

SHERPA

Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

SHERPA Position Paper

FORESIGHT EXERCISE

Alternative futures: how
to get there?



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Introduction

During 2020, the SHERPA project focused on contributing to the development of the European Commission's (EC) Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), which was published on 30 June 2021¹. Each SHERPA Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) identified a desired vision for their rural areas by 2040, the enabling factors to achieve these visions, the challenges to overcome and the opportunities to be seized. This was done by executing a Delphi method, which was based on desk research, use of quantitative data, interviews with key informants, and the design, implementation and analysis of online surveys. This work resulted in 19 MAP Position Papers that were synthesised into one SHERPA Position Paper on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas², which was taken into consideration for the development of the EC Communication on the LTVRA.

In 2021, a second stage of work on the LTVRA began with the implementation of a SHERPA foresight exercise. Foresight exercises serve as a support tool for decision-making involving different domains, especially when dealing with cross-cutting and complex issues such as the LTVRA. The SHERPA foresight exercise had the goal of informing and assisting the decision-making process through the creation of a dialogue on the future of rural areas among civil societies, researchers, and policy-makers around locally relevant matters. This was done by applying a back-casting process: the participating MAPs started from their desirable future, continuing on their work for SHERPA on the LTVRA in 2020, and went backwards to assess the goals and targets that would need to be achieved, as well as identifying possible pathways (i.e. interventions, instruments, processes and actors responsible for taking action) to be acted upon. The MAPs involved in this second stage of work on the LTVRA were the Portuguese MAP (Centro), the Hungarian MAP, the Italian MAP (Tuscany), the Spanish MAP (Galicia) and the French MAP (PACA Sud) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Location of the SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) involved in the foresight exercise.



¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en
² https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SHERPA_PositionPaper-LTVRA.pdf

For this process, the participating MAPs were invited to attend two workshops which relied on the gathered knowledge from the stakeholder group and the available data from the work done in SHERPA during 2020. In addition, the MAPs were asked to analyse the four possible alternative future scenarios for rural areas as developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) in the context of the ENRD Thematic Working Groups³, to determine which of these four scenarios reflected the characteristics of their rural areas in the current context and could support strategic thinking towards the desired future.

The four scenarios, which are the result of a foresight exercise called 'EU Rural Areas 2040' executed by the JRC for the development of the LTVRA⁴, describe various potential pathways for rural areas towards 2040 with the goal to enrich the discussions on potential developments and policy responses. The scenarios are represented by a 2x2 matrix (Figure 2), whereby the two most uncertain and impactful drivers are selected as axes with two dimensions of uncertainties for the future of European rural areas: the nature of multi-level governance and demographic developments. The resulting four combinations of uncertainties create the backbone of the scenarios, where the plausible developments of other drivers (e.g. climate change, economic development, digitalisation) were added to create the following narratives:

- 1. Rurbanities scenario:** By 2040, there is limited coordination between different levels of governance when it comes to rural areas, people turn to rural areas for a higher level of quality of life in terms of lower costs, less pollution and more security, and rural areas are defined by a diversity of economic activities, a decline in social cohesion, and tension between residents and policy-makers.
- 2. Rural renewal scenario:** By 2040, there is a focus on sustainable living, a counter-urbanisation movement with more people moving to rural areas, green transition is the overarching aim of the governance system, nature-based solutions, circular economy, and sustainable pathways implemented in villages, diversity of rural society is much higher, and there is a permanent conscious effort in building and maintaining communities.
- 3. Rural connections scenario:** By 2040, population, economic activity and local budgets have declined in rural areas, people move to 'rural hubs', a joint strategy has been developed to manage and facilitate the transition, and priority is given to digital infrastructure (e.g., for e-services, facilitating networking, and digitalisation of agriculture).
- 4. Rural specialisation scenario:** By 2040, the main policy aims are restructuring, revival, and rebounding. People have moved to urban centres, there is lower economic and social opportunities in rural areas, as well as minimal public support, and there is diminishing quality of life. Land consolidation left practical management of resources in the hands of a few large actors.

