

Rural Vision Week

Highlights report

Introduction

The ENRD Rural Vision Week was a five-day interactive online conference focused on involving stakeholders with preparations for a long-term vision for the future of EU rural areas. The associated European Commission (EC) Communication is due to be adopted in summer 2021.

Keynote contributions and stakeholder inputs were gathered from high-level presentations and discussions, workshops, a virtual marketplace, and 'fringe' activities.

More than 550 stakeholders participated directly during the event and its online outreach connected with thousands more through social media, including video-streaming of the conference sessions and Rural Inspiration Awards ceremony.

Event Information

DATE: 22-26 March 2021

LOCATION: Online

ORGANISERS: ENRD Contact Point

PARTICIPANTS: National Rural Networks, LEADER Local Action Groups, RDP Managing Authorities, EU institutions, and a broad spectrum of other rural development stakeholders

OUTCOMES: Stakeholder perspectives on imaging the future of Europe's rural areas

WEB PAGE: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural2040-vision-week en

OPENING MESSAGES

<u>Rural Vision Week</u> was launched with scene-setting presentations from high level speakers and inspirational testimonials from rural stakeholders



Dubravka Šuica, EC Vice President for Democracy and Demography, opened the conference stressing that the discussions during the week would build on the <u>earlier public consultation and Foresight exercise</u> on the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas. She particularly emphasised the ambition to ensure this becomes a joint vision, developed by rural areas for rural areas, where nobody should feel left behind. The Long term vision will go beyond any specific policy, as its added value is in its comprehensive approach, aiming to respond to different rural needs. Synergies between funding and other support was highlighted as a vital success factor for the long term and the Vice President drew attention to the importance of development

needs such as digitisation, public transport and green farming. The aim of the Vision is to turn the challenges into opportunities, with the goal of creating fair, green, innovative and sustainable development for resilient and connected rural areas and communities in 2040.





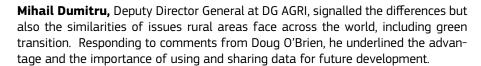
Maria do Céu Antunes, Portugal's Minister of Agriculture representing the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, echoed the key roles that farmers must play in rural Europe's future. Farms would not be able to provide food supplies so successfully without the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and this fact has been underlined by the pandemic crisis. CAP's capacity to catalyse rural regeneration and reduce environmental risks was also spotlighted - with innovation and digitisation being promoted to help land managers contribute more to the sustainable development of Europe's countryside.



Janusz Wojciechowski, European Commissioner for Agriculture, stressed the importance of rural areas. He signalled some key emerging messages expressed during the consultations, especially on the recognition of specific needs, including improved infrastructure and services. He underlined the importance of addressing the challenges faced by rural areas, and the need to reduce disparities. The Long Term Vision is envisaged as providing ambitious but realistic approaches to the development of rural areas over the next 20 years. Acknowledging the differences and needs, it should aim to make European rural areas attractive, particularly for next generation. Rural areas unique characteristics need to be recognised, keeping in mind in particular the role of agriculture. He underlined that the Vision goes beyond any specific policy but builds on different options available for the future.

KEYNOTE CONTRIBUTIONS

Following the opening messages, keynote speaker <u>Doug O'Brien</u>, President National Cooperative Business Association, USA, observed the importance of employing better and more rural-targeted data to make better policies for rural development, as this forms the foundations for well-informed growth. Comparing rural support in the EU and USA, he saw rural areas holding many assets which are fundamental to global agendas that are advancing green transitions, stressing also the importance of active engagement of stakeholders in discussions.



He saw benefits from more consistent and comprehensive data sets covering rural socio-economic and environmental matters. He particularly stressed the importance of involving stakeholders in unlocking the potentials of rural areas in Europe.





'MY RURAL' - STAKEHOLDER TESTIMONIALS

During Rural Vision Week the voices of rural stakeholders were featured prominently and interspersed throughout the various working sessions. This included in-person interventions through a series of short 'My Rural' video clips, which were produced by National Rural Networks. Overall, 20 stakeholder videos were produced from 17 Member States illustrating many different dimensions of rural circumstances, expectations and aspirations.









BUILDING A LONG-TERM VISION

The opening working plenary session included four specific contributions, which explored different components of the process contributing to the building of the LTVRA.



María Gafo Gómez-Zamalloa, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, presented an overview of the results of the EC's public consultation. An extensive process of public consultation and stakeholder engagement was employed using multiple tools, all of which were being fed into Rural Vision Week and will ultimately contribute to the Communication expected in June 2021. Key messages for rural areas today included: the need for access to transport, services, jobs and fast internet; that there are multiple reasons for people to stay or settle in rural areas; that agriculture clearly helps to ensure economic sustainability but that additional quality jobs are needed; and both landscape protection and climate adaptation should be given greater priority.

