

The workshop explored the key drivers and effects of population decline in rural areas across the EU. Participants discussed the role of the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and the importance to work in synergy with other EU policies and instruments in order to help create an enabling rural environment.

Examples of successful projects contributing to the creation of business opportunities and the improvement of services and quality of life in rural communities were discussed. Participants explored how to develop integrated approaches that can help combat rural depopulation by bringing together the available funds and policy tools.

Event Information

Date: 21 May 2019

Location: Brussels, Belgium

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: NRNs, Managing Authorities, NGOs, Paying Agencies, LAGs, EU institutions, researcher and other stakeholders

Outcomes: Setting the scene for depopulation in rural areas across EU Member States, exchanging on local actions and initiatives, as well as national and regional strategies.

Web page: enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-combatting-rural-depopulation-creating-new-opportunities-vibrant_en

Setting the scene

Opening speech - [María Gafo](#) from DG AGRI underlined that depopulation is a symptom that something is not going well and is linked to the lack of opportunities and services. She invited participants to learn from the exchanges and to take inspirational ideas back home.

Shrinking rural areas - [Andrew Copus](#) from ESPON, presented an analysis of the two main types of shrinking rural areas: active shrinking, driven by migration; and legacy shrinking, driven by distorted age structures. He explained the differing north-south trend as well as the east-west characteristics.

Quality of Life in Rural Europe - [Klara Fóti](#) from EUROFOUND, presented the main relevant rural findings of the European Quality of Life survey. In Eastern and Southern Member States, extreme poverty magnifies the difficulties caused by rural depopulation. In particular, elderly struggle to access adequate services. The digital divide persists, and low internet usage is perceived to contribute to social exclusion.

Role of Rural Development policy - [Orsolya Frizon-Somogyi](#) from DG AGRI, outlined that public support is needed to accompany people willing to stay in rural areas. The specificity of rural areas, remoteness and lower population density require local, national and EU integrated interventions. National and regional authorities can currently use different EU funds to tackle the lack of basic services and infrastructure, lower economic activity and loss of work force in rural areas. RDPs provide measures that help address these issues. CAP post-2020 gives the possibility to Member States to define in their CAP Strategic Plans how they will reach the social objective. The involvement of local actors and social partners in all stages of the programming exercise will be essential to make these interventions successful.

How can RDPs and other EU policies respond to the demographic challenge?

Round 1 working groups discussed EU, national, regional and local policies and responses to these challenges.

Mobility & Basic Services



The [projects presented](#), underlined the importance of using a thorough territorial analysis to find the most appropriate solutions to providing the different services and infrastructure needed to further development. Whether addressing transport, housing or job creation, the villages and rural areas concerned need to assess their strengths and weaknesses and engage directly in overcoming their challenges. Strong local commitment by both authorities and local people is beneficial to the sustainable development of rural communities.

Entrepreneurship



Consideration of a mix of examples from [Finland](#), [Spain](#) and [Hungary](#) allowed participants to identify key conditions for an enabling entrepreneurial environment in rural areas. These conditions included providing peer-to-peer support and mentoring; simplifying rules and reducing bureaucracy; having a realistic, viable and sustainable plan; nurturing an entrepreneurial attitude by educating individuals and providing sustained/progressive support that can be adapted to entrepreneurs.

Vulnerable groups



Efficient and appropriate use of funds is crucial in addressing the rights and needs of vulnerable people and in reconciling economic development with human factors. To achieve that, it is essential to involve the local communities and local actors who are active on the ground and familiar with the local context. [Projects](#) supporting the integration or empowerment of vulnerable groups are thought more likely to succeed and be economically sustainable if linked strongly with the areas' unique resources, innovative approaches to maximise the use of these, adds further value.

Integrated approaches at national and regional levels

Round 2 working groups considered the approaches employed in national and regional clusters.

Mediterranean Member States



In addressing the demographic challenge at a national level, [Spanish](#) and [Italian](#) contributors indicated that for a strategy to be efficient the first step is to have a strong political commitment to ensure its implementation. It is equally important to design the strategy as a tool that adapts, that is easy to use, and which can act quickly.

Nordic Member States



The [Swedish](#) and [Finnish](#) approaches to integrated regional strategies avoided the weakness of using too many simplistic solutions. Some forms of evidence can be misleading, some challenges are more complex in reality than data can capture, as when looking at social integration. A key point for the future is to avoid using only local solutions and to ensure their integration in contributing to an overarching strategic framework to help further develop wider areas/regions.

Central & Eastern European Member States



Examples from [Romania](#), [Austria](#) and the [Alpine region](#), showed the importance of fostering partnerships as a precondition of successful strategy building. Ensuring the acceptability to local communities is essential in securing their necessary involvement. A good communication plan is needed to support the strategy and help avoid any negative narrative. Any strategy should build on reliable analytical work, including an assessment of the local needs to provide a solid evidence base. Strategies should feature a mix of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches: a 'bottom-up' approach is more appropriate for the development of adequate community-led local services.

Concluding remarks

- **Act now!** With the new programming period 2021-2027 approaching, now is the right time for Member States to develop strategic approaches to tackle rural depopulation and help ensure they can serve as a tool to coordinate the different EU funding instruments (above all: EAFRD, ERDF, ESF).
- **EU funds are only complementary tools** which should be used to complement national resources to address the key drivers of rural depopulation and in working to counter the trend.
- **Any strategic approaches** aiming to improve the quality of life in rural communities **should be about the people** and rely on local actors, involving civil society in the decision-making process, making sure that local communities needs are addressed and that interventions are appropriate for the territory.