

Long-term vision for rural areas

Making “no one left behind” a reality

At a time when the European Commission is elaborating the EU's long term vision for rural areas, and Member States are adopting the [Territorial Agenda 2030](#), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) wishes to broaden the discussion and propose a long term vision for European rural areas, from the perspective of municipalities and regions.

COVID-19 has revealed the various weaknesses and opportunities of different territories. For rural areas in particular, while risks of spreading the disease would seem lower than in densely urbanised areas, the population had to face the lack of nearby health institutions and services, with a generally older and therefore more vulnerable population.

Europe is also facing some mega-trends such as ageing and urban concentration. If all the economic, social, cultural, human resources concentrate in few urban centres, we condemn rural areas to a certain death by depopulation. It does not have to be like this. With new technologies, social and institutional innovation and a new mind we could see the rise of diverse and dynamic rural areas.

As a Scottish municipal councillor from a remote island I can also tell that democracy is also at stake. Insufficient investments in rural and remote territories, will only fuel discontent and feeling of “territories left behind”, resulting in even more divided society. If we do this right, we will also be advancing the achievement of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#)

There is a diversity of rural areas: more or less connected to urban centres; more or less connected to Europe's main transport networks and mobility corridors; more or less benefitting from natural or cultural assets attracting tourism, or from a productive agro-economic sector. It is therefore impossible to adopt a “one size fits all” approach. This is also the reason why it is of the utmost importance that strategies to further develop and enhance the economic attractiveness of rural areas must be designed in full partnership with the municipalities and regions in these areas. Furthermore, vision for rural areas should be mainstreamed into all policy sectors, especially on industrial, employment, climate, environment and transport policies, and consequences of new policies to rural areas should be considered.

Local and regional governments are certainly the best placed to identify the needs of the population and more particularly the causes and effects of the vicious circle on rural attractiveness. However, actions to go from a vicious to a virtuous circle must be adopted at all levels: European, national, regional and local.

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Key messages



Change the narrative: Rural areas should no longer be addressed as depopulated areas dedicated to agriculture. Over 50% of European population live in rural and peri-urban areas. They can be places of well-being and opportunities; providing safety, quality environment and thriving community life for both young families with children and seniors. A more positive narrative should be promoted at all levels, emphasising economic diversification. Communication on touristic and cultural assets of rural areas should be encouraged.



Connect urban and rural areas: There is no longer a clear separation between urban and rural areas, but rather an urban-rural continuum, with increased importance of peri-urban areas as well. The economic and social uplifting of rural areas will in large part depend on successful connections between more rural areas and urban centres. This should also be encouraged in the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy through the promotion of local products.



Economic diversification will be essential for the development and attractiveness of rural areas. This can be possible thanks to technological developments and broadband access in rural areas, but this trend should be accelerated by public policies at European and national level.



Transport and mobility will be a key element for the opening up of most “remote” territories. It will be essential to connect cities with their surrounding areas and to provide additional opportunities for rural inhabitants. The EU but also Member States should support the development of sufficient public transport for the rural population, investing in lacking infrastructure or maintenance of existing ones.



Access to quality public services: Member States must ensure citizens living in rural areas have similar access to quality public services and economic, social and cultural opportunities as in other parts of their territory, while adapting to the specificities of rural areas. Proactive public policies are needed to incentivise the local population to stay. EU policies often follow a logic of maximising input-output relations, which rural areas per se cannot comply with.



Access to broadband internet: white spots still remain in some rural areas, and a lack of connectivity, or at least bad internet access can be observed in most rural areas, suffering from the disinterest of the local operators. Public investments (EU funds and/or national programmes) should intervene in situation of market failure to ensure local population can have decent internet access.



Access to energy networks: Ability to access fairly priced energy for industry but mainly for households warming or cooling is fundamental. As is the ability to export renewable energy generated in peripheral regions.



Local and regional governments must be considered the key partners for national territorial development policies as well as for the implementation of European policies and instruments that contribute to territorial development. Similarly, to CEMR’s experience of [local and regional dialogues on Cohesion](#). The EU should target and partner with municipalities and regions to get closer to the citizens, including in rural communities.



Reaching citizens: The Conference on the future of Europe should also reach citizens living in rural areas. More generally, the European Commission should target more these specific territories that often do not have the capacities and sufficient resources to get involved in European projects.



EU Funds: Particular attention and specific financial support are needed to unleash the untapped opportunities of rural areas. The ESIF and particularly the rural development component of the CAP should be EU primary instruments, while other instruments, such as Horizon Europe, InvestEU as well as the Erasmus+ and the Connecting Europe Facility, should also be more incentivised to target rural areas more specifically. It is also particularly true for the Recovery package in particular REACT EU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility investments.

