



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Rural Europe **IN FOCUS**

Our Contract with Rural Europe: A Five-Point Plan for Europe's Heartlands

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Summary

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The EU is much more than just its cities. Beyond the confines of larger urban centres lies a rich tapestry of towns, villages and open countryside. These are the places whose traditions and resilience have helped define Europe's way of life for centuries. They are Europe's heartlands. The EU's rural and exurban areas account for over 80% of its total area and are home to over 30% of its population. Yet across Europe these communities feel disconnected. They feel detached from an increasingly remote political process—one which, they believe, gives precedence to the priorities of urban decision-makers rather than to the needs of smaller, less vocal communities. In many sectors, particularly in agriculture, people believe that their way of life is threatened by an unending deluge of European and national level regulations. Many feel abandoned by traditional political parties and disorientated by the rapid pace of economic and social change. Europe needs a new approach to rural development because not every town needs to become a technology hub, nor every village a tourist hotspot. Our Contract with Rural Europe provides a Five-Point Plan for Europe's Heartlands. First, the Green Deal must become a positive partnership for farmers. Second, rural citizens are equal citizens requiring the same connectivity and skills as those living in urban areas. Third, essential rural communities require essential public services. Fourth, youth and quality of life will drive lasting growth. Fifth, the EU needs to get back to basics and start focusing on meeting the day-to-day needs of its rural citizens.

Keywords: Rural development – Agriculture – Public services – Growth – EU



Introduction

Rural Europe's population is older than city residents, more at risk of poverty and less connected to essential services. In this context it is unsurprising that people living in smaller communities trust local or regional authorities more than national governments (and the EU). Decades of traditional rural development strategies (focused primarily on agriculture and tourism) have done little to increase the resilience of rural areas.

All rural inhabitants worry about their children's futures.

They see every day—on the streets of their towns and villages—limited job opportunities, a lack of affordable housing, a drop in connectivity and declining services.

These are very real problems in every member state.

What is needed is a plan which places local communities at the heart of the EU in the decades to come. The Union should develop policies which drive development from the local level upwards. It needs to launch initiatives which are connected to local people and which reflect the history and character of the towns, villages and countryside which they seek to enhance. *The EU needs a plan which connects to people.*

1. Turning the Green Deal into a positive partnership for farmers

Farmers' misgivings about the implementation of the Green Deal are not about denying climate change. Rather, they view their way of life as being trapped between the EU's ever-growing package of environmental legislation and ever-shortening timeframes for its implementation.

Without the valuable input of farmers, the objectives of the Green Deal will not be achieved. *Rural communities are part of the solution, not part of the problem.* And that is why the EU must turn the Green Deal into a positive partnership for farmers.



- *Food security should be redesignated a fundamental objective of the EU through an updated Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Union needs to recognise the essential role of European farmers in maintaining a stable supply of high-quality food for European consumers.*
- The external dimensions of food security must also be addressed. Increased imports from non-EU states threaten European standards, while the accumulation of European farmland by external actors poses wider supply concerns. *EU policies must take account of the geopolitical importance of Europe's agricultural industry.*
- *The socio-economic impacts of all Green Deal legislation on the agricultural and rural sectors should be independently assessed before any additional legislation is proposed.* In particular, the impact of legislative actions on both the cost and level of agricultural production must be appraised before adoption.
- *Increased investment in innovation and developing new agricultural methods to reduce emissions is essential to continue the positive momentum in decreasing the impact of agriculture on the environment.¹ The innovation component of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) should be enhanced.*
- *Income diversification is essential to the survival of Europe's ten million family farms.* Existing rural development funding (under Pillar 2 of CAP) should be simplified. In particular, a specific 'income diversification' cluster should be introduced that focuses on creating opportunities for generating new revenue from agri-business and rural enterprise. The availability of long-term financing for viable family farms is vital to the future of rural Europe.
- *The establishment of Community-led cooperative groups should be supported.* With a successful history in the agriculture and rural development sectors, such community organisations can lead the development of rural areas in ways appropriate to local resources and strengths. From neighbourhood renewable energy schemes to farming supply hubs, they can form the core of a rejuvenated local economy.
- *Young farmers enhance rural vitality and pave the way for rural prosperity.* But with only 11.9% of EU farm managers under the age of 40 in 2020,

¹ European farmers have already made significant progress in reducing emissions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has highlighted that the carbon intensity deriving from European agriculture will continue to fall dramatically in the years ahead.



agriculture is facing a generational crisis. In addition to the proposals set out above, a clearer, more structured path for young people to begin a farming career is vital. A stronger focus should be placed on apprenticeships and on blended vocational–tertiary training courses which facilitate practical experience. In addition, national taxation models should recognise the importance of non-farm income and farm succession strategies in ensuring the sustainability of family farms.

2. Equal citizens, equal connectivity, equal skills

That people live in a small town or an isolated area is not an excuse for policymakers to reduce investment in essential skills and connectivity. We are living in a digital age. However, just 60% of EU rural households have high-speed Internet access, compared to an EU average of 86%. This lack of high-speed connectivity is deepening longer-standing skills inequalities. With their digital arm tied behind their back, rural economies are falling further and further behind.

