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ANNEX 1

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**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the  
European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

**A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient  
and prosperous rural areas by 2040**

{SWD(2021) 166 final} - {SWD(2021) 167 final}

Action title	Start date	Description
<b>Stronger rural areas</b>		
<b>Flagship: Set-up a rural revitalisation platform</b>	2022/2023	<p>The rural revitalisation platform will be a one-stop shop for rural communities, rural project holders and local authorities alike to collaborate. It will predominantly support rural areas affected by population loss, ageing and a lack of economic opportunities, by sharing information and best practices on tools and strategies.</p> <p>It will promote LEADER, Smart Villages, Interreg and integrated territorial strategies with a view to making rural areas more attractive and making services accessible to all. It will link up with the pilot action ‘Small Places Matter’ under the Territorial Agenda and the ‘Smart Rural 21’ project to develop smart village approaches.</p>
<b>Flagship: Research and innovation for rural communities</b>	2021	<p>Research and innovation activities will support the development of innovations by and for rural communities as well as training and knowledge exchange to accelerate the spread and adoption of these innovations.</p> <p>These will include, in the first two years of Horizon Europe, the creation of an ‘expertise and training centre on rural innovation’ together with actions targeting smart solutions for smart rural communities, innovations in farming and rural areas and innovations in the field of corporate social responsibility to improve health and safety at work in farming. The development of rural innovation ecosystems and related analysis of triggering factors will be supported by the set-up of a yearly forum of Start-up Villages for rural innovation, connecting rural innovation actors across the EU.</p>
Enhanced networking for LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages.	2021	<p>Over the past 30 years, communities have been empowered to develop local strategies with CAP funding under the LEADER approach, which has been extended to other funds through so-called Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). Enhanced networking will promote these approaches, along with others such as Smart Villages and sustainable coastal communities, and provide more advice to local communities, notably on access to funding and the conception of</p>

		such strategies.
Develop a study on land use linked to sustainable farming.	2022	The Commission will develop a study on land use linked to sustainable farming, and will assess how it can further incentivise optimal land use planning/zoning.
Support education, training, youth, sport and volunteering activities in rural areas.	2021	<p>The new Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes (2021-2027 ) will reach more people in rural areas through inclusion measures covering all fields of education, training, youth, sport and volunteering such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific financial mechanisms</li> <li>• Targeted communication activities</li> <li>• Easier-to-access mobility and cooperation activity formats</li> <li>• Expanded set of digital measures (particularly suited for cooperation and initiatives at local and regional level)</li> <li>• Training and networking opportunities.</li> </ul>

<b>Connected rural areas</b>		
<b>Flagship: Develop rural mobility through (1) support to rural municipalities in identifying best practices (2) Multimodal digital mobility services</b>	2021	<p>It is imperative to improve existing transport connections. To this end, sustainable multimodal mobility solutions and connections should be optimised, making use of digitalisation. Building on its experience with urban mobility networks, the Commission will support rural municipalities in discussing and identifying mobility solutions. The network will showcase local level initiatives which local authorities could replicate in their territory and provide a forum for discussion on rural mobility issues. Improving connections between road, rail, waterways and air transport can make them more accessible to rural areas. Digital platforms should also be used to create multimodal real-time information, ticketing or booking services, allowing people to easily reach their final destination through the most sustainable mode of transport.</p>
<b>Flagship: Rural Digital Futures</b>	2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Digital connectivity: closing the gaps between rural and urban areas and enabling universal and affordable access to high-speed broadband, including 5G. This will be achieved by mobilising private-sector investments through complementary public funding from national and European sources, notably from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the ESIF and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF).</li> <li>2. Digital technology: digital innovation and new technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, Internet of Things solutions and Digital Innovation Hubs contributing to the development of rural areas by implementing the actions of Europe’s digital decade. New European programmes such as Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme will be mobilized to support innovation and deployment of digital capacities.</li> <li>3. People (“human capital”): boosting competencies needed for the digital transformation of rural areas, including digital skills and entrepreneurship. The European Social Fund Plus, the EAFRD and other European programmes will contribute to make this happen.</li> <li>4. Measuring the progress towards closing the digital gap between urban and rural areas by re-arranging existing indicators, notably from the Digital Economy and Society Index, in a Rural in</li> </ol>

		Digital Index.
Support the roll-out of broadband in rural areas.	2022	Broadband Competence Offices (BCOs) are contact points in Member States or regions. They provide guidance and advice to broadband project promoters, investors and users (local and regional public authorities, citizens, operators, businesses and any relevant stakeholder). A strengthened support facility will support the BCO network to improve rural broadband roll-out and facilitate investments.
Continue promoting the digitalisation of the agricultural sector through capacity building (including in digital skills), research and innovation, and demonstration including in the fields of Internet of Things, robotics and automation, big data management and use	2021	The CAP and Horizon Europe will continue to support the digitalisation of agriculture through, training, advice and innovation actions under the CAP and funding large-scale pilot projects under Horizon 2020, and R&I actions under Horizon Europe.
Highlight urban-rural linkages in the new EU Urban Mobility Framework	2021	The new EU Urban Mobility Framework will include specific actions to better integrate the urban, peri-urban and rural linkages. This will be done through further development of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP), where dedicated attention will go to better support connectivity between rural, peri-urban areas and metropolitan/urban areas. This via safe and sustainable mobility options.
Improve accessibility of rural areas through the Drone Strategy 2.0.	2022	In addition to utility services (field inspections and measurements), drones can improve accessibility in remote rural area. They can be used for delivery of small goods in rural area (eg. Small packages, prescribed medicine to patient homes, mail, food, small automotive parts, etc.). The European Commission will take this into account in its Drone Strategy 2.0.

