



**European Committee
of the Regions**

CONCLUSION OF WEBINAR

**A Rural Agenda is urgently needed for rural areas after the COVID-19
crisis**

27 NOVEMBER 2020, 9:00-13:15

Dear Members of the European Parliament

Dear Vice-President of the European Commission,

Dear colleagues,

Dear participants,

I am very pleased to conclude this joint meeting with the RUMRA & Smart Villages intergroup, organised with the support of Euromontana and the international Rurality-Environment-Development association, our partners in the Cohesion Alliance.

For my part, I welcome the excellent cooperation between the European Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament on issues concerning rural, mountainous and sparsely populated areas. Thanks to the robust action of the RUMRA & Smart Villages intergroup, we have obtained the support of the European Parliament

in asking the European Commission to implement a European rural agenda, as there is already an urban agenda.

Things are moving:

I'm pleased to note that France and Catalonia have already launched their rural agendas.

The new Commission has been asked to develop a new, long-term vision for rural areas, working to ensure that their needs are specifically catered for in national strategic plans under the new Common Agricultural Policy. Ms Suica has just confirmed the Commission's ambitions regarding this long-term strategy.

These are further steps in the right direction.

Rural and peripheral regions are now experiencing renewed attention in Europe and around the world because there is increasing territorial fragmentation despite the successes of Cohesion Policy and other EU investment policies. Thus, whereas inequalities between EU Member States and regions tend to diminish thanks to these policies, conversely sub-regional disparities tend to widen, creating what ESPON calls 'inner peripheries' and what I will refer to more simply as 'areas left behind'. These territories are generally disconnected from their functional regions through weak economic exchanges, poor or non-existent transport infrastructure and poor access to quality public services. They suffer from the negative consequences of globalisation without seeing its benefits.

In these areas, in addition to the problems already mentioned, one of the major challenges is that of depopulation, which goes hand in hand with the lack of attractiveness.

The novelty is that this geographical disparity is fuelling a more politically powerful response today than in the past, particularly through the anti-system or populist movements that have been emerging in most EU Member States. This is known as the 'geography of discontent'.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Faced with this difficult reality, a political choice must be made:

- market forces can either be left to decide on their own and we can pursue the current agglomeration logic, in particular around metropolitan areas; or**
- we can opt for a decision to take these developmental inequalities on board by coming up with alternative and innovative solutions.**

At the European Committee of the Regions, we are strongly in favour of the second option.

Solutions will not come from Brussels alone. They will emerge primarily from the know-how of the regions, provided that the European Union and its Member States empower them. The aim has not been to strengthen the power of regions and cities as a matter of principle. Quite the contrary: the aim is to inform the European Union

that, if it does not rely on its regions, if it does not give these territories sufficient resources to develop their own policies and experiments, it will not achieve the expected results.

It is with this in mind that the European Committee of the Regions has made every effort to influence the budgetary and political choices currently being made by the European institutions.

It will be pointless for the Commission to adopt a new, long-term vision for rural areas if Europe is not given the necessary tools to implement it: namely a reinforced budget for rural policy and an action plan. As underlined by Mr Stenson, our rapporteur, the new, long-term vision for rural areas should be transformed into a concrete policy framework – a Rural Agenda. The Rural Agenda should propose a set of integrated policies that enable and empower rural communities to turn challenges into advantages.

In this context, the Committee has managed to influence Parliament on a number of important points in order to better take into account the needs of the regions that are being 'left behind' in European policies. I would like to list three of them here:

- Firstly, strengthening territorial approaches in cohesion policy and the EAFRD. Including the fifth thematic objective — the territorial approach — in the thematic concentration within Cohesion Policy is a fundamental step forward, in particular to foster cooperation between urban and rural areas. It will make it possible to reconnect the areas left behind, making them more dynamic;**

- **Secondly, the regulations as voted in Parliament confirm that more account should be taken of areas with permanent natural handicaps — in particular by taking greater account of depopulation — as a criterion for allocating cohesion policy funds;**
- **Finally, regions are to be given a greater role in managing the strategic plans of the new CAP. This model of decentralised management was not originally provided for, but the European Parliament finally followed the Committee's recommendations. This type of management, as close as possible to the ground, ensures that the problems of certain areas that are at risk of being left behind are better taken into account.**

These advances are, of course, positive. However, we have not yet covered half of the journey. We must now convince the Member States. The mobilisation of MEPs, today's presence of rural associations and the growing weight of the #CohesionAlliance are major assets for us. We must therefore maintain pressure on the Member States, calling on them to propose sufficient resources and innovative policies to address the specific problems of rural, mountainous and sparsely populated areas.

Territorial development is the key to restoring trust between Europeans and their Union. To achieve our results, we will need to mobilise all our policies beyond the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy.

Thank you for your attention.