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**Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

## **Contribution to the implementation of the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas**

Aleš Irgolič, State Secretary

National Rural Network Meeting, 18 November 2021

## Content of the presentation:

- Focus on the dossier on the Long-term vision for rural areas
  - Women and their position in rural areas
  - The dialogue between the urban and rural areas
  - Smart Villages



The Long-term vision is an important horizontal topic for Slovenia which goes beyond agriculture and is one of the priority dossiers of the Slovenian Presidency. Slovenian Presidency has brought to the fore the debate on the development challenges of rural areas and addressed this dossier by organising high-level events on three topics:

- Women and their position in rural areas
- The dialogue between the urban and rural areas
- Smart Villages

## Long-term vision for rural areas



*„We are committed to leave no one and no place behind.“*



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbWViydd0rU>



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The Long-term vision for rural areas for 2040, published in June 2021, is a European Commission's initiative to develop a common European vision. In shaping this long-term vision, Commission gathered the views of rural communities and businesses via public consultations and stakeholder-led events with the European Network for Rural Development, National Rural Networks and stakeholder organisations. One of the thoughts that underlines well the ambition of the vision is: *„We are committed to leave no one and no place behind.“* European society and the European Commission embrace the importance of rural areas.

The Long-term vision emphasizes the **need for increased synergies, complementarities and coherence between different policies** to achieve the objectives of this vision and to respond appropriately to the common aspirations of rural communities. CAP is just one of the public policies that intervene in rural areas. Different funds have to complement each other- the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Social Fund Plus, with the InvestEU programme and even the European Investment Bank.

The video nicely demonstrates *life in the countryside, cooperation and local chains*, which are also part of the Long-term vision. The video further presents an example of a renovation of an older building into a multi-purpose space for selling local products. In this case, the source of funding was the European Regional Development Fund. In

practice, we can see the importance of other sectors and investments from other sources.



As the first activity related to the long-term rural vision, the Slovenian Presidency organised a **ministerial conference entitled „Women and their position in rural areas“**.

Many rural areas face depopulation. The rural population is on average older than in urban areas. Data shows that there is a 13 percent gap between male and female employment in rural areas. Demographic trends together with a lack of infrastructure make rural areas less attractive as a place to live and work, which is one of the main reasons young people are leaving rural areas. The fact that women leave rural areas has **a negative impact on society and families**.

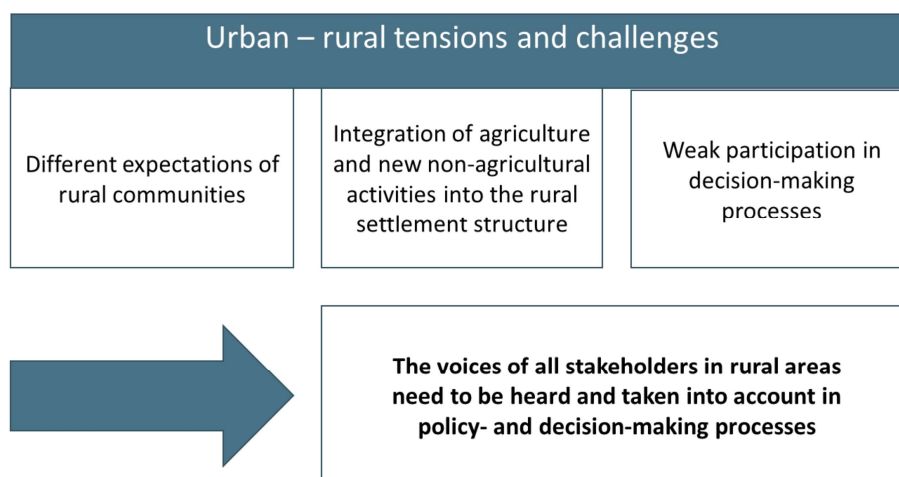
The social resilience of rural areas **has been recognised also in the Long-term vision for rural areas**. Support for women should be provided for establishing businesses, participation in decision-making and investments in services for work-life balance, such as early childhood education and care, as well as services for older people.

