

RURAL ISOLATION OF CITIZENS IN EUROPE

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Established in the Netherlands in 1981, Volonteurope's Secretariat is hosted by Volunteering Matters, the UK's leading volunteering charity in policy and practice.

Contact:

Volonteurope Secretariat

c/o Volunteering Matters
18-24 Lower Clapton Road
London E5 0PD
United Kingdom

E: info@volonteurope.eu

T: +44 20 3780 5878

www.volonteurope.eu



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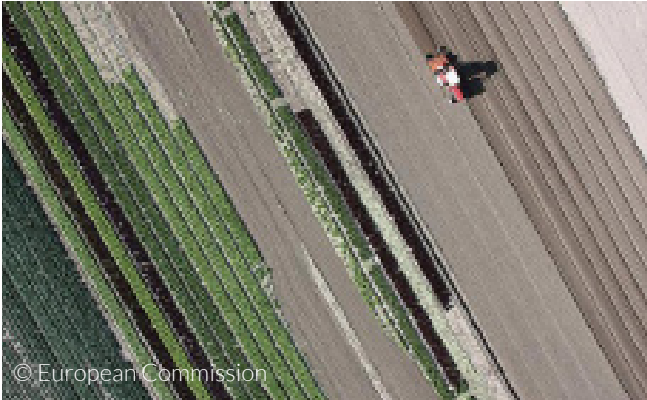
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Key terms

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CLLD	Community-led local development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EU	European Union
EU-15	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom
EU-N13	The Member States who joined the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013, namely Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia
EU-28	All EU Member States
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVA	Gross Value Added
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LAG	Local Action Group
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RDP	Rural Development Policy

Introduction



More than half of the European Union's (EU) land area (52% in 2014) is classified as predominantly rural¹, and more than one fifth of the EU's population (27.6% in 2015) lives in rural regions (Eurostat 2015: 271). Rural regions are particularly important in the EU-N13, where they represent 58.3% of the territory, whereas urban regions only cover 6.3% (European Commission 2014: Territory). Over 21% of the European population is employed in rural areas, which illustrates the importance of these regions for the European economy (European Commission 2013: 52).

Rural areas provide food, raw materials environmental services and spaces for rest and recreation. They are also home to some of Europe's natural, cultural and historical heritage.

Despite their demographic and economic importance, rural regions often lag behind urban and intermediate ones in a number of socio-economic indicators. People living and working in rural Europe are usually at higher risk of poverty. They also often face difficulties in accessing infrastructure and public services, and display lower levels of employment, income and educational attainment. Across the EU in 2013, the proportion of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion

in rural areas was 27.4%, considerably higher than in both urban and intermediate areas (Eurostat 2015: 271). The term rural isolation refers to these inequalities, as well as the mechanisms that perpetuate them such as remoteness and low population density.

In 19 EU Member States, the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2013 was higher in rural areas than in cities.

Rural regions across Europe do not represent a uniform group. Economic and social trends can be identified within macro-regions (Eastern Europe, North-Western Europe, and Mediterranean Europe), as can differences between older and newer EU Member States. In fact, the urban-rural divide is often quite complex, with some macro-regions experiencing high levels of rural isolation (especially among the Mediterranean countries and the newer Member States), while others present high levels of wellbeing in rural areas when compared to urban ones (especially among countries in Central and North-Western Europe).

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify patterns of rural isolation across the EU. In 19 EU Member States, the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2013 was higher in rural areas than in cities. In rural Romania and Bulgaria, the difference was as much as 20% (Eurostat 2015: 272). This is particularly relevant in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy, which aims to promote "smart, inclusive and sustainable growth" in Europe during this decade (Eurostat 2015: 271). In line with this, rural poverty and social exclusion must be addressed as a priority, using a sustainable and cross-sectoral approach. European institutions, Member States and civil society actors each have an important role to play in the creation of an enabling environment in which rural communities across Europe can thrive.

¹ Since 2010, the European Commission has classified regions as either predominantly urban, intermediate or predominantly rural based on population density. Urban areas are those with a minimum population density of 300 inhabitants per square kilometre and a minimum population of 5000 inhabitants. Areas that do not meet these thresholds are classified as rural.

Rural isolation: a multidimensional problem

Rural isolation is a multidimensional problem requiring a multidimensional response. Firstly, the mechanisms that perpetuate poverty and social exclusion in rural areas must be identified and targeted. This involves assessing territorial and economic patterns that lead rural communities to fall behind in a number of socio-economic indicators. Secondly, the specific effects of these patterns – social exclusion, poor access to infrastructure and services, and high levels of outmigration – need to be addressed with a more targeted approach.

Despite the multidimensional nature of rural isolation, all rural development initiatives in Europe should have the same principal objectives:

- to promote the endogenous potential of rural communities;
- to stimulate rural economies and foster social mobility; and
- to improve access to services and infrastructure across rural Europe.

In order to meet these objectives, governments, businesses, citizens and civil society need to be pulling in the same direction. Rural communities should be encouraged to tap into their existing development potential to combat isolation. As this report will demonstrate, citizen and voluntary sector engagement is as vital to this process as government or business action.

The territorial dimension: remoteness and low population density

Throughout Europe, people living in remote areas often face difficulties in accessing services, infrastructure, labour markets and educational opportunities. Remoteness therefore plays a major role in determining spatial patterns of poverty and social exclusion in Europe. The Territorial Dimension of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe (TiPSE) report (2014), a joint collaboration between the European Commission and Member States, identified spatial patterns of social exclusion and poverty in Europe. The TiPSE report found that “the role of space as a driver for social exclusion is clearer for the rural than the urban context” (ESPON 2014: 42).

Remote islands, as well as mountain, coastal or border regions, tend to experience the highest levels of rural isolation. Rural regions that are easily accessible or close to urban centres tend to present relatively high socio-economic indicators in terms of income and quality of life.



Remoteness plays a major role in determining spatial patterns of poverty and social exclusion in Europe.

Thus, geographical distance has a strong impact on access to opportunities.

The TiPSE report identified four broad patterns of differentiation in levels of social exclusion in Europe. Three of these are of particular relevance for this report:

- urban-rural differentiation;
- peripherality (geographic marginality); and
- place specific issues (e.g. demographic ageing, outmigration or population density).