3 Bock, A. and Krzysztofowicz, M. 2021. Scenarios for EU Rural Areas 2040, EUR 30755 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. ISBN 978-92-76-39407-5, doi:10.2760/29388,JRC125368

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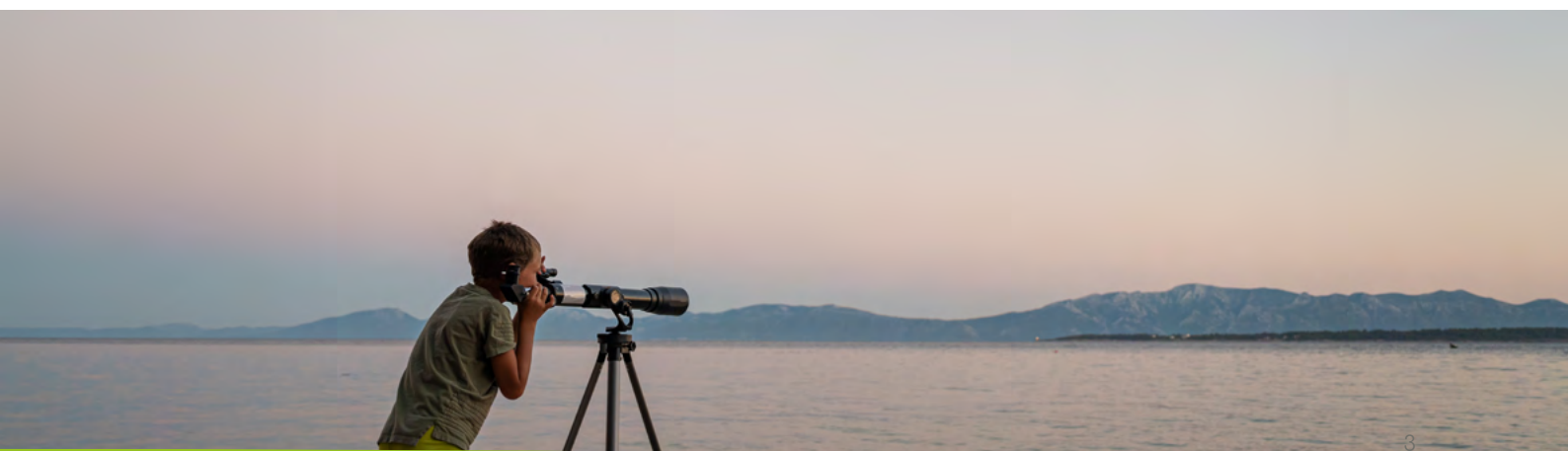
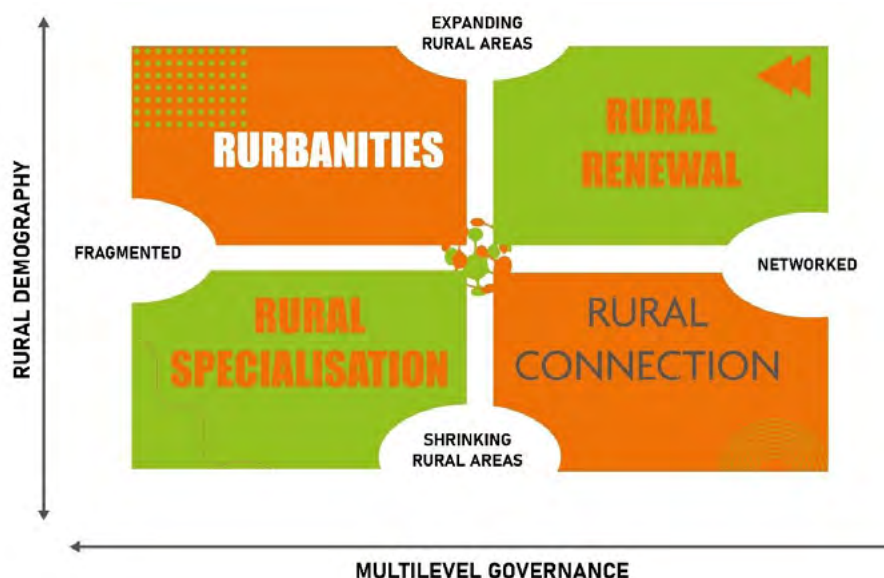


Figure 2. JRC scenarios representation



Source: Bock, A. and Krzysztofowicz, M. 2021. Scenarios for EU Rural Areas 2040, EUR 30755 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. ISBN 978-92-76-39407-5, doi:10.2760/29388,JRC125368.

