

Speech of **Joke Schauvliege** at webinar *A Rural Agenda is urgently needed for rural areas after the COVID-19 crisis* from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on 27 November 2020

Panel on *Experiences and lessons learned by rural areas during the COVID-19 crisis*

Dear participants, thank you for joining us today and for the invitation to speak to you about the experiences and lessons learnt by rural areas from the COVID-crisis as the Committee of the Regions' rapporteur on this important topic.

Rural areas across Europe have been hugely impacted by the pandemic, and many of the existing challenges in rural communities have been magnified by the ongoing crisis. This includes access to healthcare and other services, lack of digital and other infrastructure, demographic trends and ever-increasing pressures to public sector finances. Furthermore, the pandemic's drastic impacts on the tourism and agriculture sectors are strongly felt by many rural areas.

Local and regional authorities everywhere, including in rural areas, have been at the forefront in the response to the crisis, taking measures to protect the health of their citizens and to support businesses and livelihoods, development and recovery in their areas, in cooperation with local actors and communities on the ground.

In our outlook opinion of the Committee of the Regions, we want to gather evidence on the best practices and challenges in rural areas during the COVID-19 crisis, including those that are linked to measures introduced by the EU. It is important that we learn from these experiences, so that we can draw conclusions and provide recommendations for the way forward, towards recovery. The opinion aims to provide a reality check on the ground of the EU measures to fight the pandemic, to gather evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level.

We are reaching out to our members, networks and other stakeholders representing local and regional authorities, and invite all interested parties to contribute to our opinion with their experiences related to COVID-19. To complement the contributions, we have launched a study on how local and regional authorities in rural areas have made use of the more flexible rules of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives to address the challenges caused by COVID-19 in their territories.

Following a cross-sectoral approach, the opinion will be discussed in all the Commissions of the CoR, with the view to being adopted in the May 2021 Plenary session. The conclusions will be shared widely with the other EU and international actors.

We must use this global crisis to find out which actions and proposals have actually led to solutions and what lessons can be learned for the future approach to these and other crises, also at the European level and globally. A thorough evaluation will make us wiser and stronger for the future.

Europe's recovery from the crisis needs to be based on the lessons learnt at all levels of governance, including those closest to the citizens, and these lessons must be drawn from a wide variety of regions and local authorities, including rural areas.

One of the questions for debate for our opinion concerns the challenges for rural development in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

Crises can bring opportunities, if we learn from our experiences and put in place a forward-looking EU rural agenda, linked to the overarching EU policies such as the green and digital transitions, economic development and COVID-19 recovery. We must also ensure that the new funding instruments – CAP, cohesion policy, the Recovery and Resilience Facility - at EU and national levels, address the needs of our diverse rural and remote communities and support them in their efforts towards sustainable recovery in the long term.

I look forward to the debates of today, and continuing cooperation with the European Parliament, the European Commission, the and key partner networks on this thematic.