Both ‘peripherality’ and ‘place specific issues’ are pertinent to the concept of rural isolation (ESPON 2014: 32-33). Rural areas with low population density, for example, tend to have the lowest levels of access to health services.

As the European Commission has acknowledged, in some rural regions:

“The construction of infrastructure of all kinds, and the provision of healthcare, education and other basic services is usually more costly because of the nature of the terrain, and the remoteness of the location, and more difficult to justify because of the small number of people being served.

(ESPON 2014: 61)

In light of these findings, more must be done to provide even the most remote communities with the services necessary for their wellbeing. Broadening access to education, employment opportunities and infrastructure should therefore be the cornerstone of any rural development initiative.

Social exclusion and poverty: a vicious cycle

The territorial dimension of rural isolation is only part of the story; a number of social factors also come into play in generating entrenched poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Rural isolation has a strong intergenerational element, with poverty and social exclusion often being passed down through generations and becoming deeply entrenched. Individuals and communities facing social exclusion often feel alienated from mainstream society, and lack the tools to seek better opportunities and engage with social networks outside their often restricted social circles. Civil society groups have repeatedly pointed to the stigmatisation experienced by some rural populations, especially from the poorest areas, which deepens feelings of isolation and exclusion.



The TiPSE report has concluded that:

“In the long run, it is often the most vulnerable population groups who become trapped in a vicious cycle of immobility, exclusion and poverty. It is specifically critical when, within this cycle of immobility and poverty, disadvantage is transmitted from one generation to the next. [...] Prejudice and stigmatization increases the risk of poverty and contributes to a downward spiral.”

(ESPON 2014: 44)

To create an inclusive environment that fosters social mobility, the stigmatisation of rural populations must be targeted. Encouraging urban populations to visit isolated regions, coordinating exchange visits with young people, promoting tourism in rural areas, and drawing attention to the traditions and culture of rural communities are all ways to reduce feelings of exclusion and isolation. In line with this, volunteering and active citizenship should be recognised as useful tools to promote integration and inclusivity in rural areas.

Local communities understand their context and needs and have tremendous development potential.

A lack of understanding between many rural and urban communities can make rural inhabitants wary of external intervention. Involving local citizens in rural development efforts, and recruiting consultants and service providers who understand the local context, is key to ensuring the success and sustainability of rural development initiatives. Local communities understand their context and needs, and have tremendous development potential. Initiatives should be built on existing social, human and physical capital, and involve the local community at every step of the process, instilling a sense of ownership in local residents and ensuring their continued input and support.

EstYes is an Estonian non-governmental organisation (NGO) that has been running international voluntary service initiatives in Estonia for over 20 years. Their projects fight rural isolation by promoting intercultural learning among rural communities. Rural communities across Estonia host between 5 and 15 international volunteers for 2-3 weeks. During this time, the volunteers help the communities with farming, constructing and renovating public buildings, tidying up public areas, running local festivals and more. There are also opportunities for long-term volunteers to stay in a village for up to a year, usually taking on a role in a local kindergarten or community centre.

Working alongside foreign volunteers opens people's minds, teaches tolerance of other cultures and fights the stereotypes and prejudices that perpetuate rural isolation. It also gives international volunteers the experience of living and working in another country, specifically in a rural area. The contacts built through these initiatives encourage local communities to get involved in other international programmes.

The positive outcomes of EstYes' work are perhaps best illustrated by the example of Märjamaa, a small village in Estonia. The village entered the EstYes programme in 2000 with considerable trepidation. After hosting international volunteers for several years, the community

became increasingly involved in programmes promoting international cooperation, voluntary service and youth exchange. Today, it hosts international volunteers in the local kindergarten and youth centre, providing intercultural learning and language practice to children and young people. They host volunteer camps where international participants work alongside the local community to tidy up public spaces and carry out other practical tasks in the village. They also send local young people to a range of international programmes and training activities in countries ranging from India to Mexico. Finally, an international folk dance festival has now been running in Märjamaa for 10 years.

The perseverance of EstYes in fighting local reservations and prejudices with regards to international collaboration has put Märjamaa on the map, and made this village part of an international community.



Economic development in rural Europe

In general, areas with low levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic growth are more at risk of poverty. Economic development should therefore be at the heart of any solution to rural isolation.

In 2014, predominantly rural regions had the lowest level of GDP per capita in Europe (73% of the EU-28 average). This means that income levels in rural regions are considerably lower than in urban regions. The fastest growth between 2006-2011 took place in predominantly urban regions of the EU-N13 (from 90% of GDP per capita in 2006 to 108% in 2011). By contrast, predominantly rural regions in the EU-N13 only grew from 40% in 2006 to 46% in 2011. The difference in GDP per capita between predominantly rural and predominantly urban regions in the EU-

N13 has therefore increased (European Commission 2014: GDP per capita).

Accordingly, levels of poverty risk across Europe present an urban-rural divide. In 2014, people living in rural areas were most at risk of poverty, with a rate of 27.3% in the EU-28. Particularly high rates of risk of poverty were recorded in sparsely-populated areas in Bulgaria and Romania (61.4% and 54.8%, respectively). Rural poverty has also been strongly associated with Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy (European Commission 2014: Structure of the economy).

Due to variations in the sectoral distribution of economic activity across these countries, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to rural poverty. In order to stimulate economic growth throughout

Europe, the socio-economic contexts of individual regions must be taken into account. For example, in the predominantly rural regions of the EU N-13, the primary sector² still accounted for 8.3% of Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2011, compared to only 4% in the EU-15. Likewise, the importance of the secondary sector³ was 10% higher in the predominantly rural regions of the EU-N13 (39.6%) than in those of the EU-15 (29.3%). By consequence, the weight of the tertiary sector⁴ in predominantly rural areas is considerably lower in the EU-N13 (52.1%) than in the EU-15 (66.7%) (European Commission 2014: Structure of the economy).

The importance of the secondary sector across the predominantly rural regions of the EU-28 is much higher than in the urban regions. Accordingly, the weight of the services sector in the economy of predominantly rural regions is generally lower than in urban and intermediate regions, especially in the Czech Republic (51.5%), and Bulgaria (48.8%) (European Commission 2014: Structure of the economy).