 **Integrated approach:** The European Commission should also seek to facilitate the combination of different instruments when a territorial consistency is orchestrated by the local or regional governments (e.g. multi-funding between ERDF or ESF+ and the EAFRD)

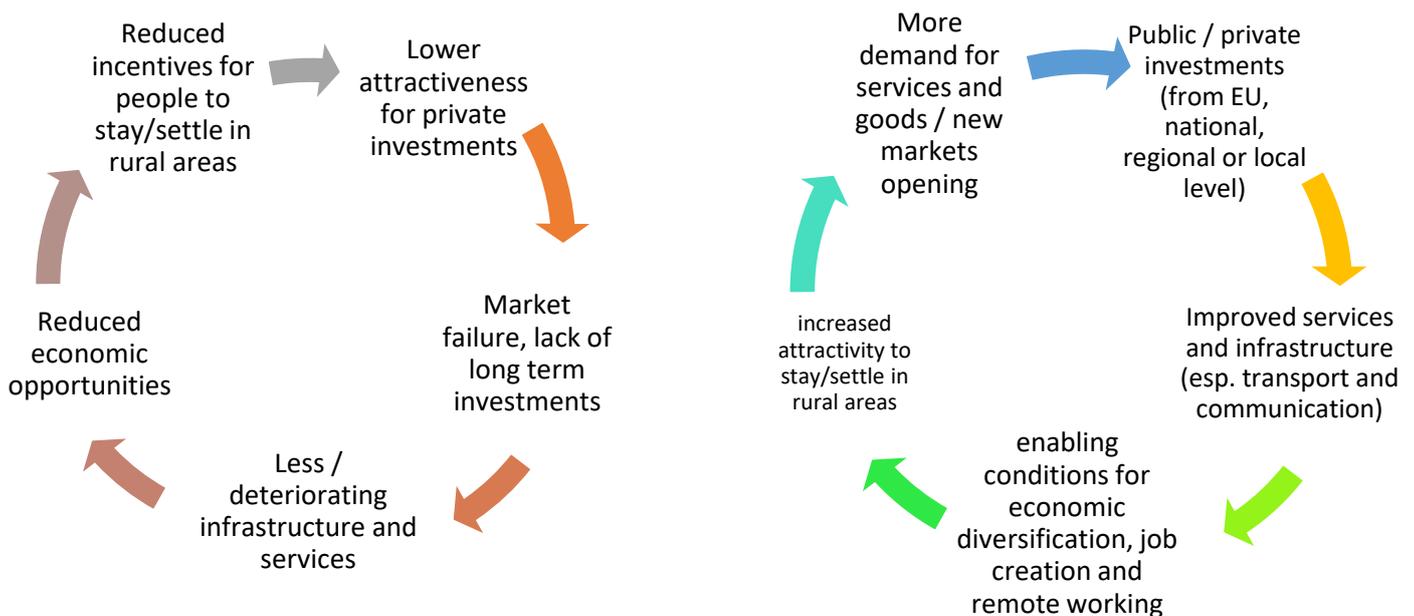
 **EU Policy Consistency:** as a holistic exercise, the long-term vision must look into all EU policies (Internal Market, Fiscal Policy, Competition, etc.). It should draw the right conclusions, especially from market failures in areas of demographic decline and make use of available European tools e.g. using public procurement as a tool to support the local and regional economy. State aid guidelines should allow for sufficient flexibility in order to adjust aid schemes to local and regional needs.

 **Reduce administrative burden for rural municipalities:** local and regional governments in rural areas are eager to participate in and benefit from EU programmes. This requires designing programmes to which smaller municipalities could easily apply without additional administrative burden or coming with additional technical support to build the project and answer European calls for proposals.

 **Youth and gender:** We encourage a specific attention for youth in rural areas which could mean for example encouraging projects of youth exchange between rural municipalities. It is necessary to provide young people with sports and cultural activities that will motivate them to stay in the countryside and connect their future life with the countryside. Specific focus on gender related issues and gender impact of public policies in rural areas should also be considered.

These messages are valid for both EU policies and national policies – including in non-EU Member States. In this regard we encourage the OECD and its Member States, in particular the Working Party on Rural Development, to take these key messages into consideration in their rural policy reviews. We also call on the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to take note of CEMR’s message in its future work on rural areas.

In line with these key messages, we also recommend the implementation of the principles of the [Territorial Agenda 2030](#), as well as the [OECD Principles on rural development](#).



The vicious circle of rural areas' declining attractiveness

The virtuous circle of rural areas' growing attractiveness

About CEMR

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest organisation of local and regional authorities in Europe. Its members are over 60 national associations of municipalities and regions from 41 European countries. Together these associations represent some 130 000 local and regional governments. CEMR's objectives are twofold: to influence European legislation on behalf of local and regional authorities and to provide a platform for exchange between its member associations and their elected officials and experts. Moreover, CEMR is the European section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide organisation of local government.

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