## Resilient rural areas

**Flagship: Support rural municipalities in energy transition and fighting climate change**

2022

**(1) The creation of a work stream on rural areas in the Covenant of Mayors**

A rural work stream within the Covenant of Mayors will be created to disseminate best practices and support rural municipalities in accessing EU funding to support the green transition.

**(2) The use of structural funding to finance the renovation wave**

Member States, regions and local authorities should further seize the opportunity to finance investments through territorial instruments of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD): Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI's), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and LEADER.

**(3) Address rural areas in the New European Bauhaus**

The New European Bauhaus, which connects the European Green Deal to our living spaces by adapting buildings and public spaces will also play an important role and be promoted in this respect.

<p><b>Flagship: Climate action in peatland through carbon farming</b></p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>Rural areas can become relevant actors in addressing climate change and restoring biodiversity. To that end, the provision of ecosystem services by farmers and foresters should benefit from further recognition. For instance, the restoration, rewetting and conservation of wetlands and peatlands has great potential in terms of climate benefits as it can deliver immediately significant emission reductions in a relatively small area, while at the same time delivering several co-benefits related to water management and biodiversity.</p> <p>This transition would be more effective with a territorial approach, in particular in those rural areas hosting extensive peatlands. These regions could make benefit from support under the Just Transition Fund. Carbon farming initiatives could be a further source of income for their farmers and foresters, rewarding them for carbon sequestration. As set out in the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, a new EU carbon farming initiative will promote this new business model. CAP, the Cohesion Policy and the LIFE programme can provide support to develop pilot carbon-farming initiatives in their regions. Ensuring strong advisory support to farmers and foresters will be particularly relevant. This support is key to the success of environmental land management schemes involving farms of all sizes.</p>
<p><b>Flagship: the proposed EU Mission on soil health and food.</b></p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>This proposed mission funded under Horizon Europe, aims at implementing an ambitious research and innovation programme funded under Horizon Europe, including the development of innovation in ‘living laboratories’ involving stakeholders, citizens, scientists and other actors (e.g. local authorities) and lighthouses (sites with exemplary practices) with the objective to improve soil health and with strong social dimensions.</p> <p>The proposed mission should contribute to tackle soil challenges in rural areas, but also in urban settings, building connections between rural and urban practices. The mission should also implement citizen engagement activities and seek to improve knowledge on soil. Synergies should be sought with the Horizon Europe Mission on healthy oceans and waters, to improve the health of EU’s water systems, in particular achieve zero pollution.</p>

<p><b>Flagship: Social resilience and Women in rural areas.</b></p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>Support for women will be provided to entrepreneurship, participation in decision-making and investments in work-life balance services, such as early childhood education and care, as well as services for older people.</p> <p>There can also be opportunities to increase women’s participation in the labour market, in particular in agriculture, under the Common Agricultural Policy or the schemes and support of European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT).</p> <p>The Commission will continue supporting Member States’ work on improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of quality education and care services for children, older persons and persons with disabilities in rural areas through investments from the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund, the InvestEU programme and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.</p> <p>Special attention will also be paid to people in vulnerable situation.</p>
<p>Analyse spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe.</p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>The Commission will analyse the drivers of demographically declining and left behind areas in Europe, and will examine the demographic, economic, social, labour market and cultural effects of urban-rural mobility in both sending and receiving areas. It will promote rural development, sustainability and socio-economic equality and it will identify policy recommendations focusing on the return of individuals to their place of origin.</p>
<p>Prepare a study on the working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers.</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>The Commission will launch a study looking into the working conditions of seasonal workers in the agricultural sector. It will address the general situation of their working conditions in the EU, focusing on identification of applicable rules and regulations.</p>
<p>Address the inclusion and integration of people with a migrant background in rural areas.</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>As part of the implementation of the Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027, the Commission will explore options to build rural partnerships to promote inclusion and integration of migrants in rural areas.</p>

Ensure equal opportunities to children in rural areas	2021	Ensure equal opportunities to children in rural areas by implementing the European Child Guarantee and providing children in need with free access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, healthcare, and effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.
Address the needs of people with disabilities in rural areas.	2021	By implementing the New Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 in collaboration with the MS, the Commission will support improved access to their rights in rural areas.
<b>Prosperous rural areas</b>		
<b>Flagship: Entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas.</b>	2021	<p>The flagship promotes sharing and supporting experiences across the Single Market to revitalise rural areas through cooperation, best practice and knowledge exchange. A series of actions is proposed to enable industry entrepreneurs, SMEs and social economy organisations to return to, transform and thrive in rural areas:</p> <p>Develop SMEs in rural areas by favouring clustering, networking and cooperation through the Single Market Programme, COSME and European Enterprise Network;</p> <p>Promote social economy business models in rural areas through the European action plan for the social economy;</p> <p>Boost retail and local supply chains in rural areas by e.g. improving the interface of local producers and retail and creating local food hubs;</p> <p>Creation and support of innovative environments in rural areas through educating and empowering future entrepreneurs to develop societal or business models and solutions that would cater for the needs of local communities, with the help, expertise and service provisions of the EIT KICs.</p>