The objectives of the SHERPA foresight exercise were threefold: (i) testing a methodology for prompting more ambitious reflections on the future of rural areas/communities and guiding strategic thinking among stakeholders involved, (ii) developing pathways of change which provide inspiration and a basis for decision-making and (iii) producing MAP Position Papers that enable further analysis and aggregated policy recommendations by the SHERPA consortium. To achieve these objectives, the MAP members took the five following steps to carry out the foresight exercise:

1. **Placing the region within the scenarios:** MAP members were asked to assess which of the four JRC scenario best described their current context of the rural areas in their region using the two-axis main variables (i.e., multilevel governance & rural demography).
2. **Reintroducing and reconsidering the vision within the scenarios:** The MAP members got re-acquainted with the future vision developed during the MAPs work in 2020 on the LTVRA, discussed if elements need to be changed and/or added to the developed vision, considered their future vision for rural areas in the light of the scenarios, and identified which of the four JRC scenarios seemed to be most aligned with their vision for the future.
3. **Defining achievable goals and targets:** MAP members were asked to make the future vision more realistic by translating it into concrete objectives and developing a set of 2-3 attainable goals and targets to achieve the vision.
4. **Creating robust pathways of change with back-casting:** MAP members were asked to develop detailed pathways of change with milestone initiatives (e.g., policy actions, relevant actors) working backwards from their future vision. The pathways were developed taking into account future drivers, barriers, opportunities, and trade-offs.
5. **Adjusting trajectories towards the vision:** MAP members were asked to reassess their initial priorities and the current situation in the light of the trajectories that emerged from the foresight exercise to adjust any element necessary.

The results of the SHERPA foresight exercise are synthesised into this SHERPA Position Paper and inform SHERPA's continued contribution to the LTVRA.

