polish countryside, although interested in modern solutions, has limited knowledge about the possibilities of using modern technologies, e.g. in small farms. Today it is the domain of large-scale farmers. Access to technology is difficult both in terms of finance and capacity (PL). This general comment almost certainly applies to small farms anywhere in Europe.

Whilst many groups highlighted current gaps and disparities, particularly compared with urban areas, the majority felt more positive about the future, and expected that by 2040 the provision and quality of digital infrastructure would be more uniform.

The Finnish vision for 2040 is a clear summary of aspirations: 'digital connections work well all over the country. Rural inhabitants participate actively in the development and usage of new technology (robotics, AI). The movement of people, goods and services in rural areas is flexible and sustainable due to digitalisation. There are a lot of digital services and solutions (e-doctor, multi-service centres, self-driving cars, delivery drones). The use of virtual and augmented reality in service provision has increased. Transportation has become easier (fast speed trains, teleportation and ride-share solutions). The ethical questions surrounding food production have gained foothold (e.g. gene technology, where and how food is produced). Digitalisation and technology have helped to reduce emissions from e.g. traffic and energy production. Digitalisation has improved citizen participation and active citizenship in the rural areas' (FI). That digital component is fundamental, as other respondents succinctly put it: 'a high-quality digital solution (is a) basic (requirement) for rural development' (EE).

It was stressed, for example by German contributors, that it is not only digital infrastructure, or even skills, which are crucial, but also the development of platforms and applications which enable businesses and communities to make use of new opportunities and incorporate them into daily life (e.g. for flexible community transport, collaborative marketing and direct sales, education and health).

Beyond the digital there is a wider technology frontier which was only given attention in some meetings and reports. For example, the Finnish observers pointed out that the next mega-challenge is science in the service of sustainability as 'the greatest potential development and scope for capitalising on opportunities can be found in the sustainable production of raw materials (e.g. development of new sustainable raw materials and products), sustainable food production (localised systems, agroecological symbioses, circular economy) and focusing on the role of rural enterprises (including farmers) in developing new technologies and innovative practical solutions for climate change mitigation' (FI).

There was also a desire from Ireland to extend innovation support: 'we should broaden the scope of the European Investment Partnerships – they are specific and geographically limited so far. They have a mix of research and knowledge transfer and could broaden their scope to look at energy, for example. They deliver a huge transfer of learning through a bottom-up, peer learning approach' (IE). CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing was specifically identified in Poland as a method opening up new horizons not only for medicine, but also for plant cultivation and food production. Renewable energy is frequently mentioned as an important arena of recent technological change. Deeper consideration of this topic is given in sections on climate change and employment opportunities.

The following key issues emerged from the workshops:

- A functional high-speed digital network is an essential infrastructure component of rural Europe,
- Many rural citizens are insufficiently digitally literate to take full advantage of the internet,
- Rural areas are not seen as innovation hot spots and more could be done to support innovation. Innovation partnerships have proved valuable in agriculture and forestry and should be developed with respect to other parts of the rural economy.

► ACCESS TO DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Gaps

Even in countries with a high reputation for digital connectivity there were concerns. 'High-quality digital solutions (are) not available in all places. The last mile connections to the network in rural areas is very expensive. Good internet should reach every household' (EE). Similarly, in Spain there are 'territorial inequalities in service provision (from fibre optics to satellite) which may be counterproductive for local retail' (ES). It was noted that 'half of the households in the Polish countryside do NOT have broadband Internet access' (PL). Italian respondents pointed to the need to 'overcome the infrastructural gap (the digital divide) and guarantee availability/accessibility to services for the population and businesses' (IT). German contributors stressed that rural populations should have equivalent access to those living/working in urban centres.

It is clear that 'some people want to work from home but cannot, due to poor broadband' (IE), and that 'the certainty of a fast connection is essential both for agriculture of the future (smart villages, Internet of things) and for running any other business, especially education and remote work' (PL). 'Broadband roll out is happening way too slow. Ireland is behind other countries and we need high speed broadband in every county for remote working, hubs, education, agriculture' (IE). It is not just broadband, because sometimes there were still 'telephone and Internet coverage problems' (LV).

From Slovakia, it was reported that there were 'possible risks linked to over-digitalisation: the presence of digital smoke; and the breaching of data protection principles (a weak legislation framework)' (SK). Polish respondents also noted the need for digital security.

Opportunities

Almost all respondents referred to the opportunities that high level broadband coverage would bring for increasing the **access and quality of many rural services, for encouraging homeworking and improving efficiency and market access for all branches of economic activity.**

Contributors stressed that access to quality digital infrastructure and services would open up a wealth of opportunities in all areas of rural life. From Slovakia it was stated that: 'activities needed to enlarge coverage by broadband internet and networks of new generation - use EU funds for this purpose' (SK). 'High-speed internet cable (is needed) for every household and business - (it) allows you to take services to a new level: telemedicine, security, communication with loved ones, education, teleworking, etc.' (EE). German groups referred to the crucial importance of adequate access, and the need to focus on the common good, whilst in Italy it was recognised as key to the development of other sectors.

Hungarian respondents reported a 'need for action for digitalisation in agriculture,' (HU) and 'great interest in digital solutions - in agriculture but also in everyday life' was shown in Poland (PL). Polish respondents also reported that there could be a 'diversification of cultivation methods in different parts of the field thanks to the use of new monitoring, analysis and application technologies (with) accuracy down to a few centimetres! (using) drones, satellite navigation, mapping sensors. The direction of development is autonomous tractors and agricultural machines, field robots' (PL).

The value of connectivity goes beyond agriculture: 'there are a lot of digital services and solutions (e-doctors, multi-service centres, self-driving cars, delivery drones)' (FI). Also, 'digitalisation will make the provision of some services easier (e.g. distance health monitoring for the elderly)' (FI). Slovak respondents reported a need for 'enhancement of the access to digital infrastructure (broadband) and use of innovative smart technologies in rural communities - Smart Villages, for example: waste management (chips for waste containers; land consolidation (GIS); electronic communication with the Agricultural Paying Agency regarding direct payments; education and training; green mobility; and shopping' (SK).

In Spain: 'the shift to digital technology is seen as a great opportunity for the future: remote working, co-working, also for planning and interventions in the territory to halt depopulation and drive economic activities' (ES). Greek respondents similarly reported that 'teleworking will allow people to settle in rural areas and work remotely' (EL). This type of opportunity is seen to become more widespread as quality digital infrastructure becomes the norm. Digital platforms to support rural enterprise were mentioned in Germany.

The wider importance of good digital infrastructure was reported from Sweden indicating a need to 'keep up with digitalisation to create opportunities for working in other locations and making higher education available for young people that do not want to leave the region.' Also, rural areas were a place to 'create rural hubs for testing autonomous vehicles' (SE). The potential for e-learning was highlighted in Italy.

Further, 'digital infrastructure can reduce bureaucracy and provide opportunities for online marketing, training, and education for the rural population (i.e., smart agriculture, innovation, telehealth, etc.)' (EL). There is scope to 'apply smart solutions in local government's everyday management, including introducing various applications for citizens, in public buildings, as well as by rural businesses and farms (ICT, GPS)' (SK).

► DIGITAL LITERACY AND INNOVATION

Widespread concerns were voiced about people's capacity to make effective use of digital infrastructure.

Gaps

'Rural populations have low levels of digital literacy,' (EL), and 'most elderly people are not ready for the changes in the technology' (ES). Slovak respondents noted that 'ICT is still not used properly in rural areas: insufficient and unequal broadband coverage in rural areas; 'white' spots still exist; (there is a) lack of digital literacy; and low access to technologies' (SK). There is also a need to 'improve digital skills' (LV). Italian and German respondents highlighted the need for investment in training and skills so that individuals and businesses can use the digital capacity provided. The need for enhanced digital literacy was made in many countries, to take up opportunities, and to avoid some sections of society being further disadvantaged.

Opportunities

In relation to the promotion of enhanced innovation opportunities, we have insufficient information to make robust recommendations, but there was a general concern that innovation was seen as something urban, even though the European Innovation Partnerships had undertaken good work. It was suggested that such partnerships could be developed to stimulate innovation in the non-land-based sectors of the rural economy.

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

There is insufficient information from the dataset to make recommendations beyond the digital dimension, so we restrict ourselves to identifying step changes in that field.

- Provide high-quality affordable digital infrastructure as a basic right, sufficient for business activity, e-service provision and social life.
- Ensure that it is accessible to all rural citizens – i.e. that training and support is available to develop digital skills and improve service provision. Enhance digital literacy of rural citizens (all age categories) via inclusive training and education programmes and information campaigns.
- Innovation partnerships should be extended into the wider rural domain and innovation activity promoted more vigorously. Networking and the development of platforms and hubs should be encouraged.

3.3. PROVISION OF BASIC GOODS (FOOD, FARMING AND ENERGY)



Introduction

For the workshops, this category covered the primary industries of food and farming, wood and wood processing and energy production, including electrical energy. Workshop participants considered the production, supply, availability, affordability and quality of these basic goods in their area. Many participants indicated that it was important not to presume the dominance of farming in rural Europe. As one Irish respondent put it: 'in my rural area, less than 1 in 10 households has any connection with farming, this is replicated across the country and needs to be kept in mind' (IE). As well as considering farming, the extent of the boreal forest in northern Europe also influences regional economic activity and forestry impacts strongly in many other regions. Further, even before the recent shift towards renewable energy, the production of hydropower in mountain areas was already an important source of regional income while coal and hydrocarbons impacted other areas.

The following key issues emerged from the workshops:

- The relocalisation of farm and food production and distribution, and retention of value in the local area, including supporting short supply chains (physical and virtual), direct sales and improving traceability,
- Farm viability and succession, especially in regions dominated by small scale farms,
- Reduction of the environmental impact of agriculture through the professionalisation of farming including improved adoption of new technology to improve sustainability and enhanced connection to the bioeconomy. The need for improved advisory services. Enhanced understanding and implementation of regenerative and organic agriculture,
- Building models for transformational change around basic industries including farming, coal mining and coal production communities with more broad-based sustainability transitions.

There were also many references to greater involvement of rural areas in renewable energy production including appropriate policies for management and retention of value and a recognition of the role of land use in carbon capture in farming and forestry, but these are dealt with in chapter 9 on climate change.

► THE RELOCALISATION OF FARM, FOOD AND WOOD PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

The largest category of comments about basic goods was associated with a desire to strengthen local and regional food production, processing, and marketing systems in the context of a globalised food system which ignores local potential. The varied arguments for such a shift included adding value to local production, retaining more value in the local area, reconnecting with local consumers, contributing to food system sustainability, and contributing to climate mitigation and local landscape and biodiversity.

Gaps

According to Finnish respondents 'the biggest gap is seen in food production, where the desired future predicts more value-based consumption and decentralised production of food and energy' (FI). Although relocalisation was the dominant desire, there were some areas where there was an aspiration for enhancing food supply chain efficiency to improve the international competitiveness of production systems (ES, HU, EL). However, in Germany, whilst there were good examples of successful local initiatives, including farms working together to establish farm shops providing a wide range of goods, red tape and bureaucracy were cited as obstacles to the development of local supply chains, particularly in relation to food processing.

Opportunities

From all parts of Europe, there was a consistent message that **strengthening local food systems and wood product systems** would be beneficial for both land managers, consumers and the environment.

The aspiration for 2040 from an Austrian group was that 'we prefer a sustainable lifestyle and our ecological footprint has become smaller because we rely on circular economy and regional products' (AT). The regionalisation of basic products and other products and services was seen as desirable, including 'strengthening self-sufficiency and safety in food production in combination with high quality of life in rural areas, supporting local producers and their networking, supporting selling local products into local restaurants, schools, public administration' (SK). 'Production of local, high quality food and drink, with prestige and recognition' (ES) was seen as key. Supporting local shopping, avoiding the need to travel to supermarkets was seen in Germany as bringing multiple benefits, not only to food producers and consumers (increasing income for producers and increasing value for money for consumers, and building relationships), but including revitalising villages and enhancing community spirit and cultural activities.

Often there was an aspiration to de-intensify food systems (DE, IT) for example through a 'transition from intensive to organic and small-scale farming' (EE, EL, FI), and there was also a demand for stronger networking regarding the local food sector (DK, EL, FI). Greater levels of regional public procurement were also seen as desirable. More widely, respondents sought better infrastructure and more support for relocalisation: 'it is worth creating local hubs that farmers will use to transfer their food directly to consumers' (PL). In Luxembourg, there were seen to be opportunities arising from 'regional fruit and vegetable growing with appropriate marketing' (LU). Elsewhere, the desired regionalisation extended to wine, game products and honey (HU).