Given the varying weights of different sectors, the EU has devoted more than one third of its budget to Cohesion Policy, which aims to remove economic, social and territorial disparities across the EU. Diversifying rural areas, with the aim of fostering economic growth and creating new jobs, is an important part of this. During the 2014-2020 period, a total of €351 billion will be invested, split across the following groups:

- less developed regions (GDP <75% of the EU-28 average);
- transition regions (GDP 75%-90% of the EU-28 average); and
- more developed regions (GDP >90% of EU-28 average).

Regional economic policy aims to stimulate investment in rural areas by improving accessibility, providing infrastructure and quality services and preserving the environment. This, it is hoped, will encourage innovation and fight social immobility

² The industries engaged in the production or extraction of natural resources such as crops, oil and ores.

³ The industries engaged in the manufacturing of finished goods and products from raw materials.

⁴ The services industry.

and exclusion in rural areas by unlocking public and private investment and targeting infrastructure developments. In line with this, The European Commission has underlined the role of Member States and regional authorities in deriving maximum impact from EU structural funds, by capitalising on loans, equity and guarantees (Eurostat 2015: 122).

However, part of the problem is the cyclical nature of the economic problems facing rural communities. The remoteness and low population density of some rural regions have resulted in low investment levels, leading to low levels of economic (productivity, employment, enterprise, innovation) and human (knowledge, skills, qualifications) capital. In turn, low capital formation leads to poorer economic performance, and lower levels of employment and income. This cycle can only be broken by greater and more diversified investment in rural areas.

The Imago Mundi Association, an organisation based in Arges county, Romania, runs initiatives that promote cross-sector collaboration and investment in rural communities.

It was founded in 2008 in the rural community of Mâlureni by teachers and young people from the community. The organisation partners with external corporations operating in the Arges area, involving them in their rural development projects. The contacts and awareness generated through these schemes enable Imago Mundi to help young people from rurally isolated areas enter the labour market, fostering social mobility and stimulating economic growth.

One such project took place in 2015, funded by a corporation operating in Arges, OMV Petrom. Having been briefed on Imago Mundi's work against rural isolation, OMV Petrom offered financial support to a project on rural development and the prevention of violence. The educational project, 3D Communities: Personal development, Communication, Nonviolence, ran between March and November of last year in partnership with OMV Petrom. Young people from three rural communities were involved in violence awareness campaigns, counselling and career guidance activities, as well as personal development training courses, all financed by the corporation.

Ultra-micro economics: a possible solution?

While outside investment in rural areas is important, it should not monopolise local economies, nor drain resources away from communities. A large industrial plant, for example, may divert profits elsewhere and exacerbate local inequalities of income and wealth. By contrast, enterprises that build an inclusive economy based on local needs and resources, and that empower people to be economically active and included, can be extremely beneficial to small communities.

Ultra-micro economics is a sustainable way to boost local economic growth. A 2014 report on ultra-micro economics published by Co-operatives UK suggests that communities often possess ignored assets that:

[...] even the biggest losers in the developed world [...] do actually possess the basics they need for an economy: they have money flowing into the remaining public sector outposts, universities or hospitals, and they have people with imagination and drive who want to work. They have people who need to buy things, and they have raw materials, maybe in the form of rubbish, but resources nonetheless. (Boyle 2014: 5)

Ultra-micro economics teaches us that local economics is about repatriating economic activity and keeping resources flowing within the community. Small businesses and social enterprises are key agents at this scale of economic activity. Research by the New Economics Foundation has found that spending £10 in a local food outlet in the UK is worth another £25 to the local economy, as it gets re-spent locally several times. By contrast, spending money in a large supermarket chain only returns about half of that to the local economy (NEF 2002: 20).

Sustainable economic success requires a variety of local enterprises and co-operatives that can trade with and invest in each other.

At this scale, economics becomes more reliant upon strong social networks and relationships based on mutual support. These, added to local citizens' knowledge and willingness to improve things, are invaluable assets for development. Evidence shows

that places with stronger social capital tend to be more successful economically.

Although ultra-micro economics can only work if different parts of the community pull their resources together, the government also has a role to play. Central government has to support the launch of local institutions that work at the required scale. For example, financial institutions that are small enough to lend money to small projects and entrepreneurs (credit unions in the USA, the KfW in Germany and co-operative banks in Italy are helpful examples to follow).

Local government must develop a vision for economic development and accept responsibility to deliver it.

Councils, municipalities and towns can focus their procurement activity on local enterprises and organisations that generate real value to communities and keep the benefits of public spending local.

European funding for rural development must also increase support for local development strategies. Funding can be channelled to support small businesses and the voluntary sector, and to provide technical assistance and training for the local labour force. Equipping rural communities with the tools to capitalise on their assets is an effective and sustainable way to boost economic growth and foster economic development in rural Europe.

The **Rural Development Foundation** (RDF) in Poland aims to support non-agricultural businesses and fight rural unemployment. Their microloan scheme was started in 2003 to offer credit to entrepreneurs from rural areas, wanting to develop their own small business but lacking collateral and a verifiable credit history. The maximum loan amount is 40000 PLN (around €10 000) with very low interest rates and a credit period of 24-48 months. So far the Foundation has distributed more than 10 700 loans, totaling over 17 200 000 PLN. Its benefits have been felt across rural Poland, stimulating local economies and encouraging economic development. Today, the microloan initiative is largely financed by EU sources.

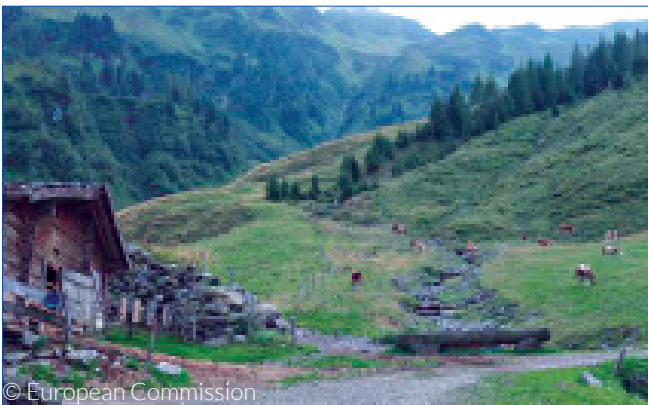
The realities of rural isolation: opportunities, services and infrastructure

Concretely, rural poverty is characterised by reduced access to education, employment opportunities, infrastructure and services. Although interconnected, each of these issues should be targeted individually.

