



TOWARDS A HOLISTIC STRATEGY ON SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE RURAL & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Key Highlights of the Hearing

Although the pandemic exposed the critical role rural areas play in upholding and enhancing environmental, economic and social resilience in Europe, rural and urban territories are not developing evenly. The time is ripe to fully unlock the potential of rural areas by adopting a holistic rural and urban development approach, where harmony is key. Increased interconnectivity, synergies and territorial cohesion to ensure rural areas are always considered and treated equally, are among the key messages delivered during the [public hearing "Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable and equitable rural/urban development"](#), jointly organised by the EESC and the European Rural Parliament (ERP) on 18 June 2021.

The EESC NAT section president Peter Schmidt highlighted how the future development of rural areas will contribute to achieving a European Green and Social Deal, which calls for a holistic approach. Moreover, **Stefano Palmieri, ECO section president**, stressed that an equitable partnership enables more balanced urban and rural development, where no one is left behind.

While we are hearing more and more voices from rural areas, territorial cohesion remains fragile. Rural-urban proofing, as an "*equitable policy where there are issues of mutual interest*" is therefore essential to reducing rural/urban disparities, in order to withstand new unprecedented global challenges, explained **Tom Jones, chair of the European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA)**. Common purposes, mutual respect and shared benefits are the three ground rules for successful and effective cooperation between rural/urban areas, he concluded.

Hilkka Vihinen, research professor at [LUKE](#) and [ROBUST](#) Academic Partner, endorsed the idea of developing a balanced rural and urban collaboration. In the absence of effective governance arrangements that foster rural and urban synergies, Ms Vihinen stressed that "*we need to get the rural-urban interaction on the political agenda, and facilitate its understanding among policy-makers. Once*

the issue is on the agenda, we need to promote place-based ways of organising things, instead of e.g. sectoral or purely economic approaches. It is important to be able to function across borders".

Rethinking rural/urban policies in a holistic way by identifying existing challenges, policies and inconsistencies

Various rural actors expressed the importance of managing territorial diversity on many fronts, ensuring an approach where no-one is left behind, and reflecting the voice of young rural and urban people, workers and employers, women and minority groups.

*"Respect and equal treatment of citizens forms a principal value and a basis for a holistic rural-urban approach and paradigm", explained **Kim Smedslund from PREPARE partnerships for rural Europe**. "A holistic approach should be included in planning, programming and funding schemes and be implemented through existing or newly created structures".* In addition, he pointed out that it is time to translate words into action by leveraging partnerships and relations with different stakeholders.

Representing young people, **Iita Prättälä, LAG Keskipiste, leader**, highlighted that education, jobs and social life are the main factors inciting the exodus of young people from rural areas. In that respect, **Jakub Dvorský from the Slovak Rural Parliament**, introduced [the European Rural Youth Declaration](#), which calls on policy-makers, rural development organisations and other stakeholders to respect the needs of the young people and act accordingly. Diverse opportunities for education and economic activities, social life, sustainable and organic farming and food production, broadband infrastructure and transportation, accessibility and quality of public services, civic engagement and political awareness were considered as key elements for the future of rural areas.

Successful policies and initiatives that are already fostering more balanced rural/urban development

*"Medium-sized cities play a key role in connecting urban metropolitan areas with rural areas", explained **Pol Huguet, deputy mayor for a Green City and Sustainable Development in Manresa (Spain) and a member of Eurotowns**. Presenting the example of Manresa, a compact city with a protected Green Belt, Pol Huguet called for more integration of sustainable agriculture, ecotourism, leisure and education activities in rural and peri-urban areas, compatible with the protection of biodiversity to guarantee the quality of people's lives, as well as of other living organisms.*

Kristiina Tammets, Estonian LEADER Union, illustrated successful cooperation between rural and urban areas by giving two examples of local level actions in Estonia: the "*Local Food network in the Tartu County*" and the "*Smart villages training programme*".

Turin, an Italian metropolitan city, is another great example of rural and urban cooperation, with the Porta Palazzo market, the management of school catering and the development of alternative food networks. "*The right to food for every citizen is a responsibility for local public authorities, which should aim to make cities resilient by establishing different governance arrangements for rural and urban territories, producers, consumers and citizens*", explained **Ms Elena Di Bella, director of the Mountain and Rural Development Service, Metropolitan City of Turin, Eurocities**. She further highlighted that food policies should become the strategic point of coordination for vertical policies, including urban planning, agricultural policies, health, transport and economic development.

Towards a policy framework and governance in order to establish a holistic EU strategy on sustainable rural/urban development?

The current pandemic offers a window of opportunity to increase the attractiveness of rural areas if policies are duly anticipated. **Marion Eckardt, president of ELARD**, mentioned that we must seize the momentum now. Achieving Europe's goal to become the first climate neutral continent has brought sustainable development in urban and rural areas to the top of the policy agenda. However, **Lasse Frimand Jensen, city councillor Aalborg and regional executive member of ICLEI**, emphasised the policy gap in connecting rural and urban communities. Moreover, appropriate and effective governance arrangements require the priorities of the different territories to be identified, given the population diversification in rural areas, remarked **Josep Puxeu, rapporteur of the opinion**.

This vision is strongly backed by **Mario Milouchev, director of DG AGRI**, as he explained that the "diversity" of rural areas should not be used to justify the lack of a holistic rural policy. Instead, the policy should be adjusted to the circumstances. Remote rural areas should therefore have special treatment. In this regard, he recommended developing rural agglomerations, on top of the various digital solutions, to increase and ensure connectivity. He further highlighted that the publication of the [Communication on the EU long-term vision for rural areas](#) should trigger a new discussion on a holistic rural strategy, both at the European and regional levels.

Wallis Vandebroek-Goelen, head of the DG REGIO Project Group on the Long-Term Vision of Rural Areas, explained how the new Cohesion Policy will create a more connected, inclusive and social Europe. It will include a green transition and function as an investment, financial and economic development tool. Both speakers from DG AGRI and DG REGIO stressed the need to work together at all levels – EU, national, regional and local.

Josep Puxeu and Piroska Kállay, rapporteur and co-rapporteur of the opinion NAT/820, concluded that the pandemic had opened the doors to sustainable and equitable rural and urban development as people are looking for space, freedom and a transition to a different life. The EESC will consider all contributions, in order to make rural areas an attractive environment for different population groups, including young people, women and entrepreneurs. It will include these contributions in the preparation of a [new opinion](#).