Regional and local products sometimes needed additional promotion: 'there is already a great variety of high-quality produce (wine, cheese, raisins, Chios mastic) that are certified and labelled, as well as others that could be promoted, such as herbs, medicinal plants, vegetables grown in mountainous areas, etc.' (EL). In Spain, there was widespread support for European designation schemes. Reinforcing regional identity was perceived as beneficial combined with marketing in urban centres (DE).

The rationale for relocalisation has manifested itself particularly during the COVID pandemic: 'the Covid-19 crisis showed opportunities for local food systems and environmentally adapted farming systems' (BE).

► FARM VIABILITY AND SUCCESSION

There were many concerns about the viability of farms and the absence of succession plans especially in areas dominated by small-scale farms.

Gaps

Many farms in remoter areas do not have a successor and on death or retirement the land is likely to cease to be farmed. 'The number of the smallest farms (up to 20 hectares) is systematically falling' (PL). Small farms and low farm incomes constrain development in Italy, where support for diversification and innovation is considered necessary to attract people into farming.

Land abandonment is a real concern in some areas. As farmers age in these zones at risk of abandonment, farming practices tend to de-intensify to a point where it is more challenging for a successor to take on the business. Young people choose to leave the farm sector. This problem is most acute where there are many small farms. Intergenerational succession is recognised as a challenge in farming in rural areas, but also arises in other sectors of the economy in remote areas. The problem was not only seen as arising from social choices but also because there was an inherent pro-urban bias in education. In Slovakia 'education of young people closer to practice and rural life, community activities and involvement of non-teachers in education' (SK) was seen as desirable.

Opportunities

A number of respondents expressed the desire to help young people by improving access to land and with a revitalised offer of services for new entrants and migrants.

'Continuous support for the involvement of young people, with non-refundable grants, with the help of low-interest loan schemes' was sought (HU). And in the depopulating parts of Spain, it was suggested that there should be mechanisms to 'transfer abandoned land for use by young people' (ES). However, there was also an asserted parallel need for a wider revitalisation of services to make rural areas more attractive for new entrants and in-migrants.

► REDUCTION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF FARMING

Many contributors highlighted the need for farming systems to become more sustainable, to reduce pollution and impact on biodiversity. A more professional and skilled workforce would have more capacity to innovate and adapt. There were concerns that existing agricultural education was overly focused on input-intensive agriculture. Restoration of traditional landscapes and habitats via appropriate farming systems was recognised as valuable for tourism.

Gaps

Many saw a need for better skills in regenerative and organic agriculture. But there were also suggestions regarding novel agricultural methods such as vertical farming (FI), precision farming (PL), and even CRISPR Cas9 gene editing techniques (PL) with the adoption of what was termed 'a bioeconomy approach' (LV). The need for more investment to promote the bioeconomy was highlighted in Italy. In Poland, it was argued that 'second and third generation biofuels made from solid raw materials and algae are favorable for sustainable agriculture and are already being produced on a small scale' (PL).

The forest sector was also seen as an arena for innovation (EE, FI). There has been intense innovation in renewable energy and there is further scope to finesse and develop new technologies. Many of the sought-after skills related to the desire to strengthen the local food sector: 'the agricultural model will change – (with a) move away from cheaper mass production to a focus on quality' (IE).

Opportunities

Several redirectional themes emerge with regard to the farm sector: First, a strong emphasis on improving environmental sustainability (DE, IT, DK, ES, IE, EL). The transition to regenerative agriculture, investing in niche and high-quality crops and breeds based on local biodiversity, more mixed farming to meet local needs and social farming of different kinds was widely supported.

Other respondents wanted to inject the fruits of modern technology into the land-based sector and see a stronger development of the bioeconomy (IT), with components like vertical farming (FI) and hydroponics and it was noted that 'the invention of a genome editing method called CRISPR/Cas9 opens up new horizons not only for medicine, but also for plant cultivation and food production' (PL). Precision farming was mentioned as an example of how technology can be combined with agro-ecology or organic farming to improve economic and environmental performance.

The opportunity lies with supporting the transfer to regenerative agriculture through, among others, a collection of good practices, systemic facilitation and changes in the educational process in agricultural schools (new experts with modern knowledge)' (PL). 'The rich biodiversity of most areas offers a significant advantage to invest in dynamic/niche and high-quality crops using local plant species and animal breeds (herbs, pharmaceutical plants, etc.)' (EL). 'Farms can be valorised in other ways rather than be driven to scale up towards a higher productivity model and looked at in terms of new services and developments e.g. social farming' (IE). All of these require a professional, flexible and innovative workforce. Swedish respondents also suggested 'offering courses on how to develop local products and start a business' (SE). Finally, incorporating modern biotechnological skills into farming was suggested.

► BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE OF BASIC INDUSTRIES

The need for transformational change across the basic industries of farming and energy was seen as requiring more integrated approaches, rather than individual action. It also entailed embracing sustainability concerns.

Gaps

There are rural regions which have coal production or coal-based power plants. Actual or planned closure of these is problematic because of their importance as major employers, yet their continued presence is a problem because of high emissions. A situation was sought where renewable and decentralised energy production and the circular economy are commonplace and profitable while coal-dependent areas were supported in transition.

Opportunities

The development of **integrated strategies for transformational change through instruments such as Smart Villages, Energy Communities, LEADER, local food policies, etc.**

Swedish respondents looked to a future when 'Sweden will rely less on imports and more on self-sufficiency in food and energy due to global uncertainty'. They also wanted "a support system for 'local, small scale and cooperative' renewable energy systems (SE), and Slovakian respondents reiterated the point.

The Italian workshops argued for 'strengthening integrated approaches, including through a specific financial tool, capable of interpreting, from a territorial perspective, the main support needs (innovative, sustainable and inclusive) that this transition requires through the promotion of local food policies, smart villages and energy communities, the creation of collective goods and services, the enhancement of ecosystem services and the development of local socio-cultural and tourist-recreational supply systems' (IT).

In Finland, it was suggested that 'the greatest potential lies in the development of sustainable and self-sufficient solutions for energy and food production through technology' (FI).

Current fossil fuel-dependent communities need significant injections of support to reinvent themselves as post carbon hubs. Two examples of such possibilities were cited in Hungary and Greece.

Respondents argued that there was a major opportunity for deepening renewable energy production. This is covered in chapter 9 on climate change.

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

- Two contrasting messages emerge from the workshops with one seeking a greater degree of relocalisation of production and the introduction of regenerative and or organic farming practices based on traditional varieties and breeds. The other saw a need to harness the fruits of technology including the use of gene editing to produce crops with resistance to disease or drought or crops suitable for the bioeconomy.
- Reducing red tape and enhancing processing opportunities for both local food and food to be exported from the region. This requires review of the regulatory framework to remove obstacles to local processing.
- Specific support to encourage young adults into land-based industries.
- Well-directed investments, and an appropriate policy/regulatory framework to induce the appropriate shifts in behavior and to reduce bureaucracy. There is a need for support for the implementation of environmentally friendly activities at the individual (small-scale, self-consumption) level (e.g. permaculture) and strengthening of other local, organic food creation initiatives at community level.
- A culture of lifelong learning in the land-based sectors which embraces sustainability and circular economy principles but is still technologically progressive. Effective and profitable agro-ecology/regenerative farming systems require highly skilled management.
- Territorial approaches which go beyond farming and forestry and provide a basis for supporting the transition to a rural economy based on sustainability and circular economy principles.
- A support system/regulatory framework for renewable energy which encourages community and regional scale action.

3.4. INCOME, WORK, AND JOBS IN THE WIDER ECONOMY



Introduction

One of the workshop topics explored the availability and range of employment opportunities for rural residents, and the associated income levels. The workshops illustrated that the wider economy of rural Europe is highly diverse in both its structure and dynamism. It is subject to structural geographies that frame the general opportunities that are more diverse in the metropolitan hinterlands and more limited in remoter rural areas. It is also subject to the general tendency towards services becoming a greater component of the overall regional economy.

Rural areas are now legitimate places for the 'relocation of economic activities and services for the local population(BE) even more so since the experience of Covid. Even in a country such as Poland, with the second highest rate of agricultural employment in Europe, 'in terms of professional activity and the sectoral structure of employment, the population in rural areas is gradually becoming similar to the population in cities' (PL).

Some respondents stressed the importance of ecosystem services in providing an opportunity for living space, tourism and new sources of income. Others recognised new demands such as the bioeconomy and bringing elements of what until recently have been urban-based activities to rural areas. Some areas identified local sources of employment that will decline or disappear over coming years (e.g. car manufacturing in DE, and mining), and highlighted the importance of supporting local SMEs. Aspirations and views of possibilities varied across different geographical settings, but the LEADER/Community Led Local Development approach of small-scale, locally grounded, natural resource dependent business, networking and adding value was widely supported.

A strong digital infrastructure and good digital skills were seen as a prerequisite not just for wider rural businesses but also for the food and farming sectors. Deeper consideration of digital issues was dealt with in the previous chapter⁴.

An increase in working from home was identified by a number of groups as a key trend, accelerated by the Covid epidemic, which can bring higher-paid work into rural areas, and can be a factor in retaining highly educated young people.

The following key issues emerged from the workshops:

- Enhancing regional value added, including through sustainable tourism,
- Revitalising local crafts,
- Building a foundation of circular economy principles, renewable energy and ecosystem services,
- Recognising and supporting different enterprise models.

► ENHANCING REGIONAL VALUE ADDED

In all sectors, not just the basic industries, there was a recognition of the need to add value to regional produce and retain that value in the local area. Tourism was still seen by many as the main alternative sector to the primary sector to drive rural economic development (and represents a form of adding value to culture and scenery). However, although tourism is widely cited as an important opportunity, there is also a need for 'redirecting thinking about rural areas away from tourism only – because then the residents' needs and their everyday living conditions are not taken care of', and ensuring that tourism activities are sustainable and do not exert undue pressure on the environment (DE, IT). It was a fact that 'tourism has become the dominant economic activity on the islands' (EL). Indeed, it was also argued that tourism is often an advantageous way of adding value to a region's distinctive produce. **Gaps**

With the exception of food, tourism and the developing bioeconomy, the workshops indicated there was a long way to go to add more value to the produce of rural areas. Unfortunately, the scope for adding value was sometimes constrained by an 'unfavourable legal framework for (the) creation of added value through processing and direct marketing, which affects the most rural areas' (SK and DE).

Opportunities

Respondents pointed to ongoing opportunities for adding value through **processing and marketing centres, shorter supply chains, as well as gastronomic, social and cultural tourism** linked to distinctive cultural heritage.

Respondents from Greece and Germany recognised the benefits of nurturing the processing sector. There was a need to 'stimulate the processing sector through operational programmes to develop new jobs in connection with the local creation of added value' (EL). In Slovakia, a suggested solution was the 'creation of production and marketing centres equipped with ICT to support production, processing and marketing of local products' and 'supporting the establishment and strengthening of short supply chains and generation of added value and foster the concept of regional/traditional products and related branding and marketing, including direct marketing on the farm or on local markets' (SK). There were demands for improved supply chain opportunities in Hungary, Germany and Italy.

Often regional value added was perceived as being delivered through tourism. A need for better promotion of tourism in rural Hungary was asserted by linking it to distinctive regional resources. There was also scope for revitalising wellness tourism. In Estonia, it was recognised that 'social, cultural, and rural tourism creates new jobs' (EE). Slow tourism, gastronomic tourism and ecotourism also offer opportunities (IT, IE). 'Tourism could be used as a tool to promote the areas' quality certified local products (gastronomy)' (EL). In Sweden, it was argued there was a case for 'mak(ing) use of the potential that our area has in terms of an interesting history, beautiful nature and innovative people (and) develop and support tourism initiatives and small-scale businesses' (SE).

► REVITALISING LOCAL CRAFTS

There is evidence of a revival of interest in craftsmanship and using one's hands for work but at the same time digitisation and robotisation to remove the drudgery of manual tasks such as fruit picking. These are not contradictory trends and were identified in for example Belgium, Spain, and Estonia. Commodity production may be subject to robotisation whilst niche products still require craft skills.

Gaps

In globalised economies it is often difficult to sell craft products at prices which recognise the full value of the labour involved.

Opportunities

There were perceived opportunities to reinvigorate the idea of craft work, because of the growth of demand for distinctive products. Branding to link craft products to local cultural identity was suggested.

'Growing interest in craftsmanship (exists), also among younger generations' (BE) and this was also evident in Spain where there are 'opportunities linked to quality handcrafted, ecological products.' There was also scope for the 'promotion of creative industries – art villages, festivals, hiking services, handicrafts' (ES).

► BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

Some respondents addressed the future in terms of circular economy ideas (e.g. DE). But respondents were also clear that there was a long road to travel to get there and support is needed for innovative businesses (advice, seed funding, premises, marketing).

Gaps

The Polish response cited a need to move to ‘the opposite of the linear economy’ and embed the rural economy in circular economy principles. These ideas were also evident in Austrian, German and Italian responses.

Opportunities

Respondents pointed to the opportunities for **strengthening regional identity and promoting rural bio-based goods and services based on the principles of sustainability and circularity.**

Austrian workshop participants depicted the following vision: ‘a self-confident regional identity and the valorisation of regional potential are the cornerstones for the success of our economy and agriculture. The products from the region are of high quality and produced in a resource-saving way inspired by the circular economy. For farmers, climate-friendly production methods, sustainable innovations and the valorisation of regional products create new niches and opportunities for the future. Through the targeted promotion of a functioning circular economy in agriculture and trade, the ecological footprint of the region has become smaller’ (AT). This was echoed in many other contributions. In creating additional housing space for new residents from the city, for tourism, and to improve service for residents there was a need to improve infrastructure and promote green building techniques in new and old buildings (IT, DE). This will not only create jobs, but also contribute to mitigating climate change (DE).

► RECOGNISING DIFFERENT MODELS OF ENTERPRISE

There was widespread recognition of a need for more entrepreneurship (EE, EL, LV, DE, IT). This was not just for individual entrepreneurial innovation but was often framed in terms of collaborative enterprise, partnership and cooperative ventures, i.e. social enterprise (AU, BE, FI, IT, ES). More generally, greater attention to training and professionalising the workforce was sought (ES, DE, IT).

Gaps

Respondents noted a ‘lack of knowledge and resources for the development of small and medium business’ (LV). Respondents in Poland noted that ‘it is important to decouple income growth from subsidies as such. Support local entrepreneurship, strengthen Local Action Groups which help in implementing the ideas of residents’ (PL). Appropriate support will be needed to take advantage of increased scope for remote working (e.g. childcare facilities).

Opportunities

In addition to **support for entrepreneurship and innovation** through incubators, training and other services, respondents pointed to the opportunity for rethinking the traditional model of work in rural areas and the importance of **collaborative, social and community entrepreneurship.**

More entrepreneurial approaches could be supported by 'creating incubation centres where entrepreneurs can support and inspire each other,' and increase 'women's and young people's entrepreneurial activity' (EE). Italian and Latvian respondents spoke of a need for 'support for entrepreneurs for innovation (and) development' (LV). Swedish respondents stressed the context specificity of the innovation support: 'we need a greater understanding of the prerequisites for innovation and entrepreneurship in rural contexts amongst policy makers as well as a strong infrastructure for innovation which does not assume that innovation is an urban phenomenon' (SE).

There was a belief that the collaborative economy could kick in with 'the creation of collective goods and services and inclusive spaces' (IT), which could be helped by 'prioritis(ing) subsidies for collective entrepreneurship, which is much more effective in rural areas' (ES). In Finland, different complementary models of service provision were envisaged: 'in addition to enterprises providing services, there is also widespread community entrepreneurship and service provision by the third sector' (FI).

In Belgium, the case was made for a new more reflexive and ethical model of work. There was the need for the 'reorganisation/ rethinking of (the) work model (more flexibility, promot(ing) labour mobility, empowerment of autonomy and possibility of choosing but taking care of the risk of Uberisation (i.e. evolution of employees into false self-employed workers), support for a reflection on personal needs/ life path' and the adaptation of working time (BE).

A 'look back to look forward' model merited attention: 'some of the rural areas that are less developed, consider this as an opportunity to design a new, sustainable, and viable development model' (EL).

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

- Good digital infrastructure was seen as a prerequisite for a diversified modern economy in rural areas.
- More creative approaches to promoting entrepreneurship were needed. Promoting teleworking centres, rooms and other teleworking and learning, creating incubator centres where entrepreneurs can support and inspire each other, minimising red tape, etc were proposed solutions to diversifying employment. Encouraging networking and collaboration amongst rural businesses.
- Ensuring the conditions (regulatory, policy, infrastructure) that facilitate the retention of more added value in rural areas.
- Support new models of collective and community entrepreneurship.
- There is not only a need to support commercial private sector entrepreneurship but also social enterprises and be open to nurturing new models of work, including support to facilitate remote working, such as local childcare.
- Support sustainable tourism which is better linked to the specific characteristics of rural economies and ensuring it is done on a sustainable scale. This can offer a particularly useful way of adding value to speciality foods and crafts and reinvigorating local culture.

3.5. SOCIAL INCLUSION AND VITALITY

Introduction

The voices from the workshops underlie the varied extent to which rural communities are inclusive and vibrant across rural Europe. The vitality of rural life is not merely a function of how well an area is performing economically but is also shaped by the vibrancy of its cultural activities, its identity, its cohesiveness and its inclusiveness. Even in vibrant rural communities, there may be conflicting interests, power struggles and alternative visions of the future.

Undeniably, there are places where, with rapid outmigration and ebbing confidence, the life blood is draining out of smaller communities and communities with high dependence on declining sectors. There are also places where the pace of growth is so fast that rural communities lack a sense of common purpose and the physical community is divided into different interests.

The extent and strength of local networks and collaborative intent also differs considerably between countries. For example, collaboration across different interest groups and strong social capital stand out in Belgian and Finnish responses but in Latvia and Spain several responses regretted the lack of collaboration and noted that: ‘you have to do things in life yourself’ and there was a ‘lack of mutual cooperation’ (LV).

Behind the well-choreographed urban-rural distinctions, there are hints of a search for different social relations in rural areas, something that addresses both the downsides of globalisation and the precariousness of so much work in the modern economy. As mentioned in Belgium, the case was made for a new more reflexive and ethical model of work. Linked to visions of more voluntary work (DE), greater mutual aid and a collaborative economy, these attitudes expose a new (or revived) rural social model in which the social and the economic are less separate and more place based.

Equally, some argued that ‘the importance of rural communities could be diminished as there is a rise in digital and value and activity-based communities. Digitalisation enables maintaining social interactions, but there will be greater division into social bubbles interacting amongst themselves. The social groups will become more diversified based on values and common activities. The use of social media will become more diversified’ (FI).

In addition to these overarching observations, several core issues emerged from the responses, in particular:

- The changing demographics of rural areas,
- Identity and belonging,
- Inclusion and diversity,
- Young people,
- Collaboration and third sector actions.

► RESPONDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Gaps

‘Addressing demographic challenges including depopulation, generational renewal and gender inequality’ was one of the top priorities of Irish youth. From many parts of remoter rural Europe and especially in Mediterranean, Eastern European and some mountain areas, there was huge concern about demographic decline. ‘Polish villages are becoming less populated. Some of them are depopulating completely’ (PL). From many parts of rural Spain there were similar voices regarding ‘the depopulation of towns and villages and the ageing population’ and that ‘population decline is the most important characteristic. There is a desire to maintain and increase the population, but it is most likely to continue to decrease’ (ES).

In Spain there was deep concern about ‘the rural exodus to the cities. This particularly affects young people, who continue their education at university and then do not return to their place of origin due to lack of job opportunities, and young adults who go to cities looking for work’ (ES). The demographic realities were well understood: ‘in the case of some rural areas (the so-called peripheral), the pace of ageing of the population⁽⁸⁾ as well as the population loss will be higher than in the case of villages located in the immediate neighbourhood of large cities’ (PL). In addition, ‘significant disproportions in the number of women and men can be observed for people aged 25+, which is related to the selectivity of migration from the countryside by sex and age, which is more frequent for women over 25 than for men’ (PL). The need for better social services to support an ageing rural population was raised in German contributions.

Population increases in other areas also posed challenges: ‘an assumed population increase puts pressure on civil society and volunteers to manage more people who want to take part in activities, and a need for physical spaces to meet between generations and interests’ (SE), as well as on existing services and housing.

Opportunities

Respondents pointed to the growing interest in moving to rural areas from **‘neorurals’, young and middle-aged people, the diaspora, climate and economic migrants and seniors** looking for a quieter, greener way of life, all of which have been intensified by the **COVID pandemic**.

It is not all bleak: ‘the trend is worrying, but due to the current situation (COVID-19) and new trends (‘neoruralism’) it is possible to attract more people, at least in the rural areas closest to urban areas’ (ES). Other regions reported: ‘there are increasing numbers of young and middle-aged people interested in returning’ (ES).

Deep concern was expressed about losses from small islands and the ageing population (e.g. DK), but it was noted that ‘most islands have large diasporas both on mainland Greece and abroad. These could be a valuable resource to support their development’ (EL). Islands also reported returnees taking advantage of working from home.

Finnish respondents taking a long view noted that ‘there will be global migration waves due to climate change’ (FI), anticipating that at least some of those waves will break on rural areas. And in Spain, there was an idea to ‘promote *‘senior village’* projects that attract people with common interests to age actively’ (ES).

‘New inhabitants can also represent an opportunity for certain rural areas because they can set up new businesses, increase the area’s social life, etc.’ (ES). ‘The arrival of immigrants is helping rejuvenate the demographic structure of the population’ (ES). ‘New residents bring knowledge, experience and sophistication that can be extremely useful’ (PL).

(8) According to a recent JRC report ‘Ageing is not necessarily linked to the traditional units of analysis such as administrative units and/or rurality, but is constructed from multiple processes such as depopulation, remoteness, accessibility to services, and lack of economic opportunities.’ Goujon et al. 2021.

► IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Finnish respondents captured the idea that the identity of 'the rural community is in transit from permanent residents to a reformed rural identity, which also includes new arrivals and non-permanent residents' (FI). Strong connections between the diaspora and the place of origin were also highlighted as helping maintain local culture and identity.

Gaps

Concerns related to local identity included 'a loss of roots means that links to the territory and the community are not maintained and, in the end, there is no attachment to the place or interest in its problems' and 'new residents can also contribute to this loss of the traditional culture of rural areas, although it is noted that this may also be an opportunity' (ES). Belgian respondents note the 'disappearance of dialects which could contribute to create social links and identity' (BE).

Social isolation may also be increasing, in part because of the COVID pandemic and 'lack of connections between villagers (increases) risk of social and mental isolation' (BE). Paradoxically, digital connectivity for those with such skills can compound the social isolation of those without.

According to Spanish respondents there was 'apathy among young people who do not feel heard or represented by specialists' (ES) and a general sense of underrepresentation of young people in rural decision making.

Opportunities

Respondents referred to two opportunities **a) building on existing distinct identities and slowing down rural exodus through training and entrepreneurship and b) forging a new shared sense of community with existing residents, new arrivals and non-permanent residents.**

There is still a distinct rural identity: 'associative, folklore networks (are) still very much alive in many Walloon rural areas' (BE). In Slovakia, there was a call for the 'development of traditions, community life, local identity and values' (SK).

The greatest potential is in rediscovering a new sense of community in rural areas with the new resources that the newcomers, non-permanent residents and youth bring' (FI) but 'a process is needed for their proper adaptation, taking advantage of these benefits while avoiding the loss of local culture' (ES, IE). There is a perceived need to 'encourage the integration of immigrants in local society to avoid social tension' (ES).

Another strategy is to 'slow down the rural exodus by encouraging rootedness, job and training opportunities, and fostering entrepreneurship' (ES) and to 'support the maintenance and development of local identity and culture through school curricula/ education of children and youth, events, civil associations and initiatives (e.g. collection of traditional songs, dances, performances, recipes, old photos, habits, celebrations connected to Easter, Christmas, advent, etc.)' (SK, FI).

According to Finnish participants, the 'greatest potential is seen in preventing out-migration of youth through e-learning opportunities in secondary and tertiary education, as well as digital hubs in the rural areas with suitable equipment and learning communities' (FI). Increased opportunities to work remotely enable highly qualified young people to continue to live in their home area rather than relocating to cities (DE).

► INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

There are very mixed messages from rural Europe regarding its responses to diversity and inclusion. ‘Social inclusion and infrastructure are connected. We are losing shops and pubs and there is less going on. You can’t be socially included if there is nowhere local for that to happen and you can’t travel to larger towns with no rural transport’ (IE). ‘Marginal rural areas (are) places with an excluded population with lower-level education, health and social services’ (SK).

Gaps

It was pointed out that ‘xenophobia may increase as well as challenges to integrate migrants and sense of disempowerment in general’ (SE). ‘An assumed increase of part-year residents may be beneficial in many ways, but it is both a challenge and an opportunity to include them in the social community, engage them and make use of their skills and networks’ (SE).