Accessing education

Access to education is strongly correlated with life chances and social mobility. A lack of educational skills and qualifications tends to limit access to jobs, and therefore increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion. In assessing access to education, a number of dimensions should be considered, including level of educational attainment⁵, school dropouts⁶, academic achievement, and participation in lifelong learning⁷.

In general, rural areas present lower levels of educational attainment and higher rates of school dropouts. Across the EU, the proportion of early leavers from education and training was highest among those living in rural areas (13.3% compared with 12.6% in towns and suburbs, and 10.7% in cities). Early leavers made up a higher share of the population aged 18-24 in rural areas in most EU Member States and particularly in rural areas of Bulgaria, Spain and Romania (Eurostat 2015: 277). The percentage of people who achieved at least upper-secondary education in rural areas in 2013 was 71.2%, compared to 77.8% in cities. In rural regions of Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Romania, the percentage was as low as 60%. Rural regions also present the lowest rates of lifelong learning (Eurostat 2015: 78).



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Territorial factors play a significant role in reduced access to education among rural populations. Children living in remote areas often have a difficult commute to school, resulting in reduced school attendance, lower numbers reaching upper-secondary education and high levels of school drop-outs. Younger children may also fall behind, as parents are unwilling or unable to take them to far-away kindergartens and primary schools. The European Commission's "Barcelona objectives" call for the development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe, with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth. A review of the objectives has highlighted that in 2010, 15 Member States failed to reach the Barcelona target to ensure childcare provision for at least 33% of children under the age of 3, registering a clear difference between urban and rural areas (European Commission, 2013: 7). Lifelong learning opportunities in remote areas also tend to be few and far between. The result is a self-perpetuating cycle, in which citizens with limited access to education are less able to value education, and therefore more likely to drop out of school, or allow their children to do so. In order to promote social mobility in rural regions, this cycle must be broken.

As the European Commission has rightly noted, "evidence suggests that delivery of education and training, at all levels of the education system, is likely to prove an important mean of helping the poor and socially excluded" in rural areas (ESPON 2014: 61).

Improving access to education must therefore be the foundation of all initiatives targeting young people in rural Europe. Fundamentally, this means increasing the quantity and quality of educational institutions and projects in remote areas. Rural communities should have kindergartens and schools within easy reach, as well as lifelong learning initiatives and educational projects which endorse learning throughout the community. Offering free or well subsidised transport to students at all levels would also reduce barriers to education for rural populations.

⁵ Educational attainment is defined as the percentage of the population between 25 and 64 years with at least an upper-secondary level of education.

⁶ School dropouts are defined as those people, aged 18-24 years, who have attained at most lower secondary education level and are not involved in further education or training.

⁷ All learning and training pursued throughout life, including informal and non-formal learning.

The Educational Enterprise Foundation (Poland) was set up by a consortium of organisations to support talented secondary school graduates from rural areas across Poland. Their **Bridge Scholarship** programme addresses the disparity in access to higher education between urban and rural youth.

Bridge Scholarships offer young people from disadvantaged rural backgrounds educational opportunities that might normally appear out of their reach. By removing any financial concerns and promoting higher education across rural Poland, the project fosters social mobility and economic development. Cross-sector collaboration has been vital to the initiative. Today, Bridge Scholarships are financed by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, The Rural Development Foundation (Poland), the National Bank of Poland, the PZU Foundation, the BGK Foundation and a coalition of some 100 local NGOs.



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Employment in rural Europe

Employment conditions and opportunities influence material living conditions and general wellbeing. Work generates income and occupies a large part of each working day. It can also build social connections, skills and a sense of satisfaction. Those who cannot find work or who work in precarious jobs, are more likely to feel socially excluded or isolated.

In 2013, predominantly rural regions had a slightly lower rate of employment than the country average in 15 Member States. For the EU as a whole, the employment rate in rural Europe stood at 68% in 2013, 0.8% below intermediate regions. There are,

however, significant discrepancies in the distribution of employment rates by degree of urbanisation across the EU. In Bulgaria and Lithuania, for example, employment rates were as much as 14.3 and 12.3% higher in cities than in rural areas (Eurostat 2014: 272-273).

As the number of farms across the EU decreases, rural workers in Member States are leaving agriculture and seeking employment in other sectors. In 2010, there were around 12 million farms in the EU, but only 10 million Annual Work Units⁸, which is less than one per farm (European Commission 2013: 20-33).

The decline in the agricultural sector's share of total employment is even more apparent in the EU-

With the mechanization of farm practices, agricultural labour is gradually being replaced by physical capital.

N13 (-2.0%) than in the EU-15 (-1.6%) and EU-28 (-1.8%) (European Commission 2014: Employment). In the context of a declining primary sector, new opportunities must be created elsewhere to maintain employment levels across affected regions.

A lack of investment in rural areas leads to reduced employment opportunities, thus debates on rural development must emphasise the need for economic diversification and innovation. Investment in tourism, industry and other services would create new prospects for local employment, and dissuade the young population from moving away to find work. Given the variation in economic performance across EU countries and macro-regions, initiatives targeting unemployment should take into account the specificities of local contexts. Furthermore, all attempts to diversify employment opportunities must be accompanied by appropriate training for workers. This could be offered through training associations and apprenticeships, as well as other forms of informal and non-formal education. Volunteering programmes are an effective way to develop skills in the labour market, and should be recognised as such by governments and employers.

⁸ An Annual Work Unit corresponds to the work performed by one person who is occupied on an agricultural holding on a full-time basis.



© Devetashko Plateau Association

A place of stunning beauty, the Devetashko Plateau is one of Bulgaria's most isolated regions. For years, people from the area's handful of villages saw no reason to come together in common activities or projects. In 2007, however, the **Devetashko Plateau Association** built a playground in one of the local villages. The following year, the Association brought the region's residents together to share their visions of how they wanted the Plateau to develop. Ever since, the organisation has been carrying out projects at the communities' request. With the Devetashko Plateau Association's help, the communities have found a way to revitalise the local economy and generate income.

