

ENRD webinar

## 4<sup>th</sup> Thematic Group meeting on the Long Term Rural Vision Rural#2040 Highlights report

A total of 50 participants from 17 EU Member States attended the [fourth meeting](#) of the Thematic Group (TG) to help build the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) announced by the President of the European Commission.

Participants took stock of the main messages coming out of the ENRDs' Rural Vision Week and listened to the inspiring experiences of developing integrated national strategies for rural development in Ireland and France at national level, and at regional/local level in Catalonia (Spain). Break-out discussions were organised to exchange ideas on what can be done in the Member States to put in place more holistic and future oriented strategies, and how the EU Rural Vision can facilitate these processes. Participants shared views about how stakeholders can cooperate at local level to make the future Vision become a reality and how networks can best provide support.

### Event Information

**Date:** 5 May 2021

**Location:** Virtual meeting

**Organisers:** ENRD Contact Point

**Participants:** 50 participants attending in a personal capacity - including people with experience from MAs, NRNs, European organisations, the European Commission, Local Action Groups (LAGs), stakeholder organisations and research.

**Outcomes:** Ideas and suggestions for actions to make the Rural Vision a reality in Member States (MS) and at regional/local level.

**Web page:** [4th TG meeting on Long Term Rural Vision](#)



### Taking stock of the main messages from Rural Vision Week

Many TG members actively participated in the ENRD [Rural Vision Week](#) from 22-26 March 2021. In a reflection session, TG members identified some of the key messages they considered emerged during the Vision Week and the actions they think will be needed in the future. These are summarised below:

- **Build a new narrative about rural areas.** The pandemic has pointed to the distinctive contribution that rural areas already make to the wellbeing of the whole of society –both rural and urban. The unique role of rural areas needs to be recognised and translated into concrete policies to boost collaboration among different public authorities on the full range of issues relevant to rural development.
- **Move from diagnosis to practical action.** The Rural Vision Week has shown that there is considerable agreement about the common needs, challenges and opportunities that rural areas are facing. However, this growing consensus urgently needs to be converted into practical action plans with rolling projects at EU, national, regional, and local levels, aiming to support rural communities to respond to and participate actively in a green, digital, and socially just transition.
- **The future of rural areas is embedded in digital and social innovation.** Action is needed now to enhance the 'digital capital' of rural areas - in terms of infrastructure, comprehensive digital skills, and access to knowledge and applications. Physical infrastructure and services need to be improved in parallel with governance, technological support and social inclusion in ways that fit different rural realities. Hubs, animators, and brokers can help connecting local needs with sources of innovation knowledge. Approaches such as LEADER and Smart Villages can help overcome the current 'innovation deficit' in rural areas and foster innovative solutions which can then be mainstreamed and institutionalised.
- **New voices in rural development need to be heard.** Agriculture will undergo profound changes in the near future to fulfil its potential in a greener future. However, the Rural Vision must be much broader than agriculture and it must build alliances among a wider spectrum of rural stakeholders that are essential to ensure vibrant rural futures. Mechanisms are needed to give voice to these new players and especially to young people.




### Ideas from TG members for a Rural Semester

[Marjorie Jouen](#) (Jacques Delors Institute) introduced the ideas for a 'Rural Semester' based on discussions among a group of interested TG members and outside the TG itself. Their proposal involves engaging with the existing European Semester to ensure that the full range of rural opportunities and concerns – environmental, social, economic, digital, educational, etc - are reflected in this EU mechanism for policy coordination with MS. She argued that the Rural Semester could go beyond simple solidarity approaches to focus on policies which provide well-being for all, simulate multilevel governance, define some specific common targets for rural areas and help to define guidelines and conditions for the design and delivery of national and regional policies.