The refugee crisis has severely affected economic and social life on the Eastern Aegean islands in Greece and in Spain. Also, ‘new settlers (can) find it hard to adapt. As well as refugees, there are concerns about migrant workers’ as ‘in most areas there are large numbers in the primary sector who live in poor conditions and suffer social exclusion’ (EL). Ethnic marginalisation exists with ‘marginal populations – Roma and other socially excluded groups on the edge of rural society’ (SK).

In more affluent peri-urban areas there has been a ‘privatisation of greenery’ by people buying into rural areas’ (BE). It was suggested that ‘increased attractiveness of rural areas during and after the COVID crisis (might be a) potential source of inequalities’ (BE).

There may be certain groups whose needs are not always well addressed. For example, there may be ‘increased difficulty in accessing resources to attend to people with special needs allowing for their full inclusion in the territory’ (ES).

Opportunities

There was a general desire to promote ‘open attitudes to newcomers in rural areas’ (FI) and ‘policies which contribute to equal opportunities, improve quality of life, and encourage women to stay in the rural environment’ (ES). This was coupled with a belief that ‘rural communities must embrace the ever-growing diversity..... and adapt towards such change’ (IE). Swedish respondents noted that ‘we must actively work to make people feel that they are included in ‘the societal contract’ and develop citizen dialogue to understand what people’s needs are’ (SE).

There was much interest in interventions to enhance inclusiveness: ‘integration programmes for incoming and local residents are needed to try to build on this diversity. People from cities have enormous potential to positively change the countryside – it must certainly be used’ (PL). Part of this might involve ‘building trust and community with immigrants through technology’ (FI). Island communities recognised that new residents may need support to adapt to a more self-sufficient lifestyle without access to the services they were used to.

There was a need for ‘integration of refugees and migrants’ (BE). ‘Migrant and minority (Roma) populations, if fully included in local societies, could contribute to the revitalisation of rural areas’ (EL), and there should be ‘involvement of more Roma population in the communities – access to education, training work, and provide/disseminate best practice examples’ (SK).

There was a need to ‘develop community social services for people in unfavourable life situations including the elderly, sick, in poverty, etc. (social housing, houses for seniors, daily care for seniors etc.)’ (SK). Belgian respondents stated that ‘a programme for weaker groups (e.g. low income families with children) and people lacking the means to participate in social life is needed to fight inequality’ (BE). The importance of rural hubs as places where the community can meet, providing opportunities for social integration was highlighted (IT).

► CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

There was a broad discussion about a model for rural development that is more partnership based and involves greater representation of civil society. This debate runs to consideration of hybrid forms of intervention where public and civil society actors work together to achieve desired outcomes. Community-Led Local Development is widely referenced through the LEADER model and is widely valued. German groups put a lot of emphasis on the value to rural communities of volunteer organised activities and services, especially where population is declining, and the need to recognise and support volunteers.

Gaps

On the one hand, a lack of cooperation among rural actors, lack of civil associations (e.g. gardeners, vegetable producers, beekeepers, etc.) was identified as a concern in some places in Slovakia and Denmark. A 'lack of cooperation' was reported in Latvia and Swedish respondents noted that 'it is hard to motivate people to take on leading roles in local civil society' (SE). And in Poland and Germany, there were 'difficulties with finding local leaders and providing them with adequate support' (PL).

On the other hand, it was argued that 'rural Ireland is too reliant on the community and voluntary sector. There needs to be provisions by government (not just financial - a support hub) to support the sector, otherwise it will burn out. The amount of red tape involved will also make potential members less inclined to participate/get involved' (IE). Continuing this theme: 'finding and applying for money is hard and time-consuming for volunteers engaged in local community development' (IE). Polish respondents called ironically for a 'burned out leaders' club'. In Sweden, 'we need a "competence platform" to support civil society volunteers and allow them to spend time on their passion and what they do best. We need to cooperate and exchange our experiences and ideas, both with institutions but also with other community civil society organisations' (SE). This call for better recognition and support for civil society groups and volunteer organisations was echoed in Germany and Italy, covering capacity building, administrative and financial support, and provision of physical spaces.

There was a perceived need for 'education on cooperation and collaboration' (LV) (IT) and concern that the value of the 'volunteer force is underestimated - when they drop out, a lot of things just stop' (BE)(DE).

Opportunities

Respondents point to the opportunity for creating a **new rurality in rural areas, by recreating villages as creative community spaces, local hubs, involving nurseries, schools and innovative services for the elderly etc, as well as strengthening partnerships and training for collective action.** The benefits of involving the whole community in participative planning were raised frequently.

There is a need for 'an attempt to create a new reality in rural areas where the local population and the incoming one create together an extremely creative, committed and well-integrated environment. (We should be) creating such conditions for the coexistence of 'old' residents with 'new' ones, which is beneficial for both parties, while maintaining the character and customs of the Polish countryside' (PL). And from Belgium there was a perceived need for a 'redefinition of the term of village on a collective basis; 'the village should be a place people want to create and design together and be able to make a story together' (BE). An innovative example from Germany was a gardening project where refugees used their knowledge to work with existing residents to develop horticulture with low water requirements.

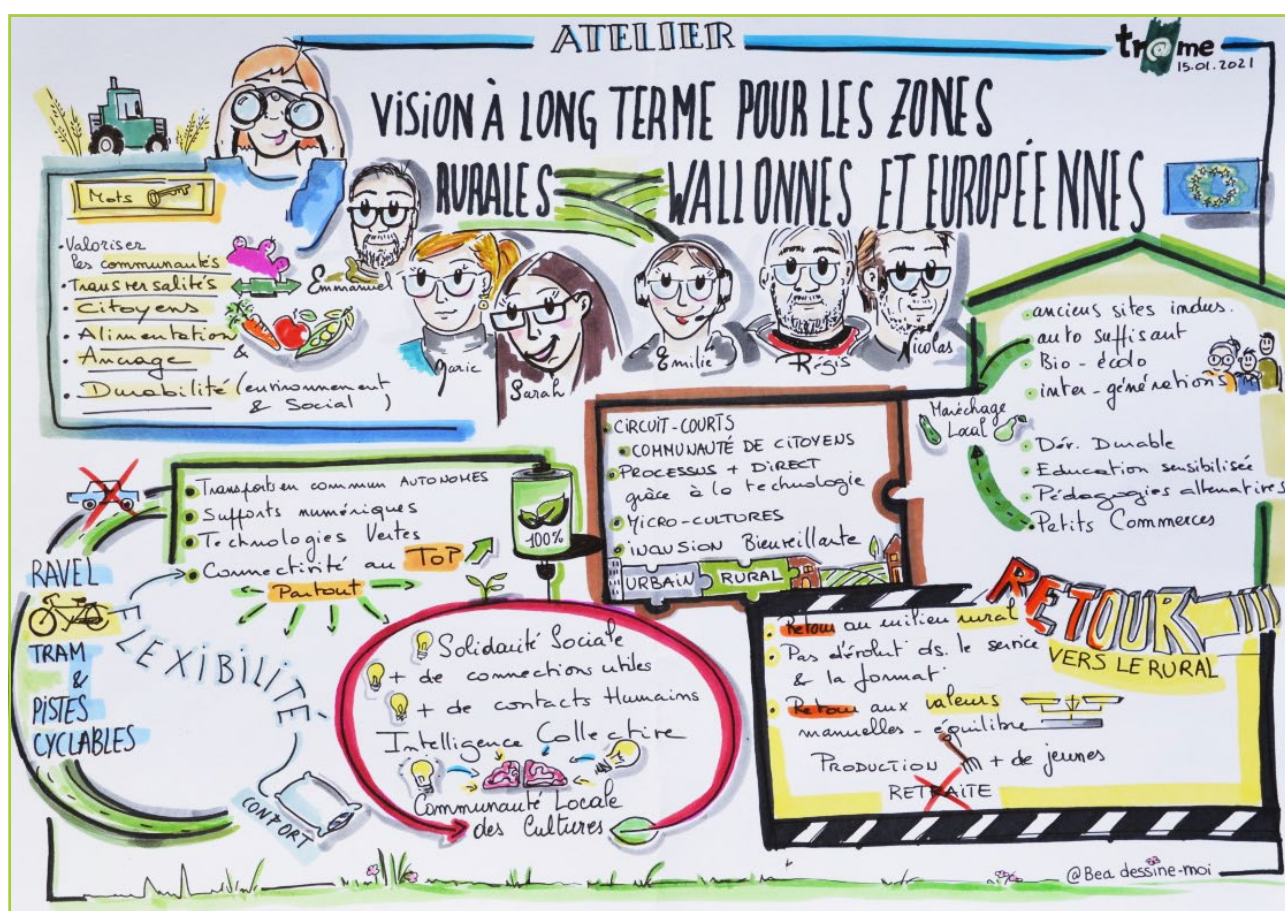
There were demands for 'improv(ing) associations and collective actions' (ES) and the 'involvement of residents in developing ideas and experimentation in rural areas' (BE) and many other countries. This should include the 'establishment of local hubs, meeting places, links, exchanges; recreate places for hybrid activities based on collaboration between nurseries, schools, rest homes (giving a role to the elderly), orphanages, etc; promoting social ties, memory work (walks, storytelling) and intergenerational links' (BE). A similar call was made from Slovakia for 'activities to encourage the development of civic activities and establishment of civil associations according to the various citizens' interest (culture, hobbies, traditions, sport etc.) and networking and cooperation among them' (SK).

Italian respondents called for a 'strengthening of local partnerships which, as third parties between public and private stakeholders who have been delegated with strategic-operational and management planning functions, favour the coordination and management of integrated local development tools and the active participation of the stakeholders and of local communities' (IT). Also 'enhancing the participation of citizens in the community life, planning the future of rural communities and in daily decisions' (SK) was seen as desirable.

Spanish respondents believed that 'it is important to have an educated rural society which is capable of critical analysis. There is also a need for supporting innovation in schools and educational models which promote collaborative and intercultural processes within the territory' (ES).

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

- Establish a policy of incentives, including tax relief, to encourage young people and professionals to settle in the countryside.
- Develop an activation programme for rural youth who will eventually be professionally active in a rural area instead of migrating from the countryside.
- Support social inclusion actions for Roma and migrants via the Rural Development Programmes (training and skills acquisitions for agriculture).
- Capacity building/support for community organisation.
- Use digital tools to create a sense of community and encourage participation in local development efforts especially for those not permanently based in the community and create support systems for those who consider moving to the area (finding a job, house, social networks, etc).
- Supporting volunteers and civil society organisations. For example, a 'bank of volunteers' – through an app or other digital platform where people interested in voluntary work can sign up and be found, establishment of rural/social hubs, capacity building and support.
- Enhance networking and cooperation among various actors (public bodies, farmers, entrepreneurs, civil associations, etc.) in rural areas, building partnerships among them and ensuring the broad participation of citizens in decision making, e.g. through the proper implementation of LEADER principles.
- Promote a change in values which revalorises rural life.



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Visual summary of the long-term vision workshop organised by the Walloon Rural Network (Belgium) on 15/01/2021

3.6. ENVIRONMENT



Introduction

The rural environment was an area of major concern and interest to respondents. There has been much attention given to the biodiversity and water quality crisis in Europe and to wider environmental damage and the need for remediation underpins the measures proposed in the European Green Deal. Rural areas and rural land use practices are implicated in creating some of the problems. Equally, some rural land use systems are intimately associated with the provision of highly valued agro-ecosystems, although they tend to use land less intensively. Further, the cultural landscapes of rural Europe are an immensely important and highly valued resource.

Five main themes were identified by workshop participants as gaps which need to be addressed with respect to the environment. To reach their desired vision in 2040 they pointed to the need to overcome:

- Environmental damage resulting from human sources, including farming, forestry and industrial systems impacting biodiversity and water quality and the amplification effects of climate change; a corresponding lack of protection and preservation of existing natural habitat and biodiversity,
- The deterioration in condition and loss of cultural landscapes and historic buildings,
- The lack of awareness and a culture of caring for the environment among rural people, including land managers and inadequate mechanisms for paying rural communities and land managers for the range of ecosystem services provided,
- Excessive waste and an absence of effective waste management,
- The lack of a coherent vision or mechanisms to guide change such as integrated territorial plans that could guide both the productive and environmental functions of rural land.

► OVERCOMING ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE RESULTING FROM HUMAN SOURCES

The most important environmental priority for many respondents is the need for agriculture to become more sustainable. A range of pathways were proposed to achieve this, including organic farming, agro-ecology, extensification and diversification. Improved sustainability of forestry management was also raised. Lack of knowledge, skills and labour, as well as inappropriate market and policy incentives were identified as impediments to this shift.