Taking advantage of the beautiful natural attractions and rich traditions the Devetashko has to offer, the communities registered guesthouses and restaurants to cater for tourists. Only 10 years ago, the region was completely unknown to Bulgarians, now it receives hundreds of visitors

each year. The local residents are very proud of their heritage. They offer visitors unique culinary experiences and planned activities (such as foraging for wild herbs). For the past 8 years, the villages have also competed to host the annual 'Songs of Spring' festival, which attracts visitors from all over Bulgaria. The people from the Devetashko Plateau have come together to show their region and traditions to the world.

Very importantly, the Association and the communities have attempted to spread the benefits of their revitalised local economy throughout the region.

Very importantly, the Association and the communities have attempted to spread the benefits of their revitalised local economy throughout the region.

Visitors are encouraged to stay and participate in activities in the most remote mountainous villages which are not so close to the popular attractions. This way, communities with apparently fewer opportunities for growth are supported in generating local income.

A large part of the initiative's success is that it was built on previously existing local capital, involving even the most remote communities. By promoting tourism in the area, the people of the Devetashko Plateau have created a network of rural communities, built connections with urban populations and found a sustainable approach to

Outmigration: a vulnerable population

Due to a lack of educational and employment opportunities, rural Europe experiences high levels of outmigration. Young people in particular leave rural areas to seek a better life in cities or abroad. This has significant implications for the demographic of rural regions, as many of those 'left behind' are vulnerable groups for whom leaving is not a viable option (older people, disabled people and children).

From an economic perspective, these trends are worrying. There can be little development in areas

where younger and more qualified groups leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, those staying behind are vulnerable and more likely to suffer the effects of social exclusion. Not only is it harder for vulnerable groups to live in areas lacking infrastructure and support, they are also often unable to contribute to the development of the local economy. In many cases, rural isolation becomes self-perpetuating.

Ageing populations are particularly prominent in rural parts of Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Spain, France,

Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom (European Commission 2014: Age structure). The old-age dependency ratio for the EU-28 was 27.4% in 2013, meaning that there were less than four persons of working age for every person aged 65 or over. This dependency ratio was higher in predominantly rural regions of the EU-15 (above 30% in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom), and lower in the EU-N13 countries (below 20% in Poland and Slovakia). The young/old population ratio complements this analysis. In rural regions, only four countries (Belgium, Poland, Slovakia and especially Ireland) have more young people than older people, while Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal count less than 65 young people for every 100 older people (European Commission 2014: Age Structure).

The problem of outmigration also has a gender dimension, as Eastern and Southern Member States experience particularly high outmigration levels among women. This is due to labour-market related barriers and must be targeted with anti-discriminatory policies and initiatives (European Commission 2008).

In order to slow outmigration and restore balance in the demographic of rural areas, investment - with the aim to increase educational, training and employment opportunities - is key. It is not, however, the only way to target the problem. Improving the quality of life in rural areas would also discourage outmigration. Simply having better access to infrastructure and services would give the younger population an incentive to stay and reduce feelings of isolation among vulnerable groups.



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First launched in 1988, Volunteering Matters' Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP) responds to local community needs by delivering services led by community volunteers. RSVP projects make use of the skills and experiences which older volunteers have to offer, while reducing loneliness and isolation among the older community.

The Norfolk Knitters and Stitchers project was started by a local retired headteacher who wanted to share her love of knitting. It has grown into an action group of retired volunteers that coordinates knitting groups across Norfolk for senior and retired individuals, vulnerable adults, and other community groups. Groups have developed in community halls, churches, libraries, care homes, and individuals' houses, bringing together like-minded people who want to meet others, use their skills to help the less fortunate, and raise money for good local causes at the same time.

Items are knitted or sewn to donate to charities and good causes, or sold to raise funds. There are also links to local schools who take knitted items to developing countries on the knitters' and stitchers' behalf. From a handful of people in 2009, the reach of Norfolk Knitters and Stitchers has grown year on year, expanding to reach over 2,570 members in the last few years.

Knitting and stitching provide vulnerable individuals with a social network, an opportunity to use their skills to help others and a sense

of community and belonging. Far from being simply an excuse to practice a craft, knitting and stitching groups are:

- beneficial to mental health, reducing social isolation, and promoting integration into communities;
- seen as an attractive and accessible activity by diverse community groups seeking support with all of the above; and
- instrumental to the self-esteem of vulnerable individuals who are empowered to give back to their communities in a way which utilises their skills and assets.

There is a correlation between social isolation and deterioration of both mental and physical health, and it has been shown that volunteering helps people to gain social stimulation, which in turn improves wellbeing and lengthens life expectancy.

Margaret is an example of the way in which initiatives such as Norfolk Knitters & Stitchers combat loneliness and social exclusion. She lost her husband to illness in 2013 and found herself alone and socially isolated. She became depressed, but found Norfolk Knitters and Stitchers and decided to raise money for the Palliative Care Centre which had looked after her husband. Margaret no longer feels alone, and is enjoying putting her skills to good use. She has now joined a crochet group as well, because “you are never too old to learn something new!”

Schemes such as Norfolk Knitters and Stitchers are tremendously helpful in combatting rural isolation. Creating an inclusive environment for vulnerable rural citizens has positive repercussions throughout the community, improving citizens’ sense of wellbeing and encouraging further positive action towards building an inclusive community.

Healthcare

For any community with an ageing or vulnerable population, a lack of access to healthcare is especially problematic. There is a direct correlation between geographical position and access to healthcare. There tend to be fewer healthcare service providers

in sparsely populated areas, as there is less incentive to provide services due to the low number of people being served. Poor access to education and training also means that there are likely to be fewer local medical professionals in these regions. This means that patients may have to travel long distances to receive necessary assistance. Whereas young people leave rural areas to seek better opportunities, some of the older or disabled population may be forced to leave to access services. Access to healthcare is therefore an important factor to consider when assessing wellbeing in rural areas.

