



European Committee
of the Regions



La Rioja

Logroño, 31 October 2023

DECLARATION OF THE BUREAU OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS ON

ENSURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THRIVING AND VIBRANT RURAL AREAS

The Bureau of the European Committee of the Regions

- recognises that rural areas are facing long-term systemic challenges, including ageing, depopulation, a brain drain, a shrinking labour force, a lack of essential services, and insufficient investment in delivering a swift response to the green and digital transitions, all of which are having a negative demographic impact;
- flags up the major threat posed by demographic challenges across Europe and points out that an estimated 30 million people will have left Europe's rural areas by 2033, with severe consequences for the sustainable development and economic growth of the EU, its farmers' livelihoods and its agri-food production, its climate-neutrality goals, and the provision of public services, as well as social well-being and democracy;
- stresses that the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss are becoming more visible, for example on agriculture, food security and infrastructure, and thus adaptation to climate change, support for farmers, and disaster risk management should be further reinforced in close cooperation with local authorities;
- firmly believes that the long-term sustainable development of the EU cannot be achieved without strong and resilient rural areas, a sufficient level of local production of renewable energy, and the complete integration of rural communities into the European project;
- affirms that the implementation of the European Green Deal presents an opportunity to place rural areas at the forefront of the green transition; however, at the same time, it also creates the need to ensure a just transition with proper support for rural populations to avoid rural desertification;
- highlights the diverse nature of rural areas, as well as the mutual benefits of functioning rural-urban linkages, the importance of peri-urban areas, and the need to ensure that mutually beneficial rural-urban synergies are integrated into all EU policies in line with territorial cohesion objectives;
- acknowledges that the digital transition, in particular after the COVID-19 pandemic, has the potential to increase rural areas' attractiveness to businesses and workers, changing urban-rural linkages and bridging the digital divide;
- welcomes the New European Innovation Agenda's recognition of the regions' role in the European innovation landscape, its placed-based approach, and focus on reducing the rural-urban divide;
- underlines the fundamental role of the Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas 2040 in supporting territorial cohesion, attracting innovative businesses, improving conditions for SMEs, fostering high-quality jobs and better skills, advancing gender equality, ensuring better infrastructure and services, and strengthening the role of sustainable and organic farming;
- regrets the absence of better targets and indicators in the European Commission's report on the implementation of the Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas and in the existing EU monitoring systems;
- emphasises the need for all EU policies to factor in rural-proofing, promoting the attractiveness of rural areas and protecting the quality of life of rural populations, with a special focus on women, by broadening labour and training opportunities and promoting a better work-life balance;
- stresses the need to focus policy-making on attracting young people to pursue their life goals in rural areas – and retaining them in those communities – and on fully involving them when seeking solutions to local challenges;
- launches the idea of a European Year of Rural Europe and a European Smart Villages Award;
- commits to playing an active role in the Rural Pact and in its governance body in order to successfully implement the long-term vision and guarantee proper involvement of local and regional players;
- commits to further developing and promoting a "regional and local vulnerability scoreboard" in partnership with the Joint Research Centre as a crucial tool in policy-making. This is key when it comes to rural areas, in order to reinforce their resilience with a focus on climate risks and social vulnerabilities;
- therefore, calls on the European Commission, the Member States and local and regional authorities to apply the rural-proofing approach to their strategies and investments under the current programming period for the CAP and cohesion funds, the national recovery and resilience plans, and other Union programmes, and to consider the vulnerabilities and needs of rural areas as important criteria in their future design.
- more particularly, calls for a multi-fund approach in rural areas and a minimum earmarking of European funds for agricultural and non-agricultural projects in rural areas to be introduced in both cohesion policy operational programmes and other European direct intervention programmes (Horizon Europe, the Connecting Europe Facility, and Creative Europe) while strengthening the use and the synergies of the LEADER approach to rural development, the Smart Villages initiatives and Local Action Groups across the funds.