Gaps

Many respondents noted the threats to biodiversity and water quality arising from regions with relatively intensive agricultural and forestry systems. 'The gap between the desired and probable future is most visible in biodiversity' (FI). Industrial agriculture and forestry on land most suited for more intensive production systems were seen as particular threats to environmental quality. This was described as 'abusing and plundering of natural resources, e.g. wild cut of forest for wood export or construction purposes, destroyed bio-corridors and landscape also due to the non-sustainable agriculture, destroying soils by erosion and leakage of residues into underground waters' (SK).

Fossil fuel extraction and use remains problematic as a source of great wealth as well as a cause of pollution, including in one of Poland's richest communities: 'there is a lignite opencast mine and the Bełchatów power plant, which entails significant environmental costs' (PL).

The causes of biodiversity losses differ between regions. Southern European mountains were identified as areas with particularly severe biodiversity losses because of climate change. In more intensively farmed and forested areas, productive rural land use that does not leave space for nature is implicated in large reductions in biodiversity. There was a perceived need to close the gap and recognise that 'agriculture and nature are no longer separate worlds and opposite'. It was noted elsewhere that 'agriculture and forestry are important to our region, but they need to be done in new and sustainable ways' (SE). Island communities raised the issue of marine pollution, noting ferries and other vessels as part of the problem, as well as the impact of agriculture on water quality, biodiversity and landscape.

Changes in water quantity and quality as a result of both climate change and farming practices were noted. Flooding was more frequent in some areas and droughts more frequent in others. Extreme events posed major environmental and human threats, including major fires and damaging inundations. 'A better situation is sought in which we pollute less, and we do not suffer the negative effects of climate change.' (ES). In Italy and Germany, it was anticipated that water quality and availability would decline over the coming 20 years. In southern Germany pressure on land use from tourists and transport was identified as a significant environmental threat.

Opportunities

The main opportunities identified by respondents concerned **building targeted and integrated approaches at a landscape scale through partnerships involving all key stakeholders**.

There is scope to 'contain instability and degradation phenomena, including those deriving from extreme events, through actions targeting the prevention, adaptation and protection of the territory and the landscape and the sustainable management of forest heritage, natural resources and ecosystems' (IT).

Landscape-scale ecological networks need to be developed to provide an 'ecological mesh' (BE).

New landscape-scale partnerships that mainstream biodiversity and water quality enhancement into rural land management were identified as a core opportunity. There is scope to 'strengthen trans-communal and transboundary ecological corridors'. 'In order to get and keep a productive landscape operational, there is a need for smart partnerships or coalitions that make these various forms of social added value concrete' (BE). This would not happen simply by creating mechanisms for partnership because a culture shift was also needed among key stakeholders to give nature a higher priority. A German group identified the significant potential of landscape but cautioned that an interconnected view of problems and solutions is needed to realise that potential.

► ADDRESSING THE DETERIORATION IN CONDITION AND LOSS OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Gaps

Extensively farmed marginal lands in Europe generate natural and cultural landscapes that are often highly valued. The deintensification and/or abandonment of productive land use in mountain (EL, ES) and marginal areas has produced a long-term change in landscape quality which is widely perceived as a deterioration. 'Forests and cropland (are) in a state of abandonment' (ES). Traditional farming systems are recognised as key to maintaining highly-valued island landscapes.

Rural Europe also contains an extraordinary diversity of vernacular buildings which are more visually significant in rural communities not subject to major expansion pressures. Many of these traditional rural buildings are in poor condition, especially in disadvantaged areas with net outmigration and an absence of locals or incomers able and willing to invest in restoration projects. Cultural landscape features such as barns, terraces and fruit trees are often absorbed into encroaching scrub, which may have some biodiversity value, but which also poses a major fire risk in many parts of southern Europe.

Opportunities

There are seen to be important opportunities for **valorising both natural and cultural landscapes and traditional buildings in ways that support tourism and other social activities**. Repurposing empty buildings can contribute to addressing the critical lack of housing in some rural areas or provide space for creating rural hubs.

'Recovering and strengthening the culture, tradition and cultural heritage of rural areas represents a great opportunity to revitalise and strengthen these areas.' (ES). As with biodiversity and water, so with cultural landscapes, the key to their better maintenance and protection is to build their retention into policy support schemes, including new designations (AT) and new partnerships (ES).

Those protecting heritage need to 'enter into consultation with other policy areas, such as spatial policy, housing, economy, agriculture to set priorities and to create sufficient support for conservation and re-use of that heritage' (BE).

► CREATING A CULTURE OF CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Gaps

At a time when the therapeutic qualities of the rural environment are recognised by some (FI), many respondents felt that most people harboured attitudes which did not value nature and the environment sufficiently highly. Younger people were perceived to have greater environmental awareness than elderly people. There was a perceived lack of respect for nature by the wider public: attitudes were seen as unduly production-oriented leading towards industrial farming and commodity production. It was believed that this was still being promoted by agricultural education establishments: 'Agricultural schools continue to educate their graduates in the old fashioned way convinced that profit can only be achieved with the use of chemicals and heavy equipment. There is no common knowledge of, for example, regenerative agriculture' (PL).

Equally, it was suggested that farmers can feel under the spotlight and unjustly vilified for adjusting their farming systems to new technologies in order to make a living. Part of the problem is that 'the farmer is not provided with an alternative or a better solution' (IE).

A frequently raised issue was that although the eco-system services generated if land is appropriately managed are increasingly acknowledged as essential to society's well-being, adequate mechanisms do not exist or enable their providers to benefit financially from their provision. This often leads to land managers choosing less sustainable or beneficial management options because they are more profitable.

Opportunities

The main opportunities identified by respondents refer to changing people's attitudes **by integrating environmental education and advice into schools, agricultural colleges, and other public fora.**

There is a great opportunity to integrate environmental education into mainstream education and also take environmental engagement out of the bubble of activists and involve a wider community of interest including older people. 'Training, education and sensitisation of the rural population towards environment protection and awareness building (waste management, e.g. limitation and zero waste strategies, protection of biodiversity, energy efficiency, protection of natural resources etc.) is needed as is (the) development and application of motivation strategies (for citizens and entrepreneurs), so that each individual takes over the responsibility for environment' (PL). As the Irish response put it: 'There is a key shift that needs to happen among people, core values and core beliefs - how do we shift those to green?

Alongside formal education there is scope for attitude shifts: 'the greatest potential for development and capitalising on opportunities can be found in improving the people's relationship with nature changing people's attitudes towards sustainable consumption, improving the circular economy in all sectors and improving the sustainable production of food' (FI). Attitudes are shifting and there is a need to 'take advantage of the rising interest for eco-tourism, small-scale farming and community gardening' (SE)(IT)(IE).

Farmers' knowledge can be improved through different approaches to farming which include regenerative agriculture as the core ethos. It is possible to 'protect the environment by steering local communities towards the production of native plant species and animal breeds alongside traditional livelihood, gastronomical, and cultural activities' (EL). 'A cadre of practice-oriented field workers/ extension agents is needed to work with farmers to build faith and understanding regarding environmentally friendly and regenerative production systems' (PL). Shifting farming to more sustainable agricultural systems can create new and more skilled jobs in rural areas.

'Rural tourism services should include more nature, traditions, heritage and locality' (EE). Vernacular buildings could be supported by 'a building rescue programme to help protect and renovate the architectural values of heritage buildings for future generations' (HU). 'There are a great variety of natural and cultural attractions, which create diverse opportunities for a diverse and quality orientated tourism development that is in balance with the environment' (EL).

► REDUCING AND RECYCLING WASTE

Gaps

Large amounts of unsorted waste, and attitudes tolerant of waste, were seen as unacceptable. Waste and an absence of effective waste management were seen as incompatible with circular economy principles.

Opportunities

Respondents refer to a mixture of **public incentives and regulation together with smart waste management** as a way of addressing the problem.

Opportunities for reducing waste and increasing recycling are contingent on a mix of public policy and culture shifts in the segments of the population that care little about waste. A mix of carrots (incentives) and sticks (fines and tighter regulation) will be needed to effect changes. This could be addressed by 'activities linked with smart waste management supporting waste separation and elimination (e.g. smart technologies such as provision of chips on waste disposal trucks; elimination of illegal waste disposal; and the completion of waste disposal yards, compost production places etc.' (SK). A project for composting local agricultural waste was given as an example of developing the circular economy. (ES)

► BUILDING A COHERENT VISION AND MECHANISMS TO GUIDE CHANGE

Gaps

It was asserted that there was no coherent vision of how the land and the ecosystem services that rural land delivers should be managed. Associated with this there was a lack of effective territorial management that linked farm sector policy with regional and place-based planning. 'Landscape management must not solely take economic performance into account, but also its ecological, social and cultural roles' (ES). The reconstruction and deepening of local and regional food systems were seen as a bridge between the land sector and regional strategies for sustainability.

It was frequently argued that the conservation values of sustainable farming practices need to be rewarded, and that mechanisms need to be adapted to the local situation e.g. small farm size, social/cultural value of landscapes. Onerous bureaucracy was highlighted as an obstacle to widespread uptake of existing incentives. Currently 'money is provided for conservation only, not as incentives for sustainable farmers' (ES).

Opportunities

There is seen to be both a need and an opportunity for **developing wider integrated sustainability strategies**.

Some opportunities for more integrated approaches were seen to be market-driven through increased local food system activity (even if not all food is necessarily associated with high levels of environmental sustainability). However, a clear vision for a territory expressed in forms such as a regional land use plan or a catchment plan, where public support was conditional on compliance with the plan was also recommended. There was a need to close the gap between agriculture and nature which can only be done by comprehensive land use plans. "Territorial farm contracts compensating for the economic difference of growing traditional crops compared to other more profitable crops", suited to the local situation, e.g. small farm size, would encourage farmers to adapt. (ES)

In some areas, there was real ambition to deliver wide-ranging sustainability strategies: the Austrian vision foresaw that in future 'our ambitious sustainability goals, above all the protection of biodiversity, the expansion of protected areas and ecologically valuable areas, are being driven forward with great commitment by a regional advisory board' (AT).

Paradoxically, 'some of the rural areas that are less developed, consider this as an opportunity to design a new, sustainable and viable development model' (EL). Their low environmental footprint and sustainable lifestyles are not so much a relic of the past but can be revalorised as a model for the future.

A Spanish group stressed the need to 'promote, both in educational plans and at the level of public campaigns, the values, opportunities and practices of the rural world (maintenance of ecosystem services – water, air, energy, biodiversity, environmental crisis and risk prevention – forest management and livestock farming to prevent forest fires and floods, intangible audible heritage – such as the bells and sound of livestock, physical heritage such as dry-stone walling, professions such as foresters and artisans)' (ES). This sentiment draws together the need to revalorise the environmental and cultural heritage of rural Europe.

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

- Strengthen preventative mechanisms to reduce the adverse impacts of intensive land use on biodiversity and water quality and develop collaborative environmental management to ensure ecological connectivity at landscape scale in the farmed and forested landscape.
- Ensure farm policy compliance with the European Green Deal imperatives and shift agriculture to a more sustainable basis. More generally, rural land use needs to be considered more centrally in the context of much broader land use planning and not as a separate entity.
- Educate farmers in regenerative and sustainable agricultural practices and systems and support universities and agricultural education establishments to build partnerships with their hinterlands to ensure that place sensitive sustainability innovations are developed and promoted.
- Enhance environmental education for all citizens to create greater respect for the environment and the need to sustain its full range of ecosystem services.
- Local food sector developments need to be strengthened so there is a stronger relationship between consumers and their adjacent rural territory and the environment.
- Support greater citizen involvement in shaping and managing greenspace on publicly owned land.
- Improve support to ensure that the public goods associated with heritage landscapes and heritage buildings are maintained.
- Bring the different facets of sustainability planning together in territorial plans that protect heritage land and buildings, engender restorative ecology, better protect water quality, reduce risk of droughts and nurture sustainable behaviours.



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Wordcloud generated during the workshop organised by the Association of Danish Small Islands (Sammenslutningen af Danske Småøer)

3.7. CLIMATE CHANGE



Introduction

In the workshops, participants were invited to consider both the impacts that climate change would be likely to have on their area in the coming years, and also the contribution that their area might make to exacerbating or mitigating climate change.

It was noticeable that respondents were markedly more pessimistic about the future impact of climate change than they were about other characteristics explored in the workshops. The expected situation in 2040 for both the impact on their territory and the impact of their territory on climate change was skewed towards a “poor” situation. Some frustration was expressed that climate change is not taken sufficiently seriously and should be integrated into all policy approaches (IT). A Belgian respondent noted how the ‘impact of climate (change) is still underestimated. It will have a great impact on agriculture, nature, liveability of villages, landscape, biodiversity, etc.’ (BE). And from Finland: ‘there is a large gap between the desired and probable future forecasts on the speed and effects of climate change, as well as on the ambition level of the actions to mitigate climate change.’ And they aspired to see by 2040 ‘balanced and logical progress globally in climate change mitigation. There are also regional and local actions, especially related to renewable energy, circular economy and more ecological fuels’ (FI).