With the conference that took place on 20th of August 2021, we gave a special importance to the topic of women in rural areas. As the result of the conference, a **Joint Declaration** was adopted by representatives of the eleven delegations from the EU, the Western Balkan partners, Standing Working Group and FAO. The Declaration emphasizes the importance of women's equal rights and the full inclusion of women. Investment in their education, health and well-being strengthens families and the community and rural

society as a whole.

On the picture, we can see some of the speakers at the conference.

## Informal Meeting of Agriculture Ministers “Strengthening the dialogue between the urban and rural areas”



Another challenge of rural areas that we have addressed is a dialogue between urban and rural areas. This important topic was discussed at the **Informal meeting of agriculture and fisheries ministers** in Slovenia, from 5th to 7th of September 2021. The meeting was also attended by the Commissioner **Janusz Wojciechowski**.

The modern and urban way of life is entering rural areas through younger generations and through new inhabitants. Particularly challenging is the **integration of agriculture and new non-agricultural activities into the new rural settlement structure** and **different expectations of rural communities**. Nowadays, society expects from rural areas much more than just a traditional role of agriculture, which is to produce food. Rural areas also have to provide its inhabitants similar standard to those in cities, take care of natural ecosystem services and other public goods. One of the obstacles to balancing the relations is the relatively **weak participation of rural populations in decision-making processes**.

In order to strengthen the dialogue between urban and rural areas, **the voices of all stakeholders in rural areas need to be heard and taken into account in policy- and decision-making processes**, which may also entail redesigning some social institutions and decision-making processes towards greater accessibility and simplicity, including the opportunities offered by digitalisation.



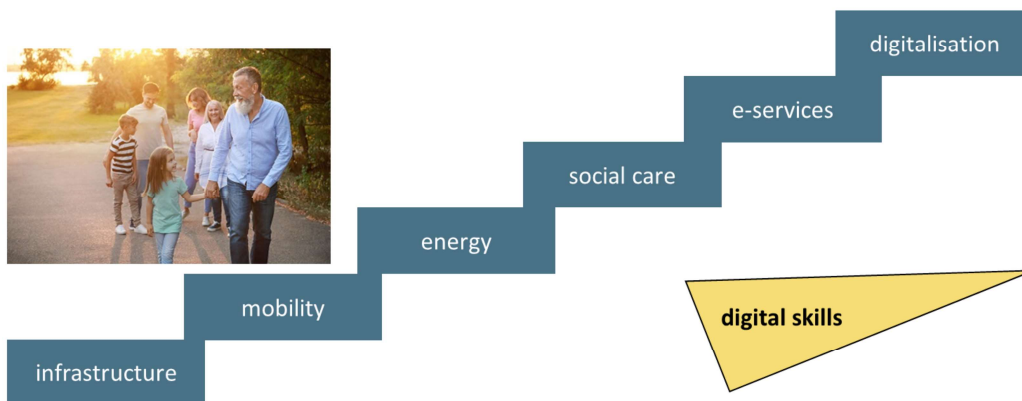


Informal meeting of agriculture ministers “Strengthening the dialogue – at the The Grm Novo mesto – Center of Biotechnics and Tourism.

On the first day of the meeting, the participants saw examples of good practice on how to connect urban and rural areas. To witness one of these examples, they visited Grm school centre (The Grm Novo mesto – Center of Biotechnics and Tourism). The centre features a school estate and laboratories where students get practical training, carry out research and various exercises in the fields of fruit growing, viticulture, animal husbandry, and implement projects on strengthening the relationship between the city and the educational centre.



## International conference “Smart Villages for a Green, Digital and Resilient Europe”



The discussion at the international conference Smart Villages on 1st of October focused on finding an answer to the question on how to make rural areas attractive and vibrant in order to reduce the development gap between urban and rural areas. Digital skills are an example of such gap: 48% of people in rural areas have at least basic digital skills compared to 62% in cities.

The key message that the participants communicated at the event is that rural development under the Smart Villages concept should be approached in an **integrated way**, which should include **infrastructure, mobility, energy, social care, and e-services**, such as eHealth, retail, online banking, travel information, access to public administration and **digitalisation**. Developing widespread digital skills and literacy is crucial to ensure accessibility.

Participants agreed that in order to achieve the goals, it is necessary **to tackle the problems at all levels**, both at the European as well as the local and national levels. The aim is to **improve the dialogue** between urban and rural inhabitants and **ensure a comparable quality of life** in different areas.

