



The Rural Resilience Roadmap



Developed by the LINK-EU project co-funded by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values (CERV) programme



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

May 2024



DIPUTACIÓN
DE **ÁVILA**



Comunidade
Intermunicipal
do Ave



ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑΚΗ ΕΝΩΣΗ ΣΥΝΔΕΣΜΩΝ



ΑΠΟΔΗΜΩΝ ΠΙΤΣΙΛΙΑΣ Π.Ε.Σ.Α.Π.

**Monts du
Lyonnais**
Communauté
de communes

A. CONTEXT

The Long-term vision for rural areas initiated by the European Commission paints stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous European rural areas and proposes a Rural Pact and a Rural Action Plan to make it happen.

Small rural communities are largely unaware of the work done at E.U. level and the LINK-EU project aimed at gathering a variety of stakeholders from rural areas, from local elected representatives, public officers to non-profit organizations and entrepreneurs, to both inform them of the ongoing work and collect their feedback to complement the Long-term vision depicted by European actors.

Four events have been held to engage rural stakeholders in the shaping and promotion of this Rural Resilient Roadmap: in CIM do AVE, Portugal, Les Monts du Lyonnais, France, the Diputación de Ávila, Spain and Nagypáli, Hungary. These events included field visits to promote local solutions and inspire the participants, as well as workshops and conferences to work on the core messages that we wanted to shape based on the shared knowledge acquired.

Five key topics emerged from the collective work and were considered a priority for rural communities:

1. Bringing life back to rural communities through actions towards the transition
2. Developing more systemic approaches
3. Empowering rural stakeholders to drive the transition locally and giving them the human means to do so
4. Making EU funds more accessible and adapted to rural communities' challenges
5. Showing-off what rural communities do and how to mainstream it

B. PROBLEM DEFINITION

The transition appears as a turning point for rural communities, either they take it and make it happen, or they don't and they slowly fall apart. Taking that turn means overcoming big challenges, but it is also a unique opportunity to put rural communities at the forefront of the transition thanks to the resources they hold, both human and natural resources. Depopulation is at the center of these challenges: as services and opportunities have been concentrated in urban centers, rural areas have slowly lost their population, witnessed their population age and, for many, lost a key driver to local development: the human factor. Rural areas became "too small to count", public policies focused on urban areas, where actions seemed to have a bigger impact, only increasing the loss of population in rural areas. However, times have changed and more and more people are worried about their future, willing to make a change and live in a more sustainable way. In this regard, the transition is an opportunity for rural communities to attract younger people and bring life back.

Traditionally with European, National and even Regional funding, challenges are addressed by topic and funded by the related fund, service or program. This approach disregards the many synergies between topics and discourages systemic approaches to address transition challenges. However, the transition is, by essence, very transversal. It is the transition of a whole system that we must aim at, not just a specific project here and there. For transition projects to have a real impact, they must be thought within this system or they may have a limited, or worse, negative, impact to the community and to the planet.

Small communities have few public officers usually trained to be civic servants but rarely to be drivers of the transition. Local elected people rarely have any specific knowledge about transition challenges either while they are asked to develop a climate action plan or an adaptation strategy. In order to face

the new challenges that climate change is bringing along, rural stakeholders must be given the appropriate means to keep-up. Being empowered requires acquiring new knowledge and know-hows, opening-up to new practices and being brave enough to speak-up to change things.

Many rural communities in Europe have no idea about the diversity of existing European initiatives and programs. This lack of awareness contributes to euroscepticism and an overall disregard for European matters. In cause, the complexity of European funds can be mentioned but the biggest difficulty may be the lack of visibility on what exists and the lack of consideration of rural communities' needs and realities in existing programs that, for many, focus on urban challenges and exclude smaller communities from even applying. This raises a double challenge: how to build capacity to allow access to rural communities to European funds? How to shape these funds so that rural communities are not excluded?