Climate change impacts rural Europe through extreme weather events, flooding, and droughts which damage property, forests and crops. Water scarcity and rising temperatures compromise liveability and threaten frail ecosystems with heat stress. Forest fires are more frequent (ES, EL). Snow tourism is threatened with shorter seasons or disappearance. However, the colder north may experience enhanced growing conditions and a climate more conducive to tourism (SE, FI). New pests may appear (DE). As an Irish respondent commented: ‘every aspect of rural development is impacted by climate change’ (IE).

Numerous adverse impacts were identified on the hydrological cycle and human use of water. Spanish respondents pointed out the problem of ‘drought and lack of drinking water,’ ‘extreme temperatures causing discomfort’ and that ‘climate change will affect the territory to a greater degree, shortening the winters, making temperatures milder and making water scarcer’ (ES). It was reported that ‘we will lose a large part of our mountain ecosystems, which will become more Mediterranean, and we will have to manage our forests to reduce the effect of climate change’ (ES), and that new pests and diseases may attack native species (DE).

In Slovakia, ‘extreme weather events and changing climate due to human activities caused flooding, drought, loss of water in the countryside, strong winds and warming. Greek respondents reported that ‘increasingly frequent extreme weather conditions (torrential rains, floods, droughts) negatively impact crops and infrastructure (e.g. roads, buildings),’ and that ‘there is ineffective water management and water scarcity is expected to intensify’ (EL, IT, DE). Drought is a threat not only to agriculture as a branch of the economy but also to the country’s food security (PL), and ‘climate changes and human interference in the water environment place Poland in the position of a water shortage threat’ (PL).

The overarching vision of the Green Deal will shape European policy into the foreseeable future. The need to address climate change sits at its heart, although parts of the Green Deal go beyond addressing the climate ‘problem’ in isolation. A Slovak commentator observed how there was a ‘lack of awareness regarding the human contribution to climate change and how to mitigate it’ (SK). An Irish respondent observed ‘(the) idea of sustainability needs to be built into every aspect of the development of rural areas’ (IE). On the positive side, ‘rural territories are one of the solutions (production of renewable energies, capture) of carbon, etc.) to fight against it’ (BE). Italian contributors commented that to be effective, policies, and in particular the Green Deal and Digitalisation policy, need to have an integrated focus on sustainability and participation.

The main issues that emerged from the workshops include the need to address:

- Enhancing awareness of climate change,
- Developing renewable energy in rural Europe,
- Adapting land use practices and developing the bioeconomy,
- Decarbonising beyond the energy sector.

► ENHANCING CLIMATE AWARENESS

The need to generate a greater awareness and sense of urgency was well made by an Irish respondent who noted the ‘need to think about 20 years’ time as if it is tomorrow to provide the urgency needed to undertake or put (climate) measures in place’ (IE).

Gaps

Levels of climate literacy were sometimes low in the rural population. There was a ‘lack of awareness among rural people about climate change (and therefore a lack of participation in, and support for, actions)’ (EL), as well as a ‘low perception of risks associated with climate change’ (ES). Further, ‘the potential of the Polish countryside in the fight against the climate catastrophe is not properly used and is not noticed by consumers and by the interested parties themselves (rural residents)’ (PL). More generally, ‘environmental behaviour among older people needs to be changed much more than among young people. Young people are much more concerned about the need to sort waste, avoid plastics, the benefits of non-fossil fuels, and so on’ (EE), but ‘people are accustomed to the current energy model’ (ES).

Opportunities

Respondents indicated that it was important to build on the **relatively low carbon footprint in some poorer rural areas and to increase awareness and understanding through widespread environmental education and examples of good practice**. Climate positive activities (renewable energy, circular economy) were identified as providing significant opportunities for creating new jobs and income for rural communities.

A number of positive elements were noted. For example, ‘rural areas in Greece have a low carbon footprint due to the limited presence of industrial-scale intensive agriculture and livestock breeding’ (EL) and this is generally likely to be so for low intensity farming areas where ruminant numbers are low.

Increasing understanding and awareness were seen as important: Greek respondents pointed to a need to ‘raise awareness among local people about climate change and its expected impact on rural areas’ (EL). And a case for wider education was argued for in Poland: ‘large-scale environmental education - conducted both by institutions financed from the state budget (e.g. schools) and NGOs’ but also that ‘the educational program should be based on a coherent state environmental strategy, consistent with EU guidelines and responding to contemporary challenges’ (PL).

In terms of climate positive behaviours and practices ‘there is a need to promote ‘what good looks like, highlighting examples, examples that encourage implementation’ (IE).

► DEVELOPING RENEWABLE ENERGY

Gaps

It was reported from Ireland that 'energy developments (are) happening, but (it is) slow' (IE), and this sentiment was widely mirrored elsewhere. A basic gap is the 'low production of local food and energy' (SE). Rural people did not always feel they were adequately informed of possibilities as 'there is little information on green energy subsidies aimed at the public, in contrast with subsidies aimed at companies' (ES), and in Sweden there was a call that: 'regulations must be simplified to encourage small-scale, cooperative energy production' (SE), a concern echoed in Germany, whilst in Italy the need for an effective policy on renewable energy was highlighted.

As well as developing renewables, the need to shut down high-GHG emitting coal-fired power stations, and to shift from climate damaging industries such as car production (DE), was recognised. 'The planned closure of a major coal power plant in Kozani, will create opportunities for environmentally friendly development and greening of the area' (EL). Other coal-fired (especially lignite-burning) power stations in rural Europe were in need of a similar solution (HU, PL).

There were also doubts about the potential for wind energy: 'wind energy is not the answer...but it can be a contribution to the viability of rural economies if properly managed and owned' (IE).

Opportunities

The renewable energy sector was recognised as a major arena of opportunity needing a supportive framework for **renewable energy communities based on solar, wind or biomass systems as well as support for more renewable energy production and self-consumption in general**.

Austrian respondents sought a 'further expansion of renewable energy supply' (AT). Greek respondents noted 'renewable energy production (solar, biomass, biogas, etc.) could generate income for rural communities, especially through small scale production' (EL). Slovakia saw a need for 'support of renewable energy use in rural areas: biogas, biomass, solar and wind' (SK).

These developments could be nudged by more supportive policies by 'grant(ing) increased subsidy and support to composting and biogas plant investment projects' (EL). In Poland, it was asserted that 'rural areas are a great place to promote and implement, among others, renewable energy. It is worth creating such conditions in which renewable energy constitutes a strategy for the entire rural community, a long-term goal, the achievement of which will be a common success. It will not only integrate the inhabitants of a given area but will also support a sense of shared responsibility and care for the closest environment - the state of the surrounding nature' (PL). German groups saw potential for clean and renewable energy production to become a pillar of rural economies, as did Italian contributors, although they highlighted the need for a better policy framework to facilitate the transition to renewables.

Often support was suggested for a different style of renewable energy development by 'provid(ing) incentives for the creation of energy communities, aiming for a neutral carbon footprint in rural areas' (EL). Spanish, Polish, and Belgian delegates argued for communities to focus on their identity as hubs for generating renewable energy: 'in terms of energy, support generating and storing as well as energy self-supporting villages' (BE). There should be support to 'develop micro-units for the production of renewable energies, promote energy communities and investments' (BE). The potential of smart solutions to help manage the community energy supply was raised by island communities.

Spanish respondents sought to 'promote and create collective 'green energy' self-consumption projects that reduce electricity costs' (ES). Finnish respondents empathised with these views. Some respondents argued that energy developments could be scaled up foreseeing that 'the great successes as an energy region could be developed and expanded even further. In 2040, the region can cover 90% of the energy demand for heat and 50% for mobility from renewable energy sources. Compact spatial development leads to shorter distances. Traffic has therefore decreased, and the construction of new roads could be restricted' (AT).

Biomass based energy systems were advocated by several countries. Forest biomass was identified as a source of energy (ES). Biofuels in the service of energy, agriculture and ecology were recommended. (PL).

There were clear suggestions that a wholesale shift into renewables should be carefully thought through: 'maximise the use of renewable energies, hydro, wind, solar, biomass and geothermal but mitigate their impacts on biodiversity' (BE). There should also be efforts at 'reducing energy consumption' (PL).

► CHANGING LAND USE PRACTICES AND THE BIOECONOMY

There were many suggestions for how the land use sector could respond to the threats and opportunities of climate change. It was noted that ‘the agricultural sector (is) one sector which can contribute positively and negatively to climate but also to remember that not every rural area is the same’ (IE). A variety of nature-based solutions such as natural flood plains and improved forest planning (DE) were proposed.

Gaps

A ‘lack of awareness about a green economy’ (ES) was pointed out while support and advice to move towards both adaptation and mitigation were much in demand.

Whilst many potential solutions to mitigate climate change are known and recognised, particularly linked to more sustainable land and resource management and nature-based solutions, there was a high level of pessimism about the extent to which they will be implemented by 2040. This was attributed to lack of incentives and skills, leading to a sense of a missed opportunity for rural areas to make the significant contribution of which they are capable, and which is needed.

Opportunities

The opportunities involved a transition to **climate friendly production methods, better management of forests, integrated approaches for developing the bioeconomy and improving water management.**

‘For farmers, climate-friendly production methods, sustainable innovations and the valorisation of regional products create new niches and opportunities for the future’ (AT). There was scope for more ‘ecological agriculture and eco-innovations in rural areas and in favour of carbon’ (SK) and for ‘fix(ing) CO₂ in agriculture (agroecology, agro-forestry, meadows, etc.)’ (BE). From Greece ‘new agricultural techniques could be applied to the development of a sustainable agricultural production model focused on quality and on agro-ecology’ (EL), supported also by Germany and Italy. German contributors saw opportunities to promote water management (flood plains, forests to aid water retention), preserving more water for use in the summer months. However, it was emphasised that large scale take-up of many of these opportunities depends on an appropriate policy framework and/or market mechanisms to capture value for farmers and forest managers.

In the hotter and drier parts of Europe it was more a case of mitigating problems. There was a demand for the ‘promot(ion of) the management and conservation of forests to avoid wildfires,’ and to ‘install automated fire warning systems as a means to prevent forest fires’ (EL) and ‘draw up contracts with local people to prevent fires and maintain the forests’ (ES). Returning to making more use of traditional methods such as domestic rainwater cisterns was advocated (EL).

More wood removal might help by ‘establish(ing) marketing channels for raw materials from the forests (pellets, firewood, resin, etc.)’ (ES). Even Sweden has its share of fire problems: ‘climate change causes distress in our region in terms of drought, forest fires etc. This may cause more people to move to urban areas and reduce the possibility of agricultural activity’ (SE).

On the other hand, in cooler parts of north and west Europe, the ‘climate crisis could boost rural areas in terms of increased agricultural production and increased rural population which in turn will have several positive effects on entrepreneurship, services, jobs, etc. At the same time, our region will have a warmer climate and could become the ‘new Riviera’, attracting visitors’ (SE).

There is a case to ‘promote the bioeconomy’ (EL, IT). To achieve this there was a need to ‘anticipate and guide research, develop associated crops (agriculture and livestock), resistant species, forests, water control,’ and ‘encourage crops, which can adapt to climate change’ (ES). There was also a case for ‘support(ing) emerging models: risk management on new agricultural models.’ (BE) and encouraging innovative practices (IT).

Water infrastructure demanded attention: ‘Smart water management (was needed) including measures to prevent flooding’ (SK) and ‘build(ing) infrastructure to store water in winter, when it is plentiful, for use in summer, when there are shortages’ (ES). There was a need to ‘support investments in irrigation and flood protection’ (EL). More generally, it was noted that ‘studies and projects concerning water management have already been prepared or are in progress’ (EL). Making better use of grey water to irrigate crops was proposed (IT).

► DECARBONISING BEYOND THE ENERGY SECTOR

Decarbonising the rural economy requires much more than the production of renewable energy and a concerted response from the rural land use sector. There are many gaps and a raft of ideas were offered to address them. There 'is huge potential for rural areas to instigate climate action projects with the right structures in place' (IE). Renovating repurposed buildings to be climate neutral and converting municipal buildings and services to use/generate clean energy (DE) and developing the circular economy (IT, DE) were amongst suggestions made. As described previously, addressing rural mobility and service provision to reduce private car use also figured in many submissions.