A high-level debate on smart villages continued at **Expo 2020** in Dubai on 1st of November where participants underlined that smart villages are about people and communities that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, and build local



strengths and opportunities. Smart Villages are about how to use the technology that benefits the people and helps them to live better.

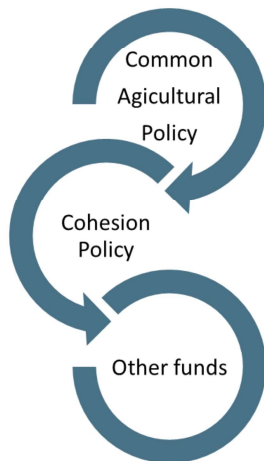


The conference has been co-organised with the office of the member of the European Parliament Franc Bogovič. The conference has offered a wide variety of speakers:

- High-level panellists, including Commissioner Dubravka Šuica and FAO director-general,
- four ministers responsible for agriculture, regional development, social affairs and digital transformation,
- business representatives from different fields such as energy, connectivity, e-health; and
- local stakeholders such as local action groups.

Their presence and discussion reflect their awareness that we have to connect different sectors and EU funding to address the needs of rural areas. The European Forum for Smart Villages was also established at the conference.

## Conclusions



Various European funds should work together to invest in infrastructure, technology and people for resilient, inclusive and prosperous rural areas



If I have to point out just one recommendation, I would stress that various European funds **should work together to invest in infrastructure, technology and people** for resilient, inclusive and prosperous rural areas.

The reformed **Common Agricultural Policy** definitely is one of the key sources of EU funding for rural areas, by fostering a smart, resilient and diversified agricultural sector, bolstering environmental care and climate action and strengthening the socio-economic fabric of rural areas.

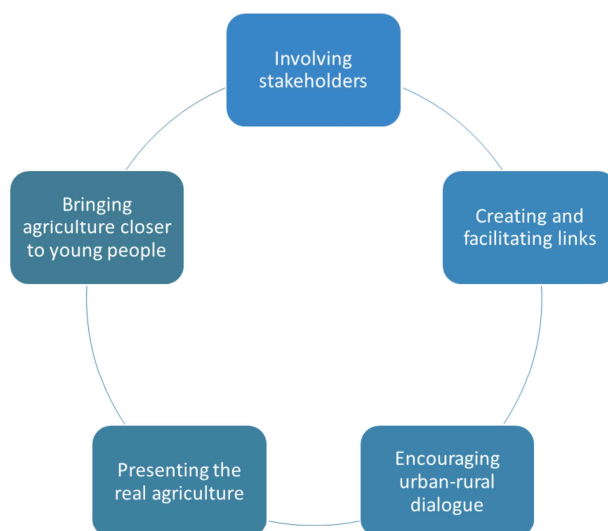
**Cohesion Policy** is the other major source of support for rural areas since it promotes and supports the harmonious overall development of Member States, regions and territories. To reach these objectives, the **European Regional Development Fund**, the **Cohesion Fund** and the **European Social Fund Plus** need to mobilise significant investment in people and infrastructure in rural areas.

In addition, we should use the very significant potential of the **Recovery and Resilience fund**, **other EU programmes**, as well as of the **European Investment Bank** to cover existing investment gaps in rural areas.

**How has the Slovenian National Rural Network been involved in the process?**

Slovenian National Rural Network already provides an important support as we are implementing the current Rural Development Programme and facilitating public discussion on CAP, but also enabling networking, the sharing of information and good practices between different stakeholders and building bridges with other EU funds, researchers and networks.

## Long-term Vision and National Rural Networks



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### **Allow me to express my opinion on how the National Rural Networks can contribute to the realisation of the Long-term Vision.**

CAP Networks have to play an active role in:

- Involving stakeholders, sharing good practices and taking actions forward across a wide range of the proposed topics and actions.
- Creating and facilitating links between different European funds, searching for synergies, networking and sharing research results and good practices.
- Encouraging an open dialogue between urban and rural areas.
- Presenting the real agriculture and different roles of farmers to consumers, urban dwellers and newcomers to the countryside; and
- Bringing agriculture closer to schoolchildren and present it as a modern and attractive profession.



I wish you all a constructive and fruitful discussion during your meeting.