<p>Continue encouraging Member States to increase education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas under the reinforced Youth Guarantee and the European Education Area.</p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>The reinforced Youth Guarantee is a commitment by the EU Member States that all young people under 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship. As part of this commitment, Member States should address the needs of young people in rural and remote areas. Particular attention will be paid to making jobs and other opportunities available. The Commission monitors the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, including the progress in the situation of young people in rural areas.</p> <p>The Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 outlines the Commission’s vision and foresees important initiative to foster the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems, which will have an impact on rural and remote areas.</p>
<p>Promote the development of a sustainable bioeconomy, including in the framework of the EU Forest Strategy and in the carbon-farming initiative.</p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>The Commission will propose a new EU Forest Strategy with a number of actions, including to plant 3 billion trees by 2030. This will provide opportunities for jobs and growth through forest restoration activities, and will support farmers and rural communities in adapting to climate change, protecting their crops from more frequent adverse weather events (floods, droughts, heatwaves, etc.) and diversify their revenues. A network of forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities will be also promoted, to give voice to forest rural areas, ensuring their representation in key initiatives and facilitating specific assessments of reality and needs of forest areas across the EU.</p>
<p>Highlight the role of Producer Organisations (POs) in rural development and strengthen producers group of geographical indications</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>POs can strengthen the social fabric in rural areas by offering their members a sense of belonging and by increasing the level of social capital and trust within the communities where they are based. They can contribute to increasing the standard of living in rural areas by securing jobs and livelihoods. POs not only directly employ people; they also indirectly help producers earn their living from farming.</p> <p>The Commission will address the role of producer organisations and their contribution to rural development in future events with the aim to highlight and give visibility to their contribution.</p> <p>The Commission will also empower the producers groups of geographical indications with additional tools for further strengthening their position in the food supply chain to keep securing a</p>

		fair return for their products.
<b>Implementation of RAP and governance</b>		
Apply rural proofing notably to the Commission's major legislative proposals which affect rural areas.	2022	Mechanism to assess the impact of major legislation and initiatives on rural areas.
Set-up a Rural Observatory to bring together all data collected by the Commission on rural areas, including official statistics.	2022	The Observatory will be put in place through a European Commission research group in charge of improving and centralising data collection and analysis specifically for rural areas, in synergy and complementarity with existing relevant initiatives such as the Knowledge Centre for Territorial Policies and the Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography, as well as monitoring and data collection under the various instruments of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. The Observatory will also support the dissemination of data on rural areas.
Enhance availability of statistics on rural areas through: (1) making available new detailed data collected in the framework of the 2021 round of population and housing censuses in the EU disseminated via the 2021 Census Statistical Atlas;	2021	The Commission will continue its work to reinforce statistical data collection and provision on rural areas. (1) While publications of demographic statistics at NUTS3 level in line with Regulation (EC) No 1260/1230 will continue, the 2021 round of population and housing censuses will provide detailed regional information, including collection of georeferenced population data at 1 km square grid from all Member States for the first time;  (2) Pending the outcome of the ongoing evaluation and impact assessment of European statistics on population, the Commission will propose a new framework regulation integrating census, demography, migration statistics and extending the data requirements towards their geographical

<p>(2) further increasing the availability and quality of official statistics on rural areas by modernising the legal framework for demographic statistics.</p> <p>(3) developing Pan-European geospatial datasets</p> <p>(4) Mainstreaming the degree of urbanisation</p>		<p>detail to enhance the score of statistics relevant for rural areas;</p> <p>(3)The European Commission will establish a harmonised approach on the use of Geospatial Information Systems, developing pan-European geospatial datasets (for example on public transport, education, health care etc.) and enabling the production of more georeferenced statistics and related indicators (like accessibility of schools, hospitals, etc.).</p>
<p>Work on the definition of functional rural areas</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>The European Commission will continue discussion with stakeholders to define functional rural areas.</p>
<p>Propose a Rural Pact to national, regional and local authorities committing to address the specific needs of rural areas.</p>	<p>2021</p>	<p>A Rural Pact is proposed to the national, regional and local authorities and stakeholders. This Pact will aim to address unmet rural needs, especially focusing on remote and depopulated areas, which are often most affected</p>

<p>Publish a toolkit on the combination of EU funds for the revitalisation of rural areas</p>	<p>2022</p>	<p>Guide providing operational and practical solutions to rural stakeholders to make full use of the opportunities offered by post 2020 EU Funds. It will also provide practical examples of innovative investments combining funding sources and getting better value for support. Links with methodological support for integrated territorial strategies under Cohesion Policy are foreseen.</p>
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