- The pan-EU target of ‘Gigabit connectivity for all by 2030’ must be accelerated and enhanced. Where necessary, public investment (as in Ireland) should be provided to ensure this level of coverage, at a minimum, is available in smaller towns and in sparsely populated rural areas.
- *It is essential that rural public transport options are protected and improved.* Access to neighbouring centres to utilise a greater range of services is critical. An increasingly online economy makes physical contact in rural areas even more important, especially for older people and those lacking private transport.
- National (and where relevant, cross-border) *education outreach models should be developed to ensure that rural citizens have equal opportunities to gain equal skills.* Technical, vocational, university and life-long learning options are a prerequisite for successful local economies. Being a resident of a rural area should not restrict your educational opportunities.
- For the vast majority of people in rural Europe, the private car is the key mode of transport, and this will remain the case in the decades ahead. This is a natural consequence of geography and is the reason why the price of fuel is such a lightning rod for discontent in smaller communities. If the EU and national governments are serious about their electric car ambitions,



then a *publicly accessible network of charging facilities in rural towns* is essential given the longer distances between critical rural services. Electric vehicles must not become the preserve of urban populations.

3. Essential communities require essential services

Access to key services for all European citizens is a guiding principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. However, in recent decades small towns and villages have seen their local facilities decline significantly. Banks, doctors' practices, post offices, veterinary surgeries, and even libraries and schools are now a scarce resource in many rural areas. This is having a detrimental impact on the ability of these areas to attract jobs, investment and people. It also weakens social capital, which is an essential component of increasing an area's quality of life.

- The shortage of healthcare professionals is a chronic problem in many parts of rural Europe. It is critical that basic healthcare services are available in every EU community. *An EU Health Service Corps should be established* to place healthcare professionals (e.g. family doctors, nurses, pharmacists and dentists) in underserved rural areas for a fixed period, in return for financial support for their training.
- *Primary healthcare centres and community nursing homes should be further developed as key components of our societal safety net.* This is particularly relevant in smaller and more isolated communities. The emerging EU Health Union must have rural areas at its heart.
- *Supported by the principle of subsidiarity, local government hubs should be set up in medium-sized towns.* Such centres would provide information on essential public services and act as a focal point for interacting with local, national and EU initiatives. They should also offer facilities for and guidance on completing essential public tasks, both offline and online: for example, paying motor vehicle and local property taxes, and obtaining local planning licences.
- Unlike cities, medium-sized towns and villages often lack physical banking and post office facilities. Therefore, many rural citizens are now unable to access cash locally. This is a significant issue given the older age profile of rural areas. *Shops and services accessible to the public must be required by law to accept cash as a form of payment.* Moreover, public transport links to larger towns must be enhanced to



ensure access to financial services (see the second proposal in the previous section).

- Local schools are the beating heart of rural communities. The ongoing school closures in smaller towns are accelerating population decline and causing community cohesiveness to fall. They can also lead to a reduction in trust in elected local politicians and a rise in political extremism. *Schools in smaller towns and villages should be clustered together in 'Rural School Groups' to enhance their viability and to gain operational efficiencies.* In tandem, physical access to education (often via rural school buses) should become a right of every rural citizen.

4. Youth and quality of life will drive growth

Rural Europe's population is shrinking. The same pattern repeats itself over and over. With the drop in population, services become under-utilised and poorly maintained. Often they become unviable and have to be withdrawn. Local living conditions and quality of life deteriorate, unemployment rises and skilled labour becomes scarce. Communities become obsolescent. Their residents abandon them. This is the vicious cycle of rural depopulation. The advent of hybrid working has the potential to act as a catalyst for rural growth. Research is clear in showing that small-town quality of life is driven by much more than just economics. Local community projects, civic participation and attracting new ideas will remain the core drivers of rural growth.

- *Local governments should facilitate and support the repurposing of unused town-centre properties (e.g. former bank branches) as 'Remote Working Centres' for hybrid workers.* Such centres could act as a focal point for community engagement and offer spillover benefits to surrounding local services.
- In many areas affordable housing remains a key obstacle to attracting new people, notwithstanding the derelict or under-utilised nature of many rural properties. *Incentives should exist for owner-occupiers to renovate and reuse rural properties for permanent housing.*
- Local people are often unable to access housing in the areas where they grew up. This can be a particular problem for those working in the agricultural sector. *Local planning rules must provide a clear pathway for continuing to build homes in rural areas, particularly on family-owned farms.*



- As shown by the OECD, rural and urban areas enjoy different and often complementary assets, and better integration between these areas is important for socio-economic performance. Ultimately, strategies for rural and urban areas cannot be discussed as separate items. *Rural–urban government partnerships should be formalised to facilitate better access to jobs, amenities and different types of services.*
- The preceding four proposals could be supported financially by repurposing existing EU funds under the well-established LEADER development programme. This programme already allows local communities to draw funding from multiple EU funds.

5. The EU needs to get back to basics on rural needs

Despite hundreds of billions of euros in rural development funding over the past decades, rural communities sometimes consider the EU part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. Isolated from political debates in national capitals and Brussels, rural residents increasingly associate the EU (and EU funding) with ever-increasing levels of bureaucracy and an ever-expanding reach into more and more aspects of their lives and businesses. Even more serious is the view that the EU is advancing a specific social change agenda, one which seeks to impose a ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ despite the preferences of local communities.

To reconnect with Europe’s heartlands the EU must

- *simplify its procedures and reduce the administrative burden of applying for European funding;*
- *widen the number of existing EU funding programmes which can be accessed through the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) portal;*
- *refocus its presence in rural Europe based on its founding principles: achieving food security, developing the internal market and increasing the quality of life of all its citizens;*
- *deliver on the key local issues which drive local political dissatisfaction, maintaining rural services being a key component;*
- *treat rural residents as equal citizens who deserve the same opportunities for development as those living in larger cities.*



About the authors

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Credits

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