The consultation findings also indicate that the attractiveness of rural areas is conditioned by multiple factors such as access to services, connectivity, care facilities and economic opportunities. Respondents underlined the importance of participatory approaches. Less than half of respondents feel left behind by society, but this is higher for those living in remote rural areas.



Maciej Krzysztofowicz, DG Joint Research Centre (JRC), explained the Foresight exercise carried out by the JRC with the support of the ENRD Thematic Group on the LTVRA. Thematic Group members started by identifying the main factors that might affect a 'day in the life' of different rural actors in different types of rural areas across Europe. They used this as a reality check for identifying nearly 40 key drivers that could shape the future of rural areas. After much discussion, they narrowed this down to two – demographic changes and multilevel governance – which were used as the axes for defining four exploratory scenarios for the future of European rural areas.

These were given the following titles: 'Rurbanities' for rural areas with fragmented multilevel governance that are attracting people who essentially want to continue an urban lifestyle; 'Rural Renewal' for areas with networked multilevel governance that are attractive primarily because of their environmental and social attributes; 'Rural Specialisation' for rural areas with fragmented multilevel governance whose population is shrinking and that specialise in providing cities with the goods and services they require; and 'Rural Connections' for rural areas with networked local governance whose population is shrinking but maintain interconnected hubs of economic and social activity.



Zelie Peppiette, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, described the 'Welcome to our Rural' initiative that was jointly developed with the ENRD Contact Point. This was a package of workshop tools explaining 'what to do' and 'how to do it' for engaging local stakeholders directly in conversations concerning the LTVRA. It resulted in 166 contributions from different workshops involving over 2900 people from 19 Member States.

A wheel diagram was used to plot: where communities found themselves now on a series of thematic axes; the likely direction of travel; where people would like to be in the future; the main gaps and opportunities; and the steps needed to get

to their desired future. Stories, quotations, keywords and phrases resulting from this initiative help to capture the rural realities experienced by rural stakeholders across Europe.



Paul Soto, ENRD Contact Point, concluded the conference's first day sessions by presenting the outcomes from several strands of the ENRD Contact Point's work in relation to the LTVRA. These highlighted immediate priorities of rural stakeholders for action in the short and medium term and showed how the differences between rural areas shape their views.

Common themes included: the need to ensure a base level of infrastructure and services; building the innovation capacity of rural areas; seizing the opportunities of more decentralised local and regional models of production and new forms of

work; raising awareness among all stakeholders to implement the European Green Deal; and the need for stronger participatory models of governance. The ENRD Thematic Group had suggested that the EU policy framework for supporting such goals should include: quantifiable, operational objectives and targets; proofing and stocktaking of existing policies; clear mechanisms for leading and coordinating initiatives; better data; and a shift from controls to enablers of local action.



Other overarching perspectives drawn from the conference's first day included: reinforcing agriculture's role in rural Europe's future; observing how the pandemic has created new opportunities for rural revitalisation and had made things that were previously unthinkable as now being thinkable; advocating the role of rural women and rural wisdom; encouraging a shift away from seeing urbanisation as an aspirational goal for rural communities; and enriching the inputs from rural areas with other long-term visioning exercises.

WORKSHOP FINDINGS

The eight virtual conference workshops which took place on the March 23 and 24 generated a large amount of useful feedback to inform the EC's Communication and substantiate its evidence-based outcomes. Workshop findings were recorded at the end of the conference and summarised by four keynote listeners - Maura Farrell (NUI Galway), Laurence Castaigny (CEJA), Kaley Hart (IEEP) and Judith Conrad (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture).

These drew out key ideas or strands for the Long Term Vision and the step changes required for its implementation with the following main resolutions.

Workshop 1. Green rural futures

- Empower rural communities to take ownership of the green agenda to deliver solutions that are locally tailored.
- Different types of knowledge brokers, education and expertise are needed to act as drivers of change that can accomplish global goals at local levels.
- Strong (but flexible) policy frameworks should set the direction of travel, build confidence, and encourage investment.

Rural2040 Vision O Maintain diversity Forus on sustainability Forus on participation Encourage trainity Encourage training Encourage trainin

Workshop 2. Digitally led innovative rural futures

- Key conditions for resilient digitalisation still remain infrastructure, human skills, and access to technology, tools and applications.
- Tackle risks of digital exclusion/marginalisation by better understanding the digital divide in rural areas and increase appreciation of socio-economic and environmental benefits from digitalisation.
- Empower communities through local digital innovation ecosystems involving brokers, hubs, co-working and research in rural areas.

