



CONCLUSIONS

Final 21032019

Challenges for Rural Areas

Rural territory must be vivid and attractive for people to live and visit. Good access to broadband, digital services, ageing population, and accessibility are the most relevant **challenges**.

Digitalization

The concept of “**Smart Villages**” allows local communities to benefit from all opportunities of the digital economy, enhance accessibility to services comparable to urban areas, and make efficient use of regional, national, and EU policies. Furthermore, they enhance and strengthen the role of the rural communities that cover 92% of European territory.

Realities in Europe are different, and a one-fits-all strategy is not feasible. More work needs to be done in four areas based on a CLLD approach: coverage with broadband access and digital technologies; innovative services and service delivery; methodology to develop bottom-up Smart Village strategies; and ways to finance these strategies through multi- and cross-funding.

Demography and Active Ageing

The proportion of 60+ citizens is growing in all countries in Europe. This is more critical in rural areas because at the same time, the younger population emigrates to urban centres due to the lack of attractive options for work. On the other side, the urban elderly enjoy good health with active life style, and in general terms have acceptable income. They can travel off-season and demand individual, active, healthy, and quality leisure services together with the possibility for interaction and participation with others, both travellers and local population. Products related with **nature and culture** are highly valued. This demand profile matches perfectly with the resources in rural areas. If adequately designed and promoted, it provides a wide range of new opportunities where also the local elderly population can participate and benefit.

Accessibility

In parallel to the demographic evolution, accessibility needs to be improved both to assure that rural areas are liveable for residents, and are more attractive for visitors. Depending on criteria, 12-20% of actual visitors already have some kind of impairment, with growing trend. Persons with any kind of impairment look for real and reliable information, which is critical to decide not just about a specific service: the whole travel process from departure to arrival is relevant. Initiatives in this field benefit both the resident population and their visitors, as can be seen in the example of Greenways.

Opportunities for Rural Areas

Changes in visitor's demand and values offer new opportunities for unexploited rural resources. Nature and landscape are amongst the most valued assets for tourism. Individual and authentic personal experiences are preferred over standardized mass tourism, and new developments in logistics can open up urban markets for local rural products.

Nature

Protected natural areas cover great part of European territory. They are a core asset to attract the increasingly environmentally aware tourism market. Special potential exists in nature reserves, nature parks, and in the Natura2000 territories: the considerable off-sets for economic activities in these areas can be compensated by their high attraction for environmentally-conscious visitors. In special, the European "brand" of Natura2000, despite several initiatives in the past, is not sufficiently put into value neither through tourism, nor as origin of high-quality agriculture produce.

Landscape

Mapping of tourism activity to geography provides clear results: an attractive and diverse landscape is a critical element for success. This is a natural asset of mountain territory. But also flat areas – which are about half of rural EU – can improve their landscape and benefit through the AgroForestry concept. Combining with villages and communities that care about their architectonic and cultural heritage, also a less spectacular landscape can be made attractive for visitors.

Distribution of rural produce to urban markets

Increasing awareness of the benefits of local, organic and fresh produce, together with digital management and optimized logistics, open new and competitive chances for direct sales from the rural producer to the urban client. Upcoming solutions such as self-driven vehicles or drones will enhance such possibilities also for small quantities through a cost-efficient two-way transport of goods to rural areas and back, creating a win-win situation for both sides.

The Way Forward

Changes in the European agriculture and regional development policy framework for the period 2021-2027 create new chances for synergies between rural and urban areas. The new concept of the CAP-Common Agriculture Policy builds around three general and nine specific objectives. Most of them offer synergies with tourism, confirming the strategic importance of the STRD concept in either way: "Sustainable Tourism for Rural Development" or "Tourism for Sustainable Rural Development".

Rural local development initiatives have been organized around the LEADER concept since 1991. Due to its success, it is now mainstream under the term of CLLD – Community Led Local Development also for urban and periurban areas. Fitting perfectly with tourism sustainability criteria, this methodology unleashes and promotes the human energy that is critical for any initiative in the future.

Development is rarely achieved by top-down planning. However, these plans can establish a favourable frame that allows ideas driven by people to become reality. Connecting the ambitions of individuals and facilitating places to meet and interact, rural human dynamic triggers economic development with global vision while still rooted in the local community.

Roundtable and Final Remarks

- The digital transformation of economy and society also affects rural areas. Local communities shall take a lead through the CLLD methodology and around the concept of Smart Villages, with specific funds to be made available. In this context, a good infrastructure of general broadband coverage is critical to avoid a digital divide between rural and urban areas.
- Demographic changes have impact on European societies in general, and on rural areas in special. Challenges can be met by taking chance of the parallel opportunities that arise from the demand for recreation of the urban retired population.
- Tourism is about how to share between visitor and rural community. “Over-tourism” is an issue also at small scale. This requires a methodology for both sectors working together, setting up joint local planning and implementation strategies.
- The rural exodus remains and increases. The spirit of Cork 2.0 seems often watered-down into administrative top-down action that make little change in reality. Only strategic policies that holistically invest in innovation, vitality and viability of rural areas are able to unleash human energy and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a dynamic community.
- Rural territories are not a problem – they are part of the solution when we define the vision of a vital, sustainable, and innovative Europe.
- The elaboration of a **Rural European Agenda** – as supported by the EP in October 2018 – has strategic importance for the sustainable future and vitality of rural areas. It would also assure that resources available through the MFF 2021-2027 for the European Common Strategic Framework, renewed CAP, and cohesion funds can be managed in an effective and coherent way to foster rural development.