Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)

LINK-EU Public consultation #1

Building a shared assessment of transition challenges in rural areas

Details

Opening: *August 29th, 2022*   Deadline: *September 30th, 2022*

Submission: *Online form*   Languages: *EN, FR, GR, HU, PT, RO, ES*

Target audience

Public authorities, scientific, social and economic partners with a focus on rural communities.

Context of the consultation

The LINK-EU project, co-funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, seeks to build collectively a Roadmap on rural resilience. The goals of the Roadmap are to:

1. Establish a shared assessment of current barriers and opportunities in rural areas related to climate action
2. Identify existing solutions and good practices tackle the transition challenges of rural areas
3. Define a trajectory towards resilient and sustainable rural communities
4. Draw policy recommendations addressed to EU decision-makers for a better support of rural transition

The Rural Resilience Roadmap will be elaborated during 4 events, each one addressing one of the goals above. The first event took place from July 6th to July 8th in Guimarães, Portugal and gathered over 30 participants from 7 European countries. During the event, the participants contributed actively to the building of the shared assessment of current barriers and opportunities of climate action in rural areas. They worked in particular on three major topics:

- Decarbonizing mobility of people and goods
- Urban-rural interdependencies, use of resources and circular economy
- Democratic practices and citizens' engagement

In order to enrich the shared assessment, we are now opening a public consultation to collect your feedback on rural transition challenges: barriers and opportunities.

Outcomes of the consultation

This consultation (and the following ones) will contribute to shape the Rural Resilience Roadmap, which will be presented to European decision-makers in order to provide them with inputs from the field in the form of policy recommendation that they can use in the shaping of future EU policies and programmes. The Rural Resilience Roadmap will set a trajectory for rural territories of Europe and identify the means necessary to achieve the expected results.

Content

The following content was elaborated by European partners in rural communities, including local elected officials, technicians, non-profit organizations and members of the scientific community during the ENER'do AVE event, first event of the LINK-EU project.

Decarbonizing mobility of people and goods

Mobility challenges in rural areas include mobility of people and goods. The subject has been discussed from different angles: relocating the services to reduce the need of mobility, adapting existing services to better address the need in mobility promoting shared mobility options and adapting vehicles and fuels to reduce their carbon footprint. The end goal is that mobility is no longer a problem nor a source of poverty in rural areas thanks to a diversified offer, the relocation of services and a lower carbon footprint.

Tackling the mobility challenge in rural areas includes: what is our goal?

- Guaranteeing people can move from point A to point B using affordable and clean mobility solutions
- Reducing the need of transportation by getting more service in rural towns (including courier delivery)
- Reducing carbon footprint of the remaining transports using alternative fuels from renewable sources
- Having the infrastructure adapted to new means of mobility (electrical charging points, cycling paths, etc)
- Reducing the impact related to the transportation of goods

This is the end goal to tackle the mobility challenge in rural areas, it sets a trajectory for rural communities. Reaching this goal means to work on many aspects, from urban planning to develop new infrastructure to the reviving of town centres to relocate services and including major changes in mindsets and habits.

Current barriers to tackling the mobility challenge: why didn't we reach this goal yet?

- No or very limited public transport in rural areas due to low density of population and dispersed need
- High dependence on individual cars for everyday transit (work, shopping)
- High energy prices leading to more energy poverty related to transport
- Legal frameworks that are not facilitating the change of practices (in relation to urban planning)
- Cost of investment: who is responsible for the investments?
- The need to change mindsets and representations about mobility: am I ready to share my car? To walk? to change habits?
- The network is not adapted to electric mobility
- Difficulties in accessing urban centres from peripheral/rural surrounding territories (traffic jam)

The main barrier to mobility of people in rural areas is the low density and dispersed population. This barrier challenges the economic models of public and private transportation services, but also car sharing options. Some of these barriers could however become opportunities such as the rise in fuel prices to change habits and regulations or the traffic jam to enter urban areas to promote interoperability of public/private transport.

Opportunities: what solutions/initiatives did we try already?

- Electric car sharing, transport on demand
- Adapting working hours in private company to promote car sharing
- Public cars shared for public service
- Apps to use shared scooters and cars
- Use of CGV (biogas produced by the local anaerobic digestor) to fuel school public transportation which allowed to decrease the price of energy and to maintain the public service (cf. Monts du Lyonnais)
- Courier delivery (medicine) by drone (Kenya)

The good practices listed above have been tested in different territories but are difficult to transfer as each territory has their own specificities and resources. However, the general logic underneath these practices can be replicated (for instance, lifting a barrier such as fuel price to maintain a public service). Other experimental and innovative solutions could be imagined as it was highlighted that the usual solutions are not having the expected impact.