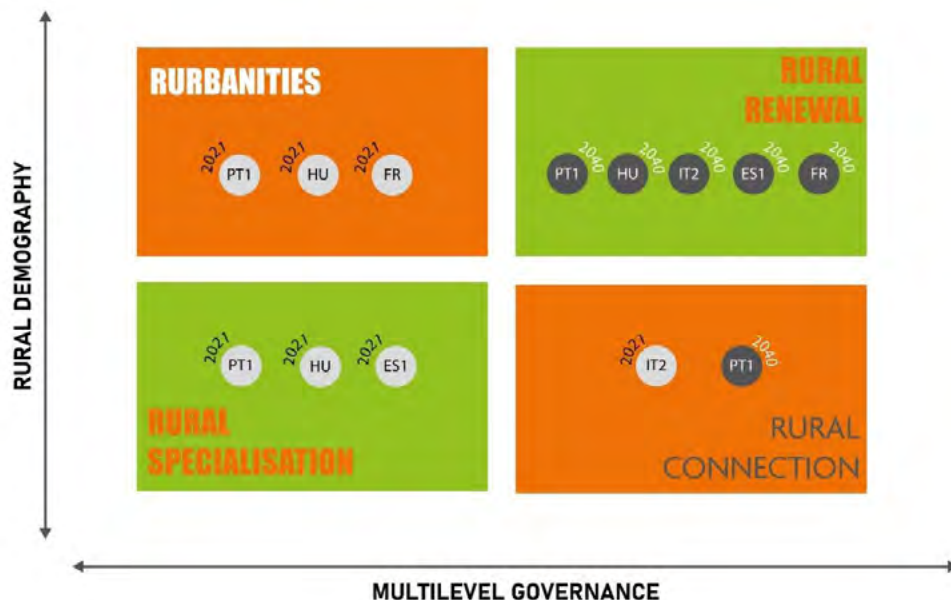
Headline messages

The result of the analysis applied by MAPs in identifying their current context is varied and reflects the heterogeneity of their rural contexts. This difference is recognisable as much among the MAPs located in different Member States (Figure 1) as within the MAP itself. Hence, different scenario perspectives occur as a result of the unique characteristics of their rural territories. Nevertheless, despite the divergent views within the MAP, in terms of the two-axis main variables of the JRC scenarios, most identified their current scenarios as being characterised by fragmented governance and shrinking rural population. These characteristics are traits of the 'Rurbanities' and 'Rural Specialisation' scenarios, which most MAPs indicated fitted best with their current context. In contrast, only the Tuscan MAP identified their current context in the "Rural Connections" scenario, a scenario also characterised by a robust digital component supporting both essential services and productive sectors in the rural territorial context

Despite variations found in the assessment of the current scenario, all MAPs indicated to aim for a future scenario in which rural population is growing and networked approaches to multilevel governance prevail. This description fits best with the scenario 'Rural Renewal', which is the scenario all five MAPs indicated that best fit with the vision for the future of their rural areas. The Portuguese MAP also considered the scenario 'Rural Connection' to be an attractive scenario for the local rural context, thus embracing the opportunity offered by the digitalisation of the economic sectors and the network of communication and transport.

According to the MAPs, this scenario will be achieved through pathways existing out of actions across several focus areas, such as digitalisation, policy, employment, services (incl. housing), agriculture, environment, land management and tourism.

Figure 3. Evolution of the MAPs' JRC scenarios (comparison between 2021 and 2040)



Source: Authors' representation based on the MAPs' Position Papers.

Throughout the exercise, the MAPs have shown that they are aware of their current context, their desired future, and the distance between these two elements. They showed that they have concrete suggestions on how to close the gap between the present and the future, and what their region can do about this. The MAPs acknowledged that there is a long way to go for their areas to achieve the desired future, but they are optimistic about the possibility of achieving their desired future.

Current context

The MAPs involved in SHERPA are unique and reflect the heterogeneity of rural areas in the EU, and so do the MAPs involved in the SHERPA foresight exercise. Due to this, the current contexts of the MAPs differ as a result of multiple factors. For instance, the Portuguese MAP reported a sharp demographic decline in their region while the French MAP identified a growing rural population. The Galician MAP even saw the need to divide its rural areas into three different zones (abandoned, active, and urbanised & forested rural areas) in order to discuss the current context (and future vision) due to its heterogeneous character.

Nevertheless, there are also common themes across the MAPs' current contexts, demonstrated when the MAPs were asked to identify which alternative JRC scenario fits best with the current scenario of their rural areas. It is important to mention that in this phase of the exercise, the MAPs were asked to only consider the two-axis main variables (i.e. rural demography and multilevel governance) when assessing which JRC scenario best identified with their rural areas. This means that the indicated JRC scenarios do not represent the complete current context of the MAPs, but only the condition of the aspect of rural demography and multilevel governance in the current context of their rural area.

The majority of the MAPs (i.e. the Hungarian, Portuguese, French and Galician MAPs) indicated that their current scenario of the rural areas is characterised by fragmented governance and shrinking rural population, and that it is either the scenario 'Rurbanities' or the scenario 'Rural Specialisation' that best describes the current context of their rural areas. The Tuscan MAP is the exception, as it indicated that the scenario 'Rural Connection' is the best fit for the current context of their rural area.