Gaps

There is 'low energy efficiency of public and private buildings' (SK). This sits alongside high use of fossil fuels in transport and hotspots of high emissions, especially coal-fired power stations in rural areas. There is also a need to decarbonise rural industry and address the impact of climate change on the capacity of the water and drainage system.

Opportunities

Participants identified opportunities for increasing the **energy efficiency of buildings and decarbonising transport**. The EU Green Deal was mentioned by some as a major step in this direction.

'Activities supporting production and use of alternative/renewable energy sources and increase of energy efficiency of public and private buildings (wind, solar panels on buildings)' were needed (SK). Improving the energy performance of the built environment was highlighted by both Italian and German groups as bringing multiple benefits for rural communities as well as reducing emissions.

There is scope for 'climate mitigation measures to decrease emissions via smart heating technologies, eliminate solid fuel (coal) from heating in municipalities, shift to more sustainable energy sources (gas, renewables) and measures increasing energy efficiency, smart transport measures, such as limiting individual road transport, as well as supporting accessible and environmentally friendly transport of goods' (SK).

'Greening measures in the design of public spaces and buildings' (AT) were advocated. The same need was noted in Slovakia and Belgium where there was a demand to 'promote green building techniques.' (BE) and a need to 'make energy savings in company solutions more accessible' (BE).

In relation to the transport sector there are 'alternative solutions to the use of fuels in transport' (EE) and a suggestion was made to 'facilitate the purchase of less polluting 4-wheel drive vehicles, which are the most suitable for the terrain' (ES). Belgian respondents argued for a 'switch from car to bike: (and to) convert roads into cycle tracks so that they will no longer be usable in 20 years, and (create a) reinforced cycling network and multimodality' (BE).

In summary, we should 'take the challenges of the European Green Deal as an opportunity' (ES) and recognise that 'climate change is an opportunity to redesign and upgrade the infrastructure in rural areas' (EL). This required 'be(ing) pro-active instead of post-active. We should move in a smarter way (new transport and new resources)' (BE).

► WHAT STEP CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE THE GAPS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS THE VISION?

- Move from planning for development to planning for local resilience.
- Deepen the responses to climate change at national level and reassess the legal framework for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures and their implementation in strategies, plans and projects, ensuring that the Green Deal and Digitalisation objectives are integrated into all policies,
- Promote innovative and smart low carbon planning and programming strategies and link them with regional and national strategies, programmes and projects.
- Support activities linked with decreasing GHG emissions.
- Support measures and activities which retain water in the countryside (where needed), through e.g. smart water management and management of rainwater, grey water, reconstruction of irrigation systems, green roofs, re-using grey water, etc.
- Build awareness and support education and training of professionals and experts as well as citizens (including youth) in climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

4. OVERARCHING MESSAGES

The contributions received come from diverse areas across the EU, each articulating their particular situation. Whilst the individual contributions demonstrate the diversity and uniqueness of each area (for example, some areas foresee continued population decline, whereas others are more concerned about the pressures generated by substantial numbers of new residents), considering them together reveals some common aspirations and shared concerns, which need to be addressed if rural areas are to thrive and realise their potential, regardless of their current situation and characteristics.

For sure, the contributions received and the participants involved are not a representative sample of today's rural Europe, and it is probably the more engaged and aware who have organised or taken part in "Welcome to our rural" workshops. However, the realities articulated and the gaps and enabling conditions identified are perhaps likely to be even more relevant to more isolated, less connected and active communities, who may be even more acutely affected by the issues raised here. The following points reflect some of the main messages.

- **Taking a holistic view can deliver multiple economic, environmental and social benefits.** In the contributions from individual workshops, participants convey a clear understanding of their own territory and its situation. Whilst considering the area and its likely development over the coming years according to the eight groups of characteristics offered in the workshop design, **there was a consistent emphasis on the interconnected nature of all aspects of local economies and communities, and recognition that an integrated perspective is most beneficial, but often absent in public administration and policy making.** Rural communities tended to view their situation as a whole, rather than a series of separate strands, and acknowledged the complexity, the synergies and the tensions in the linkages. Several examples of existing initiatives illustrate this, and many others were proposed. The need for integration of approaches and policies to support holistic interconnected locally based sustainable development emerged as a clear message.

EXAMPLE OF A WIN-WIN SITUATION

Renovating existing unused buildings to a high environmental standard for affordable housing or use as community hubs could reduce pressure on land by avoiding new developments, improve environmental performance (lower emissions from construction and in future use) and create jobs and skills in the community.

- **The crucial importance of available, affordable and accessible high-quality digital infrastructure was reiterated constantly.** This was recognised as a prerequisite for the development of many other activities, both economic and social, and identified as one of the highest priorities for urgent action. Encouragingly, it was also one of the areas about which participants expressed the greatest optimism for the future, indicating a level of trust and expectation that existing gaps and disparities will be addressed to support/strengthen the development of new business models and meet social needs. However, remote and mountain areas were less hopeful.
- **There was frequent recognition of the strength of community spirit and the prevalence of volunteering for social support in rural communities.** They were understood as key for thriving and sustainable rural areas. However, whilst the tradition, willingness and potential exist, **many groups stressed that support, recognition and capacity building are needed to maintain these activities**, especially in areas with declining populations. Rural hubs, physical meeting spaces and animators were all identified as needed to support the continuation and development of existing activities and launch new ones. The importance of capacity building emerged again and again, across Member States and from all types of area. The development of community leadership, and the support of community organisations and activities is perceived as a priority. Needs identified covered leadership development, training and facilitation, access to knowledge and also financial and administrative support for voluntary community organisations and the provision of physical premises. The development of rural hubs, to provide a base for a range of activities and services, and which can serve as a community focus, incubator and support networking and collaboration was raised frequently, irrespective of the type of rural area.
- **Many concerns were expressed about the current availability and quality of infrastructure and services, including health, education, transport and housing, particularly in more remote areas.** Expectations for the future were highly variable: although a range of ideas on how to address gaps were offered, this was not always accompanied by the belief that there would be an appropriate enabling environment to permit their implementation.

- Significant concerns were expressed about climate change, environmental degradation and pressure from unsustainable agricultural practices.** Existing impacts from these were highlighted, and an increased focus on sustainability in the future was seen as a necessity. The future outlook for climate and environment was the most pessimistic of the aspects considered. **Climate change is highlighted as a key issue, but contributors do not consider that it is being sufficiently addressed.** Workshop participants identified potential opportunities/solutions to support climate change mitigation and environmental improvements, some of which would also bring economic and social benefits, but also see obstacles and insufficient support for implementing them. Better recognition in policy of the contribution of ecosystem services to regional value creation is required in order to generate more benefits for the rural community, and to increase the supply and quality of ecosystem services. It is important to retain ownership, control and value in rural areas.
- Rural areas may be affected differently by climate change and environmental concerns. It was, however, widely recognised that rural communities are well-placed to contribute positively to the green transition.** A successful green transition requires implementing win-win solutions that maintain and enhance natural capital without exploitation or degradation, generate economic opportunities and protect the vulnerable.
- The need to make farming more sustainable and reduce its negative environmental impacts was a commonly raised issue.** Adopting agro-ecology or organic farming, diversifying or extensifying current systems were frequently cited as necessary. Respondents were also aware of the need for agriculture to be profitable and proposed a number of approaches to retain more value on farms. It was recognised that the shift to increased sustainability requires greater knowledge and new skills.
- A variety of issues related to improving governance were raised.** There were concerns to increase participation in decision making, strengthen networking and connections, such as rural-urban linkages. **Many contributions pointed to the value of holistic place-based strategies developed by and with the local community, at an appropriate scale.** Appropriate policy, fiscal and regulatory frameworks that facilitate, rather than obstruct the implementation of positive approaches were commonly mentioned, for example in relation to renewable energy, local processing, social innovation, new business models, community-owned assets. Administrative and bureaucratic hurdles were highlighted as barriers to turning opportunities into reality.

These common messages provide some clear pointers as to positive initiatives and policies that would empower rural communities to move towards their desired future as thriving, sustainable, attractive places to live and work. It is striking, however, that most of these messages are not new, and that much of what has been identified by participants in this exercise as important to fill gaps and to achieve opportunities has been known and reiterated for much of the last 30 years at least. Whilst technology and our scientific understanding of the climate and biodiversity crises and their anthropogenic causes have evolved, the value of integrated place-based strategies, calls for capacity building, networking, local empowerment and participation in decision making, adequate service provision, better skills and environmental protection and enhancement have been a constant theme in rural debates and policy papers, from “The Future of Rural Society”, the incarnation and mainstreaming of LEADER, the first and second Cork Declarations⁽⁹⁾ and in many other fora. Can the long-term vision for rural areas bring them to fruition so that the vision so beautifully illustrated by “The vision for Romerland Carnuntum in 2040” becomes reality?



The Vision 2040 of the Austrian region Römerland Carnuntum: Römerland Carnuntum – together. regional. innovative.

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(9) https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/cork-20-and-future-rural-development_en

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS⁽¹⁰⁾

All of the reflections sit within a recognition of a highly diverse rural Europe. The positive socio-economic indicators in rural areas close to major urban areas reflect spill-over from the agglomeration economies of major cities. Left to its own devices, the market economy will continue to create further disparities between close-to-urban rural Europe and remoter rural Europe. Generating a trajectory of more balanced growth over space will constitute a major cohesion challenge.

The current distribution of population reflects a historic legacy of different land use practices and mobilities and can be expected to continue to evolve. This means that relatively wealthy and expanding rural areas will be well supplied with public and private services and remoter areas will be confronted by service decline. Whether and how to avert a redistribution of population given the contemporary and likely medium-term future map of economic opportunity in Europe is an issue that rural policy makers must face. This inevitably raises the question as to whether rural areas that have often experienced decades of depopulation and economic decline can be rejuvenated and revived and, if so, can they become prototypes and exemplars for a more sustainable, post-carbon world?

Eight main reflections arise from the workshops.

First, there are major differences in perceptions of problems and opportunities between countries and regions. The stand-out variable is whether or not long-term demographic growth or decline is expected. Inevitably, one is associated with a much higher degree of optimism than the other. The regional/local demography is a barometer of possibilities. Areas of increasing population in more prosperous countries were more likely to invoke a more post-industrial vision, vibrant with possibilities. Areas with declining populations had perhaps fewer ambitions, wanting decent jobs and viable public infrastructure, but with the most astute recognising that their lifestyles were more compatible with a sustainable existence on the planet than those of their affluent peri-urban counterparts.

Second, the extent to which new regionalism and the regional territorial model were invoked as the platform for future developments was striking. However, for most, the consequences of the adoption of such a model with local and regional food systems at its core would be a very different diet, with tropical and subtropical fruit (and wine) largely absent from the Northern European diet and reduction of many staple products such as durum wheat, sunflower oil or rice, depending on location. We need to question whether far-travelled staple products will really disappear from our supermarket shelves and whether there remains a place for staple commodity products from durum wheat to construction quality timber. There is likely to be a shift in the balance of food commodities and a greater degree of relocalisation than at present, but commodity production, guided by modern technology, will probably retain an important role.

Third, there were signs of engagement with the Green Deal package, but some aspects were raised less than might have been anticipated, given their prominence in public discourse in recent months. Certain elements such as farm to fork ideas, renewable energy and environmental damage were discussed widely, but issues such as waste recycling and the circular economy were touched on less. The high carbon footprint associated with greater affluence was almost ignored. The full range of the Green Deal elements have thus yet to be fully embraced by rural Europe. When the policy framework was mentioned, it was mostly in the context of concern that higher levels of public authority were not taking climate change and the Green Deal sufficiently seriously, or pointing out deficiencies in the current framework that inhibit positive actions (such as local renewable energy schemes). Local rural groups consider themselves more aware of climate and environment issues, and more fearful of the consequences of inaction than they perceive policy makers to be.

Fourth, few insights were offered into new footloose economic activities and their novel technologies and most responses on this topic stayed within the confines of the agri-food sector and tourism. Some did reach out and added breadth and depth to the findings by taking a wider perspective on the application of EU funds to rural Europe. Comments about a need for joined-up funding architecture were particularly noticeable. If, as was correctly stated in the Polish report, there is growing similarity in the structure of rural and urban economies, it is important that any development strategy for rural areas cuts across all of those sectors and delivers them support in cost effective ways. Many respondents argued for a broader based and more holistic approach to rural planning which went beyond the confines of current EU rural development policy to include other sectors.