## National approaches to turn a rural 'vision' into reality

### 'Our Rural Future', Ireland

 **Andrew Forde** (Department of Rural and Community Development, Ireland) introduced the Irish strategic vision for rural areas for 2025. This recognises the strength of rural communities and their economic importance for the country's overall economic, social and environmental well-being. The policy is informed by and responds to the issues identified by rural stakeholders through a wide-ranging consultation process (e.g. online survey with 1 700 responses, focus groups). It contains 152 measures covering the whole of government public policy functions (e.g. broadband, remote working, employment, revitalisation of towns, community resilience and master plans, etc.) which will be supported by unprecedented investments. It will be overseen by the Prime Minister's Office to ensure cross-departmental accountability.

### Rural Agenda, France


 **Patricia Andriot** (National Agency for Territorial Cohesion, France) introduced the French Rural Agenda which aims to turn rural areas into the 'territories of tomorrow'. This emerged as a response to the growing interest of French citizens to live in rural areas as well as to the 'yellow jacket' crisis in 2018. After a major consultation process with stakeholders, an action plan was developed with 181 concrete measures in areas such as health, mobility, youth, employment etc. Examples of these measures include connected campuses, the revitalisation of small railways and public services, technical assistance for small municipalities, etc. There is strong political leadership, and implementation is followed by a dedicated State Secretariat involving different ministries. The EU Recovery Plan will be used to amplify the impacts of the Rural Agenda.

### What conditions can help MS to develop and implement their own national vision?

The examples above showed that it is possible for MS to take the initiative in developing their own vision. With this background, participants split into three break out groups and discussed the following questions: i) What can MS do to put in place more holistic, future orientated rural strategies? ii) How can the EU Rural Vision help them in this process?. Some of the main points that emerged from the discussions are summarised below:

- **Strengthen political will and leadership** for the development of holistic national visions. The EU can lead by example by defining a clear framework with responsibilities for the coordination of its policies and directorates. For example, an EU Rural Observatory could be a helpful tool for MS to develop their own holistic rural policies by gathering and analysing rural evidence and data, and identify new trends.
- **Recognise the importance of rural areas to general well-being.** Building a new narrative around rural areas can change the perceptions of society and help policy makers to think out of the box. It is important to engage new and non-traditional stakeholders in discussions around rural development and transmit rural concerns to wider policy fora (e.g. the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EU Semester).
- **Build stakeholder's trust, commitment, and ownership by involving them in the development of the vision.** The process must start with the challenges emerging at grass-root levels. Policies and structures should be adapted to respond flexibly to them. There is also a need for monitoring, scaling up and institutionalising successful pilot actions.
- **Apply the vision to the full range of current policy tools and instruments** While recognising the constraints of the current policy framework, there is considerable scope for adapting regulations and combining investments from different funds in infrastructure, services, and capacity building in ways that empower rural communities to progress towards their vision.

### Implementing a rural vision at local and regional levels

 **Eduard Trepal** (ARCA, LEADER Network of Catalonia, Spain) outlined the role of local actors, LAGs, municipalities and the Regional Government in the development of the Rural Agenda of Catalonia. The Agenda builds operational linkages with other regional policies such as the Catalan Agenda 2030 and the Urban Agenda. Inspired by the Cork 2.0 Declaration and the French Rural Agenda, this rural Agenda is action-oriented to influence the design and implementation of existing funding instruments (e.g. CAP and other EU funds). There is strong political support from the Regional Government – who will facilitate the operationalisation of the recommendations. The strategic use of LEADER cooperation by the LEADER network to deal with long-term challenges such as digitalisation, the energy transition has been key. With this background, participants discussed briefly what can be done at local and regional levels to develop and implement their own rural visions and agendas. The main points are summarised below:

- **Networks can play many roles in developing rural visions at different levels.** The Catalan example shows how networks can strengthen horizontal linkages between civil society and other stakeholders and enable cooperation with public authorities which cross over different policy boundaries and funds. Networks can also encourage vertical coordination by linking local voices with regional and national authorities to define policies and tools that are adapted to local challenges.
- **Empower and support local and regional levels to take action.** There is a need for spaces (hubs) for discussion at local level about both local and EU challenges. Targeted investment, training and capacity building is needed to enable local actors to engage and participate in the vision. Small rural municipalities need specific support, as they are expected to be hit hard post COVID-19. Networks can help in all these activities.