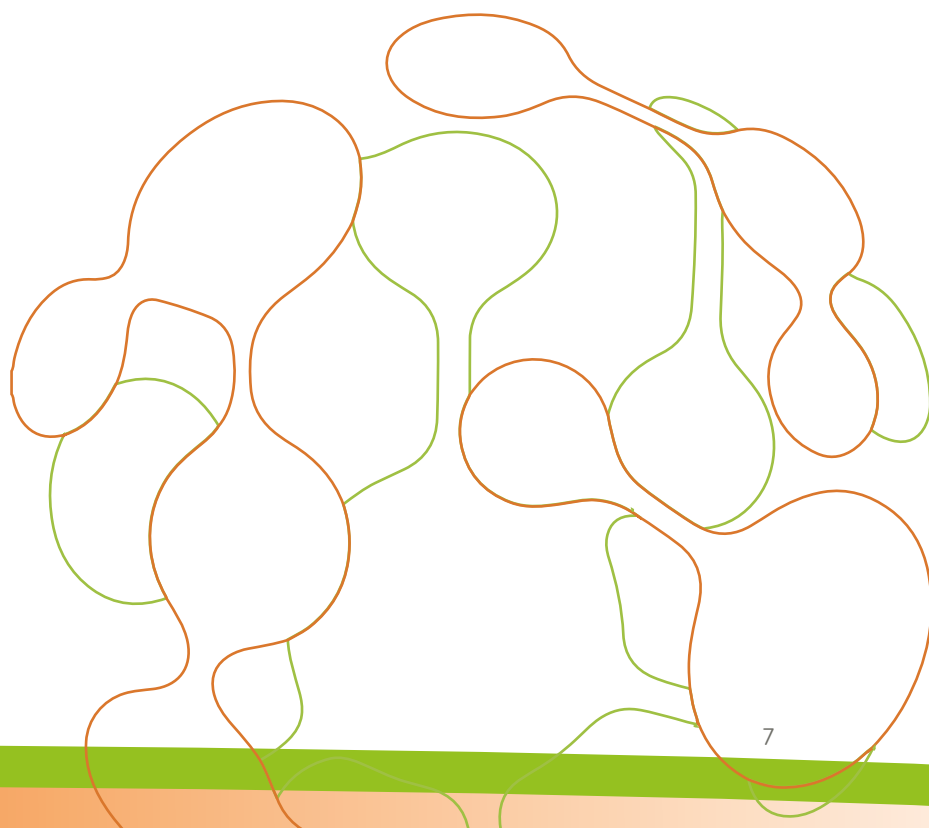
Keeping this in mind, the MAPs gave multiple explanations for identifying their rural areas within these scenarios, as indicated in Table 1. Some MAPs went beyond the consideration of the two-axis main variables and considered other variables when assessing the best fit out of the four scenarios, as can be seen in the table below.



Table 1. Reasons for selection of the JRC scenario

RURBANITIES	RURAL SPECIALISATION	RURAL CONNECTIONS
Rural expansion	Population decline	Population decline
Concern of rural territories to promote conditions to improve the quality of life	Deficit in the articulation and coordination of sectoral policies between the various levels of governance	Innovative forms of networked governance
National and regional approaches not well coordinated among themselves	Territorial disarticulation	Important opportunities come from the tourism and hospitality industry, often in conjunction with agriculture (agritourism)
Promotion of entrepreneurship, digitalisation of sectors and technological transition	Sectoral incoordination	
Characterised by cities and their agglomerations.	Difficulty in coordination and disarticulation between community funds and governmental areas	
	Environmental problems	
	Lack of digital skills, infrastructure and services	

The MAPs portrayed the internal heterogeneity of their rural areas by highlighting the fact that, due to the diversity of their rural areas, it is difficult overall to associate their rural area with one specific JRC scenario. For instance, the French MAP stated that *"it is difficult to position the entire region on one of the four scenarios due to the very subregional heterogeneity of rural territories"*, something that the Galician and Tuscan MAP also underlined, while the Hungarian MAP commented that *"the rural areas in Hungary are very diverse and polarised ... and so none of the scenarios could appropriately describe the whole Hungarian rural region"*.