What would a digitally equipped rural area look like in 2040? • Functional digital innovation ecosystems in rural areas • Efficient and interoperable data platforms to enable innovation and new business models based on data portability • Equal access to human-centric digital technologies for better public and private services across transport, health, energy, social and community services

Workshop 3. Fair and inclusive rural futures

- Accessible services, flexible community spaces, mindsets, legislation and institutional cultures at all levels that enable innovative solutions
- Supportive and responsive governance, awareness raising, skills development and accessible information to enable open communities, citizens participation and public-private cooperation.
- Collect and share evidence, data, information and examples of good practice.

FORTING FORTI

Workshop 4. Farming and food productions' role in building resilient rural futures

- Adapt food systems to changes in EU's food demand and food supply while making EU food production resilient to crises and more environmentally friendly.
- Ensure resilience of rural areas by addressing generational renewal challenges (e.g. access to resources) and supporting farmers (e.g. boosting bargaining power).
- Provide better training, advice, branding and innovation support especially for small producers.





Workshop 5. Strong and dynamic rural-urban partnerships

- Rural proofing urban policy and urban proofing rural policy. Recognising the core functions and value of rural areas.
- Recognition and support for more equal, flexible governance mechanisms, platforms and frameworks for rural-urban cooperation.
- Support for the animation, capacity building and technical assistance, skills and enabling institutions for balanced rural-urban cooperation.



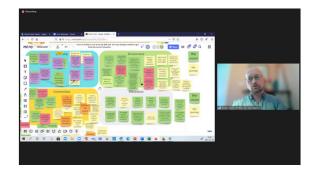
Workshop 6. Vibrant rural areas

- Benchmarking essential services and comprehensive mobility planning for rural areas.
- Reduce administrative burden and support social innovation and local empowerment to boost rural attractiveness and seek innovative solutions to enhance access to services, transport and employment.
- Vitalise rural areas by building bridges between old and young generations and local decision-makers, as well as facilitating the involvement of marginalised rural groups.



Workshop 7. Diverse and resilient rural areas

- Avoid over-specialisation and dependence on a small number of activities and strengthen rural diversity and diversification.
- Continuous investment is needed to prepare rural communities for adapting to change and improving connectivity and networking at all levels (local, regional, national and EU).
- Retaining youth and an inclusive attitude to welcoming newcomers can help to re-energise rural communities.



Workshop 8. People, policy, practice

- Simple and easily implementable mechanisms to ensure rural proofing is backed-up by a task force involving civil society and policy makers.
- Establishing governance mechanisms to clearly identify the responsible bodies, targets and promote rural aspects in coordination mechanisms like a 'Rural Semester'.
- Developing rural agendas/rural strategies at the EU, national and regional levels and establishing a rural think tank/rural observatory.





VIRTUAL MARKETPLACE, FRINGE EVENTS AND RURAL INSPIRATION AWARDS

A virtual marketplace provided online space for rural stakeholders that wanted to share their activities and display their messages about #RuralVisionEU. Eight National Rural Networks, nine Horizon 2020 projects, and six other organisations took advantage of this occasion for virtual networking and international publicity. Rural stakeholders also organised 11 different fringe workshops focused on subjects such as organic food, youth, small islands, mountains, and LEADER, among others.

This year's Rural Inspiration Awards ceremony was live-streamed with Commissioner Wojciechowski announcing project winners in the four 'Our Rural Future' categories and the Popular Vote category. The latter attracted over 10 000 votes online for the 20 finalists:



The winners of the 2021 Rural Inspiration Awards were:



- Popular vote
- Angelic Gardens / Anielskie Ogrody (PL)
- Green futures category
- ReWI Visions (Resource Wise Visions) (FI)
- Digital futures category
- The HofladenBOX (DE)
- Socially inclusive futures
- Green Care Where People Flourish (AT)
- Resilient futures category
- Pilot Project on Circular Bioeconomy (ES)



WORKING PLENARY: BRINGING IT TOGETHER

On the <u>final day of Rural Vision Week</u>, participants discussed the issues, opportunities and challenges that had been highlighted during the conference. The four keynote listeners drew out and presented the main themes from the workshops which they had carefully listened to and reported from. This was followed by a panel discussion and responses involving representatives from the European Parliament (Mazaly Aquilar), Committee of the Regions (Enda Stenson), and the European Economic and Social Council (Peter Schmidt).



Mazaly Aquilar's main messages were that agriculture was central for the future of Europe and that if EU policies acted in a coordinated, holistic manner they could improve the perception of rural areas. She also proposed raising more awareness in cities about the needs and relevance of rural areas. She recommended easy-to-understand communication approaches to achieve this aim. Other priorities for the MEP were infrastructure for public transport and broadband as well as a fair competition system for EU farmers.



Enda Stenson's interventions included encouraging all EU funds to work closer together in order to be more effective at developing rural areas. European Structural & Investment funds could finance more rural projects and rural proofing should be applied to Member States' Recovery plans. He believed that local and regional representatives could help to facilitate successful CAP Strategic Plans by ensuring that the views of all rural stakeholders are taken into consideration during the design and implementation of CAP support.