In 2013, the proportion of the EU-28 population aged 18-64 who classified their own health as bad or very bad was as high as 6.7% among rural populations. This was somewhat higher than those living in urban areas (6%). The discrepancy was particularly noticeable in Eastern Member States (Eurostat 2015: 276). Rural areas across EU Member States suffer from a lack of medical infrastructure and staff, as well as limited access to medical specialists (European Commission, 2008: 59). In some cases, difficulty accessing healthcare is also due to the low number of people with medical insurance in rural areas (for example agricultural workers and small farmers who usually have small or no pensions). The challenge of accessing medical assistance is even greater for vulnerable ethnic minorities and undocumented migrants (European Commission, 2008: 64).

The EU’s health strategy is closely aligned with the Europe 2020 strategy. Investment in health, and attempts to reduce health inequalities, must target rural areas as a priority.

With better access to healthcare, rural populations will stay active for longer, reinforcing their employability and contributing to social cohesion.

Governments also have a vital role to play in improving national healthcare provision. Simply improving transport links would have numerous positive repercussions on access to healthcare. However, more medical facilities must also be built across rural Europe to ensure that even the most remote communities can easily reach medical centres. Volunteer or civil society initiatives can also play a role in broadening access to healthcare and support throughout rural Europe.

Macmillan Cancer Support is one of the largest British charities. It provides specialist health care, information and financial support to people affected by cancer. As well as helping with the medical needs of cancer patients, Macmillan looks at the social, emotional and practical impact cancer can have, and campaigns for better cancer care.

Research has shown that a cancer diagnosis can increase a person's feelings of isolation and loneliness. This is especially true for someone who is already living in an area that is rural and isolated. The Macmillan Buddies scheme in Carmarthenshire, Wales, is an example of how volunteers from local communities deliver services that support local people who are living with cancer in a remote and rural location. Carmarthenshire was selected as a suitable area for the Macmillan Buddies scheme because of its remoteness, which means there is limited support available for people affected by cancer.

Volunteers who have been carefully selected and trained deliver the Macmillan Carmarthenshire Buddies scheme throughout the region, providing practical and emotional support to people affected by cancer in their homes and local communities.

The service is tailored to the needs of the individual and can include help with household chores, simple gardening tasks, walking the dog, company to the shops, as well as being there to listen and provide emotional support as required. The service provides support not just for those with a cancer diagnosis, but also for their carers.

Paula Clarke is a volunteer with the programme. She was inspired to start volunteering with the Buddies scheme after losing family members to cancer. Paula visits 89 year old Henrietta Hughes every week, helping her with odd jobs in the house and taking her to the supermarket and local bank:

“Henrietta has had cancer twice, she can't walk far and is losing her sight, so I help her with little things like trips to the shop or the bank, or just have a chat and cup of tea if she doesn't feel like going anywhere. People like Henrietta already have very busy carers so what we offer is different. We often help people whose families live further away too.”

All volunteers receive core induction training before delivering the service in order to ensure they have the skills, competency and confidence to undertake their role. The training of volunteers is vital to the success of the programme as it not only ensures the quality of the service delivered, but also that volunteers feel valued, supported and motivated. Macmillan's Carmarthenshire Buddies scheme is an example of the many ways in which civil society can help vulnerable rural populations access services and feel less isolated.



HELP ME
MAKE SURE
NO ONE
FACES CANCER
ALONE

Internet access

The European Commission's Digital Agenda is one of the seven pillars of the Europe 2020 strategy. It aims to tap into the potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to foster innovation, economic growth and progress (ESPON 2015: 176).

A lack of ICT skills perpetuates unemployment in rural regions, as workers cannot compete in the modern labour market. It therefore impedes economic development and increases feelings of isolation, with communities feeling 'cut off' from the modern world.

While one of the seven pillars of the Digital Agenda is to promote fast and ultra-fast internet access to all, broadband internet is available to only 76% of rural households in Europe, compared to 96% of non-rural households (European Commission 2013: 268). This urban-rural digital divide, especially acute in the newer Member States, is further reinforced by a lack of ICT education in rural schools. The implications of such a digital divide are numerous.

A lack of ICT skills perpetuates unemployment in rural regions, as workers cannot compete in the modern labour market. It therefore impedes economic development and increases feelings of isolation, with communities feeling 'cut off' from the modern world.



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People without internet access are also unable to view online information about government and civil society initiatives which may be helpful to them. It is therefore vital to increase broadband availability and take up in rural areas, and increase ICT training in line with this.



© Imago Mundi

Last year, the Imago Mundi Association led a small-scale ICT project in the rural community of Mălureni in Romania. The initiative, Digital Opportunities For Future Generations, hosted a series of ICT workshops with the aim of increasing the computer skills of the community's young population.

A lack of ICT education in rural schools further reinforces the urban-rural digital divide.

Another example of effective cross-sector collaboration, the project was sponsored by Renault Romania and Ateliere Fara Frontiere, and coordinated by Imago Mundi. Bringing targeted ICT training to rural areas fosters social mobility and economic development by equipping rural populations with the necessary skills for entering modern labour markets.

European Rural Development Policy



European Rural Development Policy (RDP) has undergone considerable change in recent years. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), in place since the 1950s, has traditionally been a sectoral policy dealing mainly with agricultural development through subsidies and price guarantees for farms, with limited territorial aspects.

The late 1990s saw the establishment of RDP as Pillar II of the CAP, while Pillar I continued to focus on direct payments to producers. This meant that, in addition to direct market support for farmers (Pillar I), the CAP gained an explicit element of targeted social and environmental investment in rural areas (RDP or Pillar II).

The guiding principles of RDP under the CAP are the decentralisation of responsibilities and the flexibility of programming.

In 2014, a new legal framework for RDP under the CAP entered into force. It covers the 2014-2020 period and is aligned with the Europe 2020 Strategy. It is based on six key priorities:

- fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas;
- enhancing farm viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture in all regions, and promoting innovative farm technologies and sustainable management of forests
- promoting food chain organisation,

including processing and marketing of agricultural products, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture;

- restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry;
- promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors; and
- promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

The promotion of active citizenship and volunteering should be at the heart of rural development efforts.

These priorities feed into the CAP's three general objectives (viable food production, sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, and balanced territorial development), which in turn feed into the three objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is meant to give flexibility to the implementation of RDP at the local level, enabling communities to find relevant solutions to local needs.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) should design Local Development Strategies to be funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).



