

The EU Long-term Vision for Rural Areas

**At last, a long-term territorial vision from the European Commission,
but only for parts of the EU territory**

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This summer, the European Commission initiated an EU Long-term Vision for Rural Areas. The process is borne by a cooperation between DG Regio and DG Agri and involves dialogue between the related institutions and political players [\[see\]](#). It is also an invitation to think about a common European vision for 2040.

This is really a positive new development in European policy making and could lead to a new and beneficial avenue in conceiving European politics, policies and actions. Finally, there is a sign of willingness and a recognised need to consider the long-term and produce visions.

However, to be useful and have impact, visions need to provide clear and operational views and aims for future aspired situations that policy actions can work for and implement. This is a key point for success and should be guiding the process ahead of formulating a Rural Pact. The envisaged Rural Proofing – that could take experiences from Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) into account - will only become feasible and efficient if the pact expresses clear political aims and goals that policy makers can use when formulating and assessing policy initiatives.

Concerning rural areas or territories in general, the further process and putting the long-term vision into practice must reflect the widespread diversity of rural areas in Europe. There is a huge difference in the opportunities and problems of remote and less developed rural areas compared to rural areas with many smaller towns, and rural areas closer to or integrated in larger urban agglomerations. This territorial diversity needs to be captured and reflected in the vision for it to become useful. The diversity needs to be integrated in, and even structuring, the Rural Action Plan, that should set out actions for all types of rural areas and not focus only on remote and less developed ones. Here, the envisaged Rural Observatory could map the rural diversity and produce the supporting information and knowledge. Drawing on its rich experience, ESPON could be a vital and supporting partner in this work.

The different elements and the process envisaged in the elaboration of the long-term vision for rural areas would seem all positive and relevant. This way of arranging work towards a long-term vision could, with benefit, be copied in other similar processes. However, unfortunately, the interdependency of rural areas and their relationship with other types of areas on the European territory is currently absent. This is a major deficit. As example, one cannot isolate rural areas from their nearest urban areas, as functional urban-rural links are crucial to solid rural development. For the credibility and place-based character of the vision this broader and more integrated perception of relations and dynamics of territories should be ensured.

For sure, the long-term Vision for Rural Areas is a much welcome step forward and extremely useful for certain types of rural areas, probably in particular remote and less-developed ones. However, looking towards 2040, it would be of far greater value for the EU to see rural areas as an integral part of a more comprehensive long-term vision for the entire EU territory.

Such a comprehensive, long-term vision for the entire EU territory could address all the different types of places and territories, and the future overall structures, interdependencies, and interrelationships to pursue. An overall EU vision could embrace the diversity of places and areas and set out operational long-term aspirations that could serve as a reference for other policy decisions.

In a vision process on the entire EU territory, there are important components that should be included:

1. The diverse socio-economic and ecological characteristics and potential around the EU.
2. The character and speciality of different urban and rural areas in the economic and social fabric, their links and interdependencies, and their potential contribution to delivery of green services and services of general interests.
3. The geographic variety within the EU, including mountains, islands, border areas, natural areas, etc., and their future roles.
4. The existing infrastructure networks, their bottlenecks, and the envisaged future flows of people, goods, and data inside the EU and to the wider world.
5. The nature networks and corridors present within the EU and their potentials to serve the ambition of a greener, more ecological and biodiverse EU, their contribution to counteract climate change, and their role as recreative areas for the citizens.
6. The quality of governance, the presence of administrative capacities, and the necessary supportive systems to ensure the implementation of the long-term vision and its actions.
7. The political aspirations of regions and local authorities, including the citizen perspective and citizen's democratic wishes and visions for the future of their areas.

Comprehensive and integrated long-term EU policy aspirations and overall aims for the EU territory, for the diversity of places and territories within the EU, formulated together with the relevant policy sectors, would be a welcome innovation in EU policy making. Moreover, with a broad democratic involvement, it would make the EU more visible and accepted among citizens.

The European Commission should, as said, be congratulated for moving into long-term visionary considerations that are carried forward and coordinated by several Commission services. Lessons should

be learned from the first attempt on Long-term Visions for Rural Areas and used to create a comprehensive long-term reference framework for the EU territory that could inspire future long-term policy making at EU level.

To meet future challenges, it is crucial to stimulate greater coordinated efficiency in EU policy making and funds, and to provide an important and targeted action base for implementing more territorial cohesion and cooperation around the EU.

The Commission is strongly recommended and urged to take further steps and enlarge the use of long-term visions related to places and territories as a reference for policy making. The forthcoming Cohesion Report would be an obvious place to outline such intentions.