Potential: what else could we do to move closer to our goal?

- Bring services to where people live (including courier) to reduce the need of transportation
- Service digitalization to limit the need of transportation
- The development of a diversity of mobility tools: Electrical bikes, car sharing, flexibility of working hours
- Develop public/private fundings on new infrastructure and services
- The development of autonomous vehicles
- Opening school buses to other users to fill-up the buses and avoid the closing of the public service or the development of a new service that would represent a large investment for few users
- Experiment drone courier deliver (packages)
- Develop the service offered by postman who could deliver more than just mail (food, medicine…)

Rural communities have many opportunities to tackle the mobility challenge, for instance they have **local resources** that could be used as alternative fuels (biogas, renewable sources to produce electricity). The mobility challenge is also very much connected to the availability of services in rural areas and their **connectivity**. **Relocating services** and developing **online services** could prevent people from taking their car for short distance transit. In addition, it would keep small villages alive while many are slowly losing population along their services. Finally, rethinking proximity services to keep up the **social links** in rural areas and respond to the evolving needs of the population could be a good way to address the mobility challenge.

Urban-rural interdependencies, use of resources and circular economy

Relationships between rural and urban territories are often unbalanced: population, consumption, services are gathered in urban areas while rural areas, in which many natural resources are available, the population is ageing, consumption remains limited compared to the resources available and services are disappearing. The balance between urban and rural territories must include equal access to connectivity, to basic services, transportation options to move from one to the other and resilient agriculture to maximise local food supply for both rural and urban areas.

Optimizing the synergies between urban and rural territories and promoting circular economy: what is our goal?

- Balancing urban and rural worlds so that urban consumptions can be covered by rural production and resources and rural communities can benefits from urban services and transports.
- Developing remote work (home office, teleworking) without forgetting the importance of the social bond: co-working spaces accessible even in tiny towns.
- Provide new services (transport) for people living in rural areas and working for urban areas.
- Increase non-agricultural activities in the rural areas to diversify and strengthen local economies

This is the end goal to optimize urban-rural linkages, it sets a trajectory for rural communities towards more cooperation as they obviously depend on one another. Achieving this goal means to share responsibilities and collaborate: urban areas must consider the development of surrounding rural areas by providing transportation means, access to basic services and highspeed broadband; rural areas must diversify their economies to be more resilient and less dependant on food prices and develop proximity markets to reduce the food carbon footprint and contribute to urban areas food independence.

Current barriers to urban-rural relationships and circular economy: why didn't we reach this goal yet?

- The lack of scale of rural products that cannot face large supermarket importing products from all over the world and where everything can be found in one place. In addition, the lack of a centralized selling place that could gather different local products to make it easier for the consumer.
- The mindsets of urban (and rural) people who go more easily to supermarkets than to local food store selling local products
- Specific mindsets barriers like in Romania where cooperatives are attached to the communist heritage and thus to a way to make profit for a minority.
- The lobby /power of supermarkets vs. small size farmers
- The lack of visibility of the resources coming rural areas and used in the urban areas
- Regulations that make it difficult to gather and sell in cooperatives in Portugal
- Population density is too low to develop services, actions and investments are in rural areas, urban areas are always the priority because a similar investment will reach more people
- The difficulty of moving from city to rural towns
- The lack of attractiveness of rural areas for the development of services.

Most barriers highlighted for the development of circular economy and urban-rural cooperation are related to the low density in rural areas: both the low density of population that make services and

investment less attractive and the low density of production that is dispersed on the territory and thus less accessible to people used to supermarkets. The barriers are an endless circle that has to be stopped by an initial investment: attractiveness relies on accessibility of services and the later depends on the former.

Opportunities: what solutions/initiatives did we try already?

- The development of short supply chains
- The development of small local markets
- A good practice of a cooperative (producing vegetables) in western Romania
- Proximity service provided by municipalities.

Few good practices have been shared and essentially focused on the development of short supply chains and markets. The role of the municipality in providing access to proximity services to maintain the attractiveness has been mentioned as well, although this requires the commitment and long-term vision of the municipality to bear the cost of offering this service.

Potential: what else could we do to move closer to our goal?

