



**European Committee
of the Regions**

A rural agenda is urgently needed for rural areas after COVID crisis

Briefing for Enda Stenson, rapporteur on EU Strategy for an EU revival

27 NOVEMBER 2020, 9: 00-13:00

Dear Members of the European Parliament

Dear Vice President of the European Commission,

Dear colleagues,

Dear participants,

As rapporteur for the Committee of the Regions opinion on EU Strategy for Rural Revival, I am delighted to present you the main recommendations of my opinion adopted on Monday during the meeting of the NAT Commission.

I think that this webinar comes at a perfect time just before the end of the Commission consultation on the new long term vision for rural areas but also during the final discussion on the Multiannual Financial Framework and at the beginning of the CAP trilogues.

The outcome of the discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework will be crucial for the development of rural areas. There is indeed a real danger that support for rural areas in the next programming period will be significantly reduced. These drastic cuts in the budget and the increase in co-financing for rural development policy will both put obstacles in the path of developing rural areas.

The COR also requests that the Recovery and Resilience Facility with a budget of EUR 560 billion invest in more and better connectivity and focus on closing the digital divide between rural and urban areas. High-speed telecommunications networks are critical for rural competitiveness and economic growth and efforts must be made to guarantee the same capacity for all regions, in accordance with the objectives set in the context of the 2020 Digital Agenda for Europe.

We have heard in the previous session, that the current pandemic crisis has exposed and exacerbated the consequences of a number of long-standing threats faced by rural areas, and has added to the urgency for rural revival in regions across the European Union. Rural areas and rural towns and villages have been decimated by, inter alia, a reduction in demand for agricultural products due to the shutdown of the tourism and hospitality sectors, an inability to source supply of critical seasonal labour, pronounced social isolation and comparatively higher vulnerability to the pandemic due to the limited services present in small regional hospitals.

For the COR a Rural Agenda is urgently need for rural areas after the COVID-19 crisis.

We ask that the new long-term vision for rural areas should be transformed into a concrete policy framework – the Rural Agenda. The Rural Agenda should propose a set of integrated policies that enable and empower rural communities to turn challenges into advantages; these challenges include decarbonisation, climate change, digitalisation, sustainable mobility and fair job and income opportunities, generational change, integration of new migrants and social innovation

It is crucial to take rural areas into consideration in all European policies: their needs extend far beyond what the rural development pillar of the CAP can deliver. Consequently, the Commission must strike a better territorial balance by taking account of the specific needs of rural and peri-urban areas, especially under cohesion policy.

There is an urgent need to simplify, coordinate and harmonise access to European funding for rural development. Programmes and sources of finance for rural services often operate in separate silos and their use is highly complex. The rules and access to funds must be made more straightforward for beneficiaries.

It is also necessary to increase the role of the local and regional levels in the governance of rural policies. The COR advocates for a future CAP that maintains a direct relationship with the rural territory through the active role of EU Regions, which play a crucial role when it comes to define and implement agricultural and rural development policies at local level. In its current form, the CAP proposal tends to

marginalise or even threaten the role and autonomy of European regions in the management of the CAP, granting them with the mere task of implementing measures established at national level. Applying such organisational scheme to the EAFRD would risk disbanding a wealth of management experience gained over the years in many European regions.

The CoR reaffirms the necessity of safeguarding the central role of European Regions in the definition and implementation of agricultural and rural development policies and increasing their role in EU decision-making processes. We are very pleased that the European Parliament supports our request and we urge the Council to take the same position.

A European rural agenda that set out an ambitious case for integrated, sustainable development of rural areas in all their diversity would highlight their potential to meet the challenges facing Europe both today and in the future, with the aim of achieving territorial cohesion and fostering initiatives on the part of local and regional actors. I undertake to convey this proposal to all the European institutions and to the European Parliament, and I would like to warmly thank Mr Bogovic and Mrs Aguilera for their supports.

Thank you for your attention.

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