Fifth, the quality of delivery of public policy, both in terms of structures and effectiveness varies greatly. Between the EU and the wellbeing of the average rural citizen there are multiple levels of public sector administrations from the commune upwards. How effectively and constructively they interact and the extent to which they are permeable, inclusive and interactive with their citizenry as well as the extent of mutual trust and social capital will have huge consequences on engagement and outcomes. We are deep in the experiment of multi-level governance and it remains hard to work out what causes it apparently to operate effectively in some areas and poorly in others. There is a need to learn fast.



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(10) These are the personal reflections of Bill Slee after having analysed the results of all the workshops supported by the NRNs and having been heavily involved in drafting this report.

Sixth, the many heartfelt pleas for new participatory models of governance and multi-actor partnerships to oversee interventions are difficult to ignore. So too is the strong feeling that while appropriate levels of diligence and bureaucratic control are well understood as necessary when dealing with public money, there are far too many signs that community groups and volunteers are burning out under the harsh glare of regulatory burdens. Small projects are too often given the same regulatory grilling as much larger projects and public officials are operating in an unduly risk-averse manner which stultifies innovation and slows down effective responses to the grand societal challenges that rural Europe is confronted with. These concerns need to be addressed if a more experimental and exploratory journey towards a more sustainable future is to be undertaken.

Seventh, the need for place-based and place-sensitive policies is widely accepted, but the appropriate scale for action and intervention may vary. Some grassroots actions that emerge locally can offer novel solutions and enhanced service quality, but their up-scaling may require modification of existing public administration procedures and a willingness and capacity to change. The scale at which different place-based policies emerge and can best be implemented will vary depending on the action and a greater capacity to work across scales may be needed.

Finally, the extreme disruptions of the COVID 19 pandemic were very much in mind when these views were elicited. There were three particular impacts that might offer a glimpse of a longer-term future when the ephemeral nature of the COVID 19 pandemic is replaced by the long run and even more challenging grind of adjusting to a zero-carbon world.

The first insight is in relation to the food sector. There were major disruptions to travel and many people resorted to more local food suppliers. Many even took to growing food and seemed to enjoy it, both in terms of nutrition, taste and the mental health benefits of engaging with natural processes.

The second insight is into work behaviours, where so many were able to work from home, to the extent that many service jobs will now have the expectation of home working for at least part of the working week. This is the new normal. There will be substantial savings in travel cost and time. People may use that time constructively and communally and if they do there may be a reinvigoration of place-based activity and less money leaking out of the 'bucket' of local rural economies.

The third is an enhanced appreciation of nature, and its contribution to well-being, both from time spent outside in the natural environment, and the benefits of eco-system services for society as a whole.

Climate change will drive changes in food systems and land use and will require more from the bioeconomy. Will that include a greatly relocalised food sector, or monocultures of crops providing the much-needed feedstock for diverse materials that have supplanted hydrocarbons and plastics? And will the short-term gains from less work-related travel remain and be extended in ways that could rejuvenate villages and market towns and replace their dormitory status by something more vibrant and enriching for the lives of their inhabitants?

Over and above these general conclusions, there was a clear belief among many respondents that rural areas offered possible visions of new models of work, new forms of partnership and planning and new relationships with the biophysical environment and post-carbon sustainability which should be given serious attention. These new relationships, often involving collaboration and cooperation, more hybrid food and fibre production as well as service provision should be taken up not just by those responsible for rural Europe, but by all concerned with coming to terms with the greatest challenge ever confronted in modern times: the climate crisis and possible pathways to its resolution.

ANNEX: “RURAL VOICES” – OVERVIEW OF KEY THEMATIC MESSAGES FROM STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS ON THE RURAL VISION

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Infrastructure and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor quality public services, schools, health and social care and infrastructure. An overly urban-centric transport and mobility system. The lack of vitality of village and town centres and hubs. Neglect of heritage of historic and industrial buildings. Insufficient and inappropriate housing to meet current needs. Inadequate water supply, water treatment and flood and drought management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scope for digital innovation, service hubs and rural schools for the provision of rural services Growing demand for wider sustainable rural mobility approaches building on developing links between different modes of transport, on-demand services and new technologies. Revitalisation of rural centres and abandoned buildings to build a new rural identity. A growing stock of rural housing which needs to be managed to support demands from existing residents and newcomers to rural areas. The potential of improved water management infrastructure to tackle drought and floods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a base level of infrastructure to support the functioning of the rural welfare state comprising a basic minimum of services that can be considered a right (e.g. internet, access to public services, etc). Invest in a modal shift from private cars to public transport and alternative mobility and from hydrocarbon to post carbon transport systems. Remodel settlement centres and target investment on historic and traditional buildings to transform those that are no longer fit for purpose into vibrant community and business uses. Enhance water infrastructure resilience, adapted to and with increased resilience to changing climate with respect to drinking water supplies, sewerage, flood management, storm water, drought and irrigation needs. Capacity building and support for community/volunteer services.
Digital and technological change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor access to digital infrastructure in rural areas. Weak digital skills of the rural population. Low level of digital innovation in rural SMEs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emergence of the digital era, with new models for the provision of basic of rural services, jobs, work practices and market access. Growing demand for digital services and technological innovation at local level (in towns and farms). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide affordable digital infrastructure as a basic right, sufficient for business activity, e-service provision and social life. Enhance digital literacy of rural citizens via inclusive training, education programmes and information campaigns, and to enhance e-service provision and use. Extend innovation partnerships and advisors into the wider rural domain and promote innovation activity more vigorously at local levels.

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Basic goods/food/energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An over-globalised food system which ignores local potential and means that value is not retained in the local area. • The absence of succession plans and questionable viability of many small farms. • Inadequate advisory services. • Skill shortage in regenerative/ organic agriculture. • Low levels of involvement of rural communities in renewable energy production. • Weak recognition of the role of land use in carbon capture in rural land use (dealt with in the chapter on climate change). • A failure to embrace models for transformational change and sustainability transitions in basic industries, (farming, coal mining and coal-using communities) together with red tape/regulation which hinders development of local processing/energy production. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing movement around the relocalisation of shorter food systems and wood product systems. • Emergence of technological developments that will enhance the professionalisation of farming and the connection to the bioeconomy. • Demand for niche and high-quality crops, breeds and products based on local biodiversity/identity. • Growing recognition of regenerative agriculture as a sustainable farming practice. • Growing interest and awareness of community-based renewable energy production. • Scope to access new markets via digital technologies. • Availability of instruments for integrated transformational change such as Smart Villages, Energy Communities, LEADER, local food policies etc. • Growing political interest to support 'just and green transition' in rural communities with stranded hydrocarbon or carbon-based industries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural production. Two alternative approaches emerge: • Relocalise production, shorten supply chains and introduce regenerative and or organic farming practices based on traditional varieties and breeds; and • Harness the fruits of technology to reduce costs, environmental impact, raise productivity and produce crops suitable for the wider bioeconomy. • Reduce red tape and enhance processing opportunities both for local food and for food to be exported out of the region. • Support the entry of young adults into the land-based industries. • Target investments to induce environmentally friendly practices at the individual (small-scale, self-consumption) level (e.g. permaculture) and strengthening of other local and organic food initiatives. • Encourage modern technology in the land-based sector and development of the bioeconomy. • Enhance lifelong learning in the land-based sector which embraces sustainability and circular economy principles. • Foster wide territorial planning approaches (which go beyond farming and forestry) that support the transition to a rural economy based on sustainability and circular economy principles. • Support systems/regulatory framework that encourage regional/community renewable energy action and a post-carbon transition in coal dependent communities.

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Income, work and jobs in the wider economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited exploitation of regional value added, including through tourism. Poor development and value given to local crafts. Low take up of circular economy principles. Limited recognition and support to innovative models of enterprise and lack of value/recognition of the provision of ESS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emergence and reinvigoration of traditional and new sectors (e.g. social farming, craft work) and professionals contributing to rural diversification. Emergence of new models for supporting entrepreneurship and innovation (e.g. incubators, hubs, networks, etc.). Growing market recognition of the value of regional identity and bio-based goods and services, including ESS, based on principles of sustainability and circularity. Value added through processing and marketing centres, shorter supply chains and gastronomic, social and cultural tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a good digital infrastructure as a prerequisite for a diversified modern economy in rural areas. Create appropriate conditions for local entrepreneurship, to keep people in the countryside and develop creative approaches to promoting entrepreneurship such as teleworking centres, incubators, minimising red tape etc. Support new models of collective and community entrepreneurship. Support both commercial private sector entrepreneurship and social enterprises and be open to nurturing new models of work. Support sustainable tourism which is better linked to the specific offer of the wider components of rural economies (e.g. linked to speciality foods, crafts and reinvigorating local culture).
Social inclusion and vitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic change especially dramatic population decline in some rural areas. Divergent identities and differing sense of belonging of rural residents. Gaps in inclusiveness and diversity in some rural areas. Limited civil society engagement and partnership in some areas. Limited territorial collaboration with third sector agencies and need for support for community & volunteer organisations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing interest in moving to rural areas and working from home (WFH) – all of which have been intensified by the COVID pandemic. Growth of a new shared sense of community and new rurality with existing residents, new arrivals and non-permanent residents. Presence of strong rural identities which slow down the rural exodus. Recognition of inclusiveness and diversity as a value to bring positive change in the countryside integrating refugees and migrants. Increasing demand for community social services for people in unfavourable life situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish policy of incentives to encourage young people and professionals to settle in the countryside (e.g. tax incentives, adequate services) and support systems to find jobs, houses, etc. Implement an activation programme for rural youth to support them to be professionally active in rural areas. Support social inclusion actions for Roma and migrants via the RDP (e.g. training and skills acquisitions for agriculture). Capacity building/support for community organisations e.g. Investigate digital forms of creating a sense of community and participating in local development including ‘banks of volunteers’. Enhance networking, cooperation and partnership building and ensure rural citizen participation in decision-making e.g. through LEADER. Promote a change in values in society, valorising rural life.

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental damage from human sources, including rural production systems impacting biodiversity, water quality and climate change. Deterioration in the condition and loss of cultural landscapes and historic buildings. The lack of a culture of caring for the environment among rural people, including land managers. Excessive waste and an absence of effective waste management. The lack of a coherent vision or mechanisms to guide change in integrated territorial plans that could guide both productive and environmental functions of rural land. Inadequate mechanisms to reward provision of ESS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further scope for action to reduce the adverse impacts of intensive land use systems on biodiversity and water quality. Recognition of the positive effects of targeted and integrated approaches at a landscape scale through partnerships involving all key stakeholders. Considerable potential for valorising both cultural landscapes and traditional buildings in ways that support tourism and other social activities. Potential to change societal attitudes in the direction of more sustainable behaviours. Availability of tools and instruments to develop wider integrated sustainability strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure farm policy and all rural sectors comply with the European Green Deal imperatives. Consider rural land use needs much more centrally in the context of much broader land use planning and not as a separate entity. Support collaborative management to address environmental damage at landscape scale in the farm and forest sector. Bring together the different facets of sustainability planning in territorial plans that protect heritage land and buildings, engender restorative ecology, enhance water management and nurture sustainable behaviours. Provide environmental education for all citizens as a public responsibility. Support training to farmers in regenerative agriculture practices. Establish partnerships between Universities and agricultural education centres with their hinterlands to ensure that place-sensitive sustainability innovations are developed. Support greater citizen involvement in shaping and managing greenspace on publicly owned land. Ensure that the public goods associated with heritage landscapes and heritage buildings are maintained through support measures.

TOPICS	CURRENT CONCERNS	OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO ENABLE STEP CHANGES
Climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of awareness of climate change impacts. • Low levels of development and community engagement with renewable energy in rural Europe. • Limited engagement of land managers with climate mitigation and developing the bioeconomy. • Inadequate adaptation to new climate realities. • The need to decarbonise beyond the energy sector. • Lack of incentives/skills to adopt known solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low carbon footprint in some rural areas, especially some of the least developed. • Increasing demand for renewable energy including the creation of renewable energy communities based on solar, wind or biomass systems and more self-consumption. • Growing societal interest to transition to climate friendly production methods, enhanced farm and forest management and the bioeconomy. • Wide scope for action in enhancing the energy efficiency of buildings, decarbonising transport, and improving water management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move from planning for development to planning for local resilience. • Deepen the responses to climate change at national level and reassess the legal framework for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures and their implementation in strategies, plans and projects. • Promote innovative and smart low carbon planning and programming strategies and link them with regional and national strategies, programmes and projects. • Support activities targeted at decreasing GHG emissions. • Support measures and activities which retain water in the countryside (where needed), through e.g. smart water management and management of rainwater, grey water, reconstruction of irrigation systems, green roofs, etc. • Build awareness and support education and training of professionals and experts in climate change mitigation and adaptation measures as well as citizens (including youth).