- Changing public policy to support small producers to outflow to large local supermarkets
- Increase the transparency of cooperatives and share the good practices to mainstream this practice, especially in places where they can be suspicious for the local population
- Using forest resources for energy valorisation in urban areas, increasing the share of renewable using local resources
- Implementation of the "smart" village concept

The main point highlighted by the participants is the need to **strengthen circular economy** to reinforce rural economies but also develop **cooperation** to **share resources and opportunities and services in a smart way** between rural areas (with resources but less services accessible) and urban areas (with services but a larger need of resources and not enough to fill their need). Resources related to energy production are discussed as well as resources related to food systems with the main challenge of promoting local food production when large supermarkets are more competitive on the market. The **diversification of rural economies** and the **support of urban areas to provide public transportation to link urban and rural** areas could also boost both types of territories, facilitating movements towards rural areas and mitigating congestion in urban centres for a more balanced use of the territory and its resources.

Democratic practices and citizens' engagement

Our democracies are changing, people want to be involved but not always on the same term as elected representatives, municipalities are willing to involve citizens but not just opposition groups that are not representative of the territory. Increasing participation, making people feel more concerned, more involved in climate action is a key challenge to the implementation of successful climate policies and projects at the local level.

Optimizing the synergies between urban and rural territories and promoting circular economy: what is our goal?

- All the generations are involved in participative processes
- Participation is not reduced to public debate and exchange of opinions but also to co-construction and consensus building
- Local democracies are stronger, the elected people are able to take strong decision for climate action thanks to the support of local population.
- Public project must present a clear vision of the expected impact (answering people's needs) and municipalities promote/support citizen led initiatives
- Social consensus is sought for all public policies and territorial project to maximise their impact
- Participative practices are integrated in local democracies and became the norm
- Relevant facilitators/mediators have been identified to animate participative processes while guaranteeing the neutrality of the process.

The picture depicted by the participants is one of a renewed democracy with more spaces for dialogue and the conditions for long-term involvement. It is also a place where the hidden voices are heard and the law is not to who speaks louder. Finally, it is a place where experts in participative instances are in growing number and available to guarantee the quality of the dialogue spaces. Public discussions and dialogue work hand-in-hand with local municipalities and elected officials, they reinforce one another and give legitimacy to the projects developed.

Current barriers to urban-rural relationships and circular economy: why didn't we reach this goal yet?

- It is difficult to prioritize long-term issues over short-term problems
- There is a low level of participation/interest in existing public participative spaces
- The lack of trust and confidence of communities to elected authorities
- Negative mindsets / attitudes in public participative spaces prevent from co-construction and engagement of the population
- Accepting that everyone will not be involved

Ensuring the security and representativity of consultations or public debates is difficult and builds on the fear of organizing or taking part in co-construction / dialogue processes. Many public debates are only showing one side of the coin, usually the opposition which can influence the public opinion even though there is no real open discussion. Some groups are difficult to reach which takes away the credit of building new / more participation spaces. The lack of confidence based on people's position is a thick barrier to increase dialogue spaces and citizens' participation to territorial / public projects.

Opportunities: what solutions/initiatives did we try already?

- Create / reinforce social bonds with a direct collaboration between communities and elected officials (Loos-en-Gohelle, France) to share the responsibilities and increase the feeling of ownership over territorial projects
- Adaptive governance of a network to promote social acceptance of a Green Infrastructure Plan in the city
- Launch opinion polls: face-to-face interviews with households, in small communities (Prespes, Greece)
- Implement the LEADER methodology, a bottom-up approach uniting public and private actors
- Apply participation processes to concrete projects (COLEOPTER project in Chambon sur Voueize, France)
- Create a participative budget to encourage citizens' actions and participation in local democracies: people present projects' ideas and vote. The project with the more votes is included in the municipality budget (Guimarães, Portugal).

Participation spaces leading to concrete outcomes have proved to be relevant to engage participants, as well as face-to-face discussions. Local dialogues seem to be the most adequate to conduct, structured / boosted by the sense of community shared by the participants. Finally, funding citizens' led initiatives can be a way to build back trust between municipalities and local private actors.

Potential: what else could we do to move closer to our goal?

- Engage pupils in governance processes through environmental education (environmental protection, climate change, waste management, renewables…). For instance: Elect a mayor of children.
- Engage experts in participative processes to provide a common ground of knowledge on specific topics and enrich the co-construction processes.
- Conduct an ex-ante evaluation of problems' diagnosis, to find possible solutions together
- Systematically evaluate the impact of citizen participation for the territory.
- Develop partnerships between public and private stakeholders to define the development strategy for the territory.

The participants highlighted the **difficulties to prioritize long-term issues**, and thus, to increase the level of participation and interest in the democratic process for the rural citizens. Also, the participants pinpointed that there was a **lack of trust and confidence** of communities to elected authorities (and vice-versa), that blocked them to strengthen local democracies. To tackle these problems, the ideas discussed included the implementation of **public-private partnerships** and increased **cooperation** at the local level and the **importance of evaluating the impact of citizens' engagement** in public interests' projects.

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