C. EXISTING SOLUTIONS

Rural communities face transition challenges, they experiment solutions, they make mistakes and try again. At the level of the RURENER network, we realized that many rural communities are making the same mistakes, which could be prevented by a better communication among them, a wider visibility of what rural communities can do to comfort the others in thinking big. While the so-called “good practices” can never be transferred as such from one community to another because the context is different, the actors are different, the imaginaries are different, etc., they can illustrate driving principles that led to the success of these practices. These driving principles are inspiring and can lead to more “good practices” if they are visible. Showing-off what rural communities do and how they do it is at the heart of the RURENER network, and it is a crucial point to speed-up the transition and make a more efficient use of public money.

Rural communities are already making the transition happen all over Europe. The four events of the LINK-EU project showcased how small rural communities addressed local challenges in a sustainable way. We chose 5 examples tackling the 5 priorities presented above.

1. Gotarrendura, Spain, seized the opportunity of renewables

Gotarrendura is a small village of 167 inhabitants located in the Diputación de Ávila, center west of Spain. Agriculture and breeding are the main economic activities for the local active population. The preservation of local traditions is very important for the community of Gotarrendura that developed an ethnographic museum for visitors. But what is most astonishing about Gotarrendura is the way they became a pioneer village for renewable energy. Indeed, an off-grid solar PV installation fuels the pump to provide water throughout the village, larger solar PV plants have been developed in the surroundings of the village where the land cannot be used for agriculture and the village is now hosting a pilot project of low altitude wind-mills. By becoming a pioneer of the energy transition, the village of Gotarrendura is hoping to improve the living conditions of its population and to attract new people, thus bringing life back to the small community.

2. The virtuous circle of Les Monts du Lyonnais, France

In the association of communities Les Monts du Lyonnais in France, the transition's strategy has been thought as a virtuous circle. An anaerobic biogas digester was built by local farmers with the support

of the association of communities to transform the waste created by their farming activities and food waste from collective and school catering into biogas. The biogas produce is directly injected into the grid to fuel a biogas pump where the school buses and truck come to re-fill. And the circle is completed, what was previously a waste became a local resource and provides a carbon-free mobility solution. These projects could not have been developed if the local public body used a silo approach, they needed to have the full picture through a systemic approach combining farming, waste management, social, governance and mobility challenges.

3. Building knowledge with the Landscape Laboratory in Guimarães, Portugal

Established in 2014 in Guimarães, Portugal by the city council, the University of Minho and the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, the Landscape Laboratory is a place dedicated to transdisciplinary research and awareness raising on environmental challenges. The Landscape Laboratory plays an important role in planning Guimarães' transition and empowering local actors by providing info, data and analysis of the challenges, risks ahead and solutions. The joint work between the research world, decision-makers and local citizens and organizations produces a very fruitful cooperation and highlights the need for empowered actors and a systemic approach of sustainability: all topics are interconnected and all local stakeholders are necessary to implement a change.

4. (Re)connecting rural communities with the European Union through the work of the European network RURENER

RURENER is a European network of rural communities committed to the social and ecological transitions. One of the network's missions is to (re)connect rural communities to the European Union by opening dialogue spaces between local communities and European decision-makers, by supporting rural communities in accessing E.U. funds and by organizing field tours dedicated to the exchange of experiences among rural actors. In addition, RURENER develops capacity-building sessions to respond to its members' needs and support their empowerment. The support and expertise brought by RURENER is crucial for many rural communities that, without it, would not be able to open-up to what Europe has to offer.

5. Promoting rural innovation for the transition in Nagypáli, Hungary

The village of Nagypáli has been committed to the transition for over 30 years and is considered a pioneer of the energy transition at European level. Nurtured by field tours in other pilot rural communities of Europe, the village of Nagypáli is at the forefront of innovation. From the creation of the Energy Park 15 years ago with a sunflower shaped solar plant equipped with sun-tracking technology to the recent inauguration of a small hydrogen storage unit in 2024, nothing is too big for Nagypáli. Since the years 2010s, the village hosts field tours for locals and schools as well as for European visitors willing to learn from them. Being able to show-off what they achieve and how, to testify of the road to get there and the difficulties on the way, is important for the Mayor because it is based on this same type of field visit that he was able to drive the transition and achieve what is in place today.

D. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To bring life back to rural communities through actions towards the transition

Because rural communities are losing population;

Because rural communities lack access to basic services (health, education, culture, etc.) and job opportunities;

Because infrastructure in rural areas isn't sufficient nor sustainable;

Because rural communities have much to offer: natural and cultural heritage, endogenous resources;

Because rural communities are necessary to achieve Europe's transition;

We need to bring life back to these communities so that they can thrive and contribute actively to the sustainable European Union that is depicted in the speeches of E.U. representatives.

RURENER members embody the diversity of rural communities of Europe and for each member, the priority investment to bring life back to their community is not the same. However, they agree that the E.U. should:

- Conduct a report at E.U. level to highlight the interdependence between urban and rural areas if we want to achieve the E.U. climate goals: connecting what needs to be transformed and where the resources are located, the report would emphasize the necessary interconnections between urban and rural areas (in terms of renewable energy production, carbon sinks, job opportunities; carbon-free mobility, etc.) and calculate the necessary investments in rural areas to achieve the change.
- Adopt a European Rural Agenda, meaning a holistic framework to define policies aiming to build a sustainable future for rural communities in Europe: Following up on the European Parliament's resolution on October 3rd, 2018, on addressing the specific needs of rural, mountainous and remote areas, the European Rural Agenda focuses on concrete priority areas to improve the quality of life in rural communities and foster opportunities for all Europeans.
- Invite Member States to develop their own Rural Agendas at National level to ensure the continuity of the measures and policies within the European Rural Agenda.
- Stop funding organizations that do not follow the circular economy principles and projects that do not meet the conditions for a sustainable future (8 conditions initially defined by the researchers of The Natural Step led by Karl-Henrik Robèrt in 1989).

2. To develop more systemic approaches

Because one-shot projects are not enough to make a change;

Because "silos" do not make sense in real life;

Because we cannot properly address a problem from only one perspective;

Because new ideas or solutions might come from where they are less expected;

Because we need to change the whole system to achieve sustainability;

We need to develop more systemic approaches so that the change is rooted in local communities and makes sense for the people living it.

RURENER members feel like the silo approach used in the funding schemes (at all levels) does not encourage the conduct of systemic change. Although silos serve their purpose by balancing the

allocation of funds to different priorities, a new systemic perspective should be better included in the European Union policies and funding programmes:

- Review the European Union governance bodies to include transversal processes in particular between DGs and set the good example to drive efficiently the transition of Europe
- Promote the process and not only the results in the allocation of funding of European projects to encourage co-constructed tailored and systemic approaches of the transition and avoid threshold effects disqualifying rural communities
- Introduce a community-led program to address transition challenges in rural areas (it could be based on the concept of Rural Transition Labs that are rural hubs supported by local municipalities in charge of connecting local actors, mobilizing synergies, providing expertise for the conduct of the transition based on a shared vision of the community's future)
- Provide training on the conduct of systemic change for local authorities, to help them address the new challenges of the transition.

3. To empower rural stakeholders to drive the transition locally and give them the human means to do so

Because the transition challenges are complex to apprehend;

Because the financial instruments to tackle these challenges might not be known by rural stakeholders;

Because we cannot do local development the way we used to 10 or 20 years ago;

Because the job of a local elected person or a public officer is not the same and involves new skills to address properly transition challenges;

Because funding is usually oriented towards structural investments rather than operational costs;

We need to empower rural communities to be drivers of the transition at their level and we need to give them the necessary human means to tackle these complex challenges.

The RURENER members realize that they need human resources to fully realize their ambition of becoming sustainable communities:

- Create new funding for operating funds of rural municipalities to support the implementation of their transition strategy (it could be based on the concept of Rural Transition Labs that are rural hubs supported by local municipalities in charge of connecting local actors, mobilizing synergies, providing expertise for the conduct of the transition based on a shared vision of the community's future)
- Develop and fund training modules targeting local actors (local elected people, public officers, entrepreneurs, etc.) on the conduct of socio-ecological transitions in rural areas: the training would include basic knowledge of the challenges and know-hows.
- Train local public officers in rural areas on European challenges and on the operating scheme of the E.U. (by the intermediary of local organizations with the relevant expertise)
- Include rural stakeholders in the discussion on the integration of European policies into National regulations.