However, in order to make CLLD a viable tool for local development, relevant actors should address issues of bureaucracy, complex funding instruments and unused funds.

Member States must spend at least 30% of their EAFRD on measures related to land management and the fight against climate change, and at least 5% on CLLD. This is meant to guarantee minimum levels of funding for the social and environmental needs of rural areas, and avoid disproportionate shares of the resources being used as payments to farms. Nonetheless, as can be seen from the six priorities in the 2014-2020 period, farm (agricultural) support continues to be an important part of RDP. This means that in addition to farm payments under Pillar I, subsidies to agricultural activities are also promoted under Pillar II, and represent important shares of RDP spending.



A considerable body of economic research has emphasised the need to move away from heavy farm subsidy and towards investing in rural areas' social needs, innovation and environmental services (Zalurnt 2009: 13). These priorities need significantly less budget and would be more effective in combatting rural isolation. The EU budget should follow an even more welfare-oriented logic, rather than being shaped by agricultural output, political compromise and historical patterns of payments. Rural policies have been dominated by large political and economic interests, rather than by the social and environmental needs of the poorest rural regions in Europe. Further CAP reforms are therefore necessary.

It is vital that EAFRD funding is well targeted to reach the poorest areas, and used for the projects that are most needed by local communities.

Reductions in Pillar I funding in order to increase availability of resources for Pillar II (RDP) have to continue despite political opposition. Some have suggested an increase in co-financing requirements for Pillar I, thus forcing Member States to withdraw opposition to further reform. Similarly, co-financing requirements for targeted rural development could be reduced (although co-financing is an important aspect of European funding in order to promote better quality project design and prioritisation by Member States). Further shifts from Pillar I to Pillar II may bring more opposition from some Member States, especially those who would move from net recipients (due to the size of their agricultural output) to net contributors (due to their lower rates of rural isolation). However, funding for the poorest rural regions must be protected and enhanced.

A considerable body of economic research has emphasised the need to move away from heavy farm subsidy and towards investing in rural areas' social needs, innovation and environmental services.

It is vital that EAFRD funding is well targeted to reach the poorest areas, and used for the projects that are most needed by local communities. To ensure this, local citizens and civil society should always be involved in project implementation. The promotion of active citizenship and volunteering should therefore be at the heart of rural development efforts in all Member States, allowing rural communities to take ownership of their wellbeing and prosperity.

From isolation to inclusion

Giving rural communities a voice

Rural communities are the best equipped to identify and target the problems they face. Giving citizens a platform to articulate these problems empowers them to take action and ensures the relevance and efficacy of rural development efforts. Bringing communities together to share ideas and common experiences not only reduces their sense of isolation, it allows them to work together to target the issues outlined in this report. This is why several Member States have established Rural Parliaments.

Rural Parliaments originated in Scandinavia and their success in Sweden in particular encouraged other countries (including Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands and Lithuania) to hold their own meetings. Rural Parliaments bring together representatives from rural organisations to share ideas. Crucially, they open a dialogue between rural communities and national and regional governments, promoting civil society involvement in rural development initiatives. Rural Parliaments also encourage rural representatives to build contacts and collaborate with leaders and organisations from other villages. The resulting networks of rural communities combat feelings of isolation and encourage communities to work together. As some civil society organisations have recognised, similar benefits may be derived from smaller, more informal meetings.

Following the success of national Rural Parliaments and meetings, the European Rural Parliament was established to ensure that rural communities' ideas and opinions are reflected in European policy. There have been two meetings of the European Rural Parliament so far, most recently in November 2015 in Schärding, Austria. During this meeting, 240 rural representatives from across Europe approved a European Rural Manifesto, calling for full recognition of rural communities' rights to a quality of life equal to that of urban populations, as well as their right to full participation in political processes. The European Rural Parliament aims to engage rural communities, and ensure that changes to RDP in particular are based on real opinions and needs. The campaign will continue over the next two years with a view to influencing the preparation of policies for the period beyond 2020.

Giving rural citizens a platform to articulate their ideas and problems promotes active citizenship and engages rural communities in development efforts.

Poland

Since 2002, The Polish Rural Development Foundation and the Nidzica Development Foundation (NIDA) have been organising nationwide meetings for representatives of rural organisations from across Poland. The purpose is to support rural development by involving citizens in social and public issues. Every May, between 350 and 500 activists gather in Maróz for a three day event.

The meeting is an opportunity to make new contacts, exchange experiences and know how, hear about good practice examples from other parts of the country, improve management skills and get information about funding opportunities. The meetings are sponsored by the Polish Rural Development Foundation and the Polish-American Freedom Foundation.

Past topics at the meetings have included: 'From idea to project', 'Information technologies in the development of local communities', 'Cultural Heritage' and 'Internet , education, landscape, art'.



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The Netherlands

There are some 2500 village organisations in the Netherlands. These organisations are made up of volunteers who take responsibility for the wellbeing of their villages. Village organisations are members of a regional organisation for small villages. There are 11 regional organisations, made up of professionals who support the village inhabitants and their local organisations. These 11 regional organisations form the national organisation LVKK (Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen – National Organisation for Small Villages).

LVKK hosts national Rural Parliaments, bringing together representatives from local and regional organisations across the Netherlands. Regional organisations host a parliament once every two years, and themes from these regional parliaments are noted and, if widely relevant, discussed at the national meetings. Issues related to just one specific region are sent to the regional government.

Prevalent themes at Rural Parliaments in the Netherlands include ageing and declining populations in rural areas, the economic crisis, social mobility, access to healthcare,

education and broadband internet, as well as the renovation of unused buildings for social purposes (such as housing for young people or spaces for vocational projects).

At the November 2015 Rural Parliament, the main themes were healthcare in rural areas and the allocation of social housing. Following the event, concrete advice was sent to the Dutch parliament. Events such as these facilitate dialogue between rural communities and regional and national governments, ensuring the relevance and efficacy of rural development efforts in the Netherlands.



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Looking ahead

In order to break self-perpetuating patterns of exclusion and poverty across rural Europe, improvements must be made to education, labour markets and infrastructure. This means targeting both specific areas of social inequality, as well as the wider territorial, economic and social patterns that perpetuate them. Investment and economic diversification in rural areas will be central to achieving this, as will the provision of adequate public services.