Desirable future of the MAPs

After the definition of the baseline scenario describing their current context, the MAPs were asked which of the four JRC scenarios fitted best with the vision for the future of their rural areas. **The five MAPs all pointed towards the 'Rural Renewal' scenario** (i.e. focus on sustainable living, counter-urbanisation movement, green transition, high diversity of rural society, building and maintaining communities, etc.), though the Hungarian MAP added that *"any shift from the 'Rural Specialisation' scenario was considered promising"* and the Portuguese MAP indicated that the scenario 'Rural Connection' would also be fitting with their desired future. The MAPs have a similar desired future for their rural areas centred around similar elements, based on which they selected the 'Rural Renewal' scenario as the most fitting: positive demography trend and coordinated governance above all, but also improved digitalisation, enhanced rural economy, increased sustainability, and better social aspects.

When it comes to the topic of demography, **all five MAPs envisioned a future with an increased rural population**. The Galician MAP simply underlined the presence of positive demographic dynamics, while the Tuscan and French MAPs explained this would be due to the retention of the current rural population and the attraction of new inhabitants, especially younger inhabitants, to increase the number of people living in the countryside. The French and Portuguese MAPs added a focus on improved quality of life (e.g., access to housing and public services, strong community feeling) for the rural population, which they see as a factor contributing to the envisioned positive demographic trend.

Some MAPs envisioned **a more coordinated and integrated governance of rural areas** as part of their desired future, which would ensure the inclusion of the actual needs and issues of rural areas in national and regional decision-making and policies. The Galician MAP envisaged governance with a more participatory structure, while the Tuscan MAP envisioned the progressive integration of rural development policies in other sectorial policies, using a bottom-up approach; this approach is meant to ensure that the characteristics of their rural areas

are maintained during the development of policies. The Hungarian MAP went one step further and desires a future where local decisions are based on analysis of the actual needs of rural inhabitants.

Furthermore, the MAPs recognised the importance of digitalisation in the desired future of their rural areas. According to the MAPs' vision, digitalisation of rural areas is of paramount importance because of its capacity to improve the quality of life for rural inhabitants through more efficient and better quality public and private services. Additionally, digitalisation in rural areas of the future is of instrumental relevance in the transfer of knowledge, community building and deeper involvement of government in the community. According to the Portuguese MAP, digitalisation should boost all the economic sectors and in particular the agricultural activities through the implementation of a communication network for farmers. The Tuscan MAP underlined the positive aspects of digitalisation in their desired future scenario and identifies digitalisation as a mean to integrate public and private services, and increase their quality and efficiency.

As reported by the MAPs, the **rural economy will be supported** through the reinforcement of the sectors traditionally associated to rural areas (e.g., agriculture, forestry and tourism), the diversification of the economy with the development of new business models (e.g., short chain) and sectors, as well as the promotion of services aimed at creating employment and innovation (e.g., training, coaching). The diversification of the economy and the know-how of the actors involved are seen as two key elements of the future rural economy. The Tuscan, Hungarian, and Portuguese MAPs agreed on a vision of rural economy based on an increased level of knowledge and entrepreneurial skills, where talented professionals are retained and supported through trainings and capacity building.

MAPs considered that **sustainability will be the norm in the future**. The Tuscan MAP envisioned that the impact and opportunities resulting from climate change will re-establish the centrality of the rural areas in society, while the Portuguese MAP actively recognised the importance that will be given to multiple environmental services produced by the natural ecosystems. Furthermore, the Galician MAP foresaw improvement of the quality and sustainability of the activities performed by the forestry and agri-food sectors.

The desirable future for rural areas as envisioned by the MAPs also contains a variety of **social aspects**. One such aspect is the **wide-spread availability and access to qualitative private and public services** in the rural areas. The Tuscan and Galician MAPs specifically envisioned that the public services available in the rural areas will be tailored to the proximity and needs of rural residents, and so are adapted to specific conditions in their rural areas. Furthermore, the Tuscan MAP indicated that digital tools to support these services will be integrated in the process as an enhancement of the delivery of services, rather than replacing the standard provision. The Portuguese MAP mentioned the **improved communication and transport networks** as an aspect, designed to increase the connectivity between people, services, and businesses. The Tuscan MAP envisioned a sustainable mobility system (e.g., rail transport, shared mobility) that increases the accessibility of rural areas for (potential) inhabitants and tourists. Other elements reported are **continuous availability