4. To make EU funds more accessible and adapted to rural communities' challenges

Because the limited number of public officers in rural areas who, in addition, do not have the necessary skills, often prevents them from accessing E.U. funds;

Because rural communities often have a restricted view of what the E.U. has to offer;

Because many programs are simply inaccessible to small rural communities that do not reach the thresholds;

Because the absence of European funding in rural areas (except from the C.A.P.) contributes to nurture Euroscepticism;

Because everything that counts cannot always be counted (or the numbers can seem insignificant) and the E.U. fundings rely heavily on quantitative indicators thus downgrading quality projects developed in rural areas;

We need to make E.U. funds more accessible and better adapted to rural communities' needs and challenges.

The members of the European network RURENER have come to realize that EU funds are not completely inaccessible, as long as they can be supported in accessing them:

- Funding intermediary non-profit organizations with an extensive knowledge of European fundings and policies to support rural communities in accessing funds

For the members of RURENER, the LEADER program is a good approach to support rural development as it relies on locally led initiatives and it is now well-known by rural stakeholders. However, improvement aspects must be highlighted:

- Simplification of the administrative management process to reduce the delay for payment
- Allocation of more funding and diversification of the areas of activities that are funded

The number of intermediaries between the European funding and rural communities is too big and the rural communities of RURENER think that it contributes to the complexity of the funding process and increases the money spent on management:

- Fund local municipalities directly or reduce the number of intermediary organizations

5. To show-off what rural communities do and identify how to mainstream it

Because rural communities are often times isolated;

Because rural communities are sources of innovation and resilience;

Because showing what you have done is motivating and learning from others is inspiring;

Because there is not one good practice good for all, but driving principles can be learned from good practices to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again;

Because rural areas' contributions to the transitions are not visible and overlooked in decision-making;

We need to show-off what rural communities already do for the transition at European level and to highlight the driving principles of these practices to mainstream transition practices.

RURENER members benefit from the exchanges of experiences among the members of the network (which is more than many other rural communities) but they think that an initiative should come from the E.U. to recognize the work done and do a continuous monitoring:

- Organize a European event / meeting dedicated to rural areas to give the floor to local representatives (interpretation is necessary to make the event truly accessible to rural actors)
- Sponsor the transfer of knowledge among rural communities (like through the CERV programme and its Town Twinning and Networks of Town calls)
- Develop a European platform to help local and European networks support rural transitions connect to each other and mutualize activities or events to increase their impact.
- Improve the collection of data to better target the issues in rural areas

E. CALENDAR TO MAKE THE MESSAGE HEARD

- **RURENER core messages:** Finalization of RURENER core messages with the RURENER members | *March-April 2024*
- **ENER’Nagypáli:** Presentation of the Rural Resilience Roadmap to European institutions and work on a strategy to spread it across Europe | *June, 2024*
- **Diffusion & signatures:** Diffusion of the RURENER Roadmap to collect signatures from rural elected representatives | *June 2024 and on.*
- **Reaching out:** Contact with the newly elected European representatives to promote the RURENER Roadmap while increasing the signatories | *September – December 2024*
 - Newly elected Members of the European Parliament
 - Directorates-General (DGs) of the European Commission, starting with Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and Climate Action (DG CLIMA)
 - Committee of the Regions
 - European Economic and Social Committee
- **Advocacy updates:** regular (every month/ 2-months) updates through newsletter on the outreach of RURENER messages and the advocacy event for RURENER or its members. | *September 2024 and on.*
- **European event:** Organization of a European event in Brussels to share the messages of the Rural Resilience Roadmap | *June 2025*
- **2025 RURENER General Assembly:** Assessment and review of the Rural Resilience Roadmap and RURENER’s advocacy strategy. | *May-June 2025*

Signatories

The following signatories support the messages and recommendations presented in the Rural Resilience Roadmap.

Name and title

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