If Europe is to meet its targets for 2020, an integrated and sustainable approach to rural development must be adopted at all levels: European, national and local. A priority should be empowering rural communities, and supporting civil society to take action and expand their activities. The importance of local action cannot be exaggerated. Rural development initiatives should

build on existing social, human and physical capital. When communities have the opportunity to share knowledge, skills and resources, they can not only survive in harsh economic times, but also thrive and guarantee the prosperity of their future generations. Local initiatives need to be supported by coherent funding and public engagement. Volunteering and active citizenship are essential tools for generating awareness and promoting positive, sustainable change.

As the case studies in this report demonstrate, several NGOs and associations have taken the lead in providing innovative solutions to rural problems, and this must continue. If Europe is to eradicate rural poverty, governments, businesses, citizens and civil society must all be working towards these same central aims.

Recommendations

EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS

Investment and funding:

- 1) Ensure that agricultural funding supports the poorest farms in Europe, including small family farms.
- 2) Aim to attract diversified investment in rural areas, be it in tourism, industry or other types of services.
- 3) Increase the percentage of rural funding to Community -Led Local Development. Strengthen the role of Local Action Groups, community organisations and civil society with funding, engagement and assistance.

Policy:

- 1) Decouple Rural Development Policy (especially Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy) from commercial policy.
- 2) The Common Agricultural Policy should be linked to wealth and income levels and decoupled from land ownership and output.
- 3) Target rural infrastructure as a priority. Address the digital divide with policies that increase broadband availability and take up in rural areas. Develop digital skills among rural populations with local training programmes involving volunteers. Policies should take into account the characteristics of the local population in terms of age, educational attainment and income levels.
- 4) Focus especially on vulnerable groups (women, young people, old people, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, migrants) when evaluating rural policy.

At the local level:

- 1) Support volunteering and grassroots action to promote social inclusion. Recognise the role of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations in engaging citizens and promoting local ownership of projects.

- 2) Support the empowerment of rural communities. Involve vulnerable groups in the design, delivery and evaluation of projects.

Europe 2020:

- 1) Continue to strengthen the rural dimension of Europe 2020 by measuring its impact on rural areas. The European Semester should include the measurement of progress achieved in rural areas and the European Commission must make specific recommendations to Member States to address rural issues, especially regarding the most deprived regions.
- 2) The 2016 review of the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework must consider the rural dimension. The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has indicated that the review will focus on his agenda for jobs, growth, fairness and democratic change. These must also be looked at from a rural perspective.

MEMBER STATES

Funding:

- 1) Improve implementation of European agricultural funds for Rural Development.
- 2) Allow local groups to participate in the governance structure of European funds. Clarify local level participation with stakeholders before submitting them to the European Commission.
- 3) Integrate the different funds' strategic priorities to target areas most in need.
- 4) Remove political resistance to farm subsidy reductions to free up resources for broader and more targeted rural development across Europe.
- 5) Focus resources on the most vulnerable rural areas and ensure that European programmes reach the most disadvantaged groups.

Government:

- 1) Ensure the quality and integrity of local Government and administration.

- 2) Equip local government officials with skills, knowledge and an understanding of Community-Led Local Development.
- 3) Adopt an intersectoral approach. Tackle Rural Isolation from a political, business, educational, social and cultural perspective.
- 4) Create networks of rural communities with national meetings for rural leaders.

Infrastructure:

- 1) Address the digital divide with policies that increase broadband availability and take up in rural areas. Develop digital skills among rural populations with local training programmes involving volunteers.
- 2) Increase the number of kindergartens and primary schools in rural areas so that children do not fall behind.
- 3) Increase support and care for the elderly in these areas, to avoid them moving to cities for care-purposes
- 4) Preserve networks of rural settlements using transport links. Assess the possibility of free or well-subsidised transport for young people and the elderly in these areas.

At the local level:

- 1) Recruit consultants and service providers who understand the local rural context. Build local initiatives on existing social, human and physical capital
- 2) Promote Community-Led Local Development. Foster the role of local action groups, community organisations and civil society and don't take it away from them.
- 3) Provide technical assistance to Local Action Groups in developing their Local Development Strategies.
- 4) Engage volunteers and voluntary organisations by guaranteeing funding and meaningful spaces of debate.
- 5) Use training associations, educational projects and lifelong learning initiatives to promote skills

that are relevant to the needs of rural labour markets.

- 6) Explore the possibility of group training associations and shared apprenticeships.
- 7) Use volunteering opportunities to develop skills in the labour market.
- 8) Ensure that skills and knowledge acquired through informal and non-formal learning, particularly volunteering, are recognised by employers.
- 9) Explore the possibility of community ownership of assets. This allows communities to use land and buildings to run vocational and training schools.
- 10) Provide adequate support and funding for small enterprises. Encourage entrepreneurship with micro-loan schemes.
- 11) Promote tourism in rural areas.
- 12) Promote volunteering and travel amongst rural populations with mobility schemes involving international volunteers.

CIVIL SOCIETY

General:

- 1) Share examples of good practice.
- 2) Encourage citizens to take responsibility for their villages. Avoid monopolising Civil Society involvement.
- 3) Promote cross-sector collaboration within rural communities. Local organisations must work together to improve the community.
- 4) Encourage urban populations to visit isolated communities and foster exchange-visits of young people.

Government and funding:

- 1) Take an active role in the governance structure of European funds impacting rural development. Participate in the design of Operation Programmes and the oversight of monitoring committees at the national level. Engage local groups and vulnerable groups in the design

and implementation of projects.

- 2) Communicate bad practices by Member States to the European Commission to ensure Governments engage a variety of stakeholders (especially at the local level) in the design, implementation and evaluation of European programmes.
- 3) Establish local advisory groups to assist grassroots and community organisations to access European funds. Advise Governments on strategic priorities and volunteer involvement.

Working with communities:

- 1) Organise local festivals and initiatives to draw attention to rural communities and their traditions.
- 2) Create intersectoral volunteer networks between civil society organisations in rural areas.
- 3) Encourage the urban population to visit isolated communities.

ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- 1) Use the above recommendations to create an enabling environment in which rural communities can thrive.

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