

The ENRD Workshop on Vibrant Rural Areas: Access to Services was organised virtually on 30 June 2020.

Following the Workshop on Rural Jobs held in November 2019, this second workshop on Vibrant Rural Areas examined the accessibility of services across rural Europe and considered the role of public support, including that of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The workshop provided an opportunity for exchanging practical experiences of improving service accessibility in different Member States.

The online event brought together a wide range of practitioners and policy makers from all over Europe.

#### Event Information

**Date:** 30 June 2020

**Organiser:** ENRD Contact Point

**Participants:** Approximately 60 participants from 20 MS including Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, NGOs, Local Action Groups, DG AGRI, researchers and other stakeholders

**Outcomes:** Establishing a stronger understanding of the key factors for making rural services more accessible, as well as practical exchanges on the situation in various MS

**Web page:** [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-vibrant-rural-areas-access-services\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-vibrant-rural-areas-access-services_en)

## Making a difference through public support



### Setting the scene

During the first session three presenters introduced the audience to the main subject of the workshop. **Mert Kompil** from the [Joint Research Centre](#) shared the findings of a [study](#) on mapping the accessibility of services in Europe's rural areas. The accessibility study, implemented through the [LUISA territorial modelling platform](#), shows the distance to reach services is higher in rural areas than in the cities, with high variations between countries and within a country. The people living in remote rural territories are in a particularly vulnerable situation where the distance, the absence of public transport and related additional costs of reaching services can represent major obstacles to economic development.

**Ana Moreno Monroy** from the [OECD](#) focused on present and future public service delivery costs. She explained that public service provision is challenging for rural areas due to high transportation costs, low economies of scale and scope, and the difficulty of attracting and retaining professionals. There is a need for better estimates of the current and future costs of service delivery in rural areas. It is also important to develop policies which focus on rural public service provision and take into account aspects such as: 1) spatial considerations both in medium and long-term planning; 2) the assessment of the cost to public finances; 3) service delivery strategies; and 4) multi-level governance and multi-sectoral perspectives.

**Georgios Mathioudakis** from DG AGRI made a series of important reflections about the role of EAFRD support. He argued that the challenges experienced in rural areas need to be approached in a holistic way. Globalisation and digitalisation need to be taken into account in any future vision for rural areas to ensure that they are not marginalised from future economic and environmental opportunities.

## Concrete examples



The second workshop session illustrated how public support helps make services more accessible for the rural population at local level. Two concrete EAFRD-funded examples were presented.



**Marija Čipčić** presented a project from the Croatian municipality of Dugopolje which used the RDP's Measure 7 (Basic Services and Village Renewal) for the construction of a new kindergarten. By addressing the lack of childcare facilities in the rural part of the municipality, the project significantly improved living conditions, made the village more attractive for young families and thereby reversed the previous out-migration from the area.



The 'Senior Mobil' project, implemented in the municipality of Koppl in Austria, was presented by **Julia Soriat** from the Local Action Group LEADER Region Fumo. They invested in a fully equipped minibus which is available on demand for elderly and disabled people. The project was carried out as part of the broader masterplan for the future of mobility ([FUMObil](#)) prepared by the LAG that was among the winners of the [ENRD Rural Inspiration Awards 2020](#).



The main conclusions from the group discussions on the theme 'Making the difference through public support' included the following points: there is an urgent need to improve the match between funding mechanisms and needs on the ground; it is important to improve the coordination and the quality of governance in local and regional administration; there is also a need to improve the synergy between different funding mechanisms and between urban and rural initiatives. Investment in better access to services for rural population could have various positive long-term effects including reversing the depopulation trend.

## Experiences with improving access to services from the ground



### Enabling factors

During the afternoon session, [Jan Droege](#) from the Broadband Competence Office explained how broadband connectivity can be promoted as an essential enabler for accessible services. He provided examples of various rural broadband investment models including citizen-driven cooperatives, cooperatives with public stakeholders as well as public-private partnerships. The recent lockdown has shown how important connectivity is for providing access to services. He referred to a recently published [BCO handbook](#) with 12 practical examples of bringing connectivity to European rural areas.

[Giuseppina Cannella](#) from [INDIRE](#), the research institute of the Italian Ministry of Education, provided a practical example of how the internet enables access to services in the form of distance learning in small schools in Italy. Giuseppina emphasised the important role of ICT as part of the learning process, especially for online classes when there is a particular need caused by remoteness or other specific circumstances. The objectives of the Small Schools Network are to share practices and provide training opportunities to teachers so they can co-design more effective classes. The importance of the small schools community is increasing and this helps students to get to quality education, maintain an identity, teachers to strengthen the curricula and schools to be connected to the outside world. It is also important to provide equipment and connectivity for families and pupils who cannot connect from home. Connectivity needs to be on both sides, schools and children.

[Graciela Malgesini](#) from the [Spanish Anti-Poverty Network](#) addressed the question of the access to services for vulnerable groups. Depopulation in rural areas is strongly influenced by the poor quality or lack of services such as the scarcity of doctors and nurses, the lack of banks and shops and the small size or absence of schools. This trend has led to what has been called 'empty Spain' or the 'Spain of disconnection'. Some of the main underlying causes are the low population density and the rural digital divide. In fact, IT solutions often do exist, but they are not implemented. Graciela concluded with the need for a holistic approach that takes into account all the above challenges and which could lead to a move 'Back to the village'.



### Lessons learned from the national and regional level

The final session featured key findings from two international projects. [Linda Randall](#) from Nordregio introduced the Interreg-funded [project MAMBA](#) which focuses on maximising mobility and the accessibility of services in regions affected by demographic change. After describing the demographic situation in the project's focus area – the Baltic sea region, Linda presented the lessons from the project through concrete local examples. Key issues that need to be addressed for maximising the accessibility of services include: taking full account of community needs, territorial specificities, the economic context and legal constraints and enablers.

[Marie de Bizien](#) from the association LEADER France described the outcomes of the [ACCESS'R project](#) funded by the French National Rural Network using state funds and the EAFRD. The project coincides well with the aims of the workshop as it has been analysing alternative strategies for improving the accessibility of services for the rural population. Marie outlined four key approaches: 1) Pooling and/or partnership between the public and private sectors; 2) Cooperation and solidarity (e.g. mobilising volunteers); 3) Itinerant services and improved mobility; and 4) Digitalisation and e-services.



Subsequent discussions in smaller groups led to the conclusion that there is a need for identifying and mapping areas without broadband and for supporting digital literacy, especially for the older generation. Local authorities can improve the efficiency of service provision by contracting out certain community-based services to third sector organisations. Furthermore, it is important to provide economic and legal support to the stakeholders who want to explore innovative forms of service provision.

## Conclusions and next steps

The concluding remarks by [Orsolya Frizon-Somogyi](#) from DG AGRI summed up that there is insufficient public funding in rural areas, however there are different solutions and instruments in place to cope with the situation. The question 'how to make the most use out of the public support' has more aspects. Good programming and well-targeted interventions are the basis for future success. It is also crucial to involve local actors in the programming and implementation of the public support, and preventing unnecessary prescriptions that could hinder innovation. The participants have been invited to take part in the EU public consultation on the Long term vision for rural areas that will be launched in September.

Additional lessons from the day were collected from the workshop participants:

- Cooperation between inhabitants, the public and private sector; as well as cooperation through multi-level governance, a multi-funds approach and complementarity among funds are all deemed necessary. The need for a broad, holistic approach when looking for sustainable solutions for rural areas remains crucial.
- Community partnerships and the inclusion of local inhabitants in decision-making about service provision is essential for finding successful innovative solutions.