Peter Schmidt suggested a move towards using 'well-being' economic frameworks that reflected holistic values. He stated that Europe's rural areas can make significant contributions to high-level political ambitions like the Sustainable Development Goals, European Green Deal and Biodiversity strategy. Food council models were endorsed to improve food security and create quality jobs, whilst also providing a channel to help bring urban and rural policies closer aligned.

KEY RURAL VISION WEEK MESSAGES



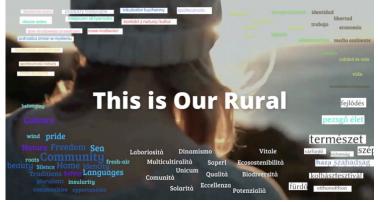
Jose Enrique Garcilazo, Head of Regional and Rural Policy Unit at the OECD, presented an overview of the discussions held throughout the week. Key challenges identified included the need for holistic rural policies, addressing the diversity of rural places and shaping the strategy through tailor-made, bottom-up and inclusive processes. He pointed to the importance of breaking rural isolation and promoting open communities in various ways, such as through improved rural-urban and rural-rural linkages, better vertical coordination and more social innovation. The Vision should also be 'future ready' and embrace digitalisation, innovation and the transition to a low carbon economy.

Turning to the suggestions about "how to get there", Enrique Garcilazo pointed to the need to build the capacity and empower local actors to manage the transition, to ensure the enabling conditions were in place in terms of services, digital infrastructure, skills, mobility, networking and reducing red tape. Other important conditions were: rural proofing, backed-up by adequate resources and governance structures; generating and communicating good data and knowledge; developing and assuring the resilience of rural areas and embracing innovative and forward-looking solutions.

He summed up his reflections noting: the importance of implementing policies at the right geographic scale and assuring the bottom-up inclusive approach; ensuring that the Vision becomes a "living document" updated periodically; the need to avoid "unfunded mandates" or commitments which are not resourced sufficiently; going "beyond rural proofing" by ensuring there is an overarching coordination mechanism; and a flexible framework for combining policies and resources from different levels. Ensuring increased quality of life in rural areas is an important element of the Vision. People-based well-being indicators could be helpful to measure the success of rural visions, while development strategies are often most productive and popular when they are shaped through bottom-up methods building the capacity of local actors. He also reiterated the need to focus on well-being and digitalisation as "the highway to our rural futures".

Rural Vision Week participants provided their own key messages from the week's conference session in a series of word clouds that can be viewed in the Rural Vision Week's video playlist.







Janusz Wojciechowski, European Commissioner for Agriculture, **Elisa Ferreira,** European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, and **Dubravka Šuica,** Vice President for Democracy and Demography, joined the closing high-level panel.



Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski re-asserted a need for collaboration among all levels and stakeholders to help rural Europe develop sustainably without anyone feeling left behind. The recent pandemic has highlighted the values of rural areas, and this should be capitalised on now through consistent and coherent policies directing support and funding. He underlined the importance of different contributions to the Long Term Vision. As the Vision will bring together different stakeholders and policy areas, it will also bring the rural areas in the core of policy making. To reach the goals, we need better data as well as consistency and coherence of different instruments. The forthcoming EC Communication will focus on proposing what needs to be done in order to achieve an inclusive, fair, resilient future for rural areas.



Commissioner Elisa Ferreira acknowledged that Europe is facing urgent and important challenges and that the answers we find now about rural Europe would shape its long-term future. She identified four broad priorities for overall development of Europe and in particular its rural areas: availability of basic public services; digital connectivity; good transport connections and best use of natural and specific assets of rural areas. While rural areas already benefit from different EU funds, all the broad priorities would benefit best from well-informed targeting of EU resources. Smart and targeted solutions, fitting the different realities, are needed to develop rural prosperity, while local knowhow can direct integrated approaches that secure synergies to improve the functionality of Europe's rural areas. Commissioner Ferreira stressed that attractive, dynamic and prosperous rural areas are at the core of a prosperous Europe.



Vice President Dubravka Šuica welcomed the fruitful findings of the Rural Vision Week, particularly underlining the importance of hearing different voices from diverse rural areas of Europe. The adoption of the Communication on a Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, foreseen for June, is a starting point for a new approach towards rural areas. On reflecting how to make rural areas more attractive, she particularly identified the opportunities that digital and green transitions bring. To make the rural areas prosper in the future, it is important that their cultural realities are respected, while keeping in mind the demographic and social changes happening in Europe. Vice President Šuica closed the event by recalling some of the key messages of the week and underlining the importance of a targeted approach to different realities of rural Europe. Ensuring that policy initiatives answer the needs and expectations of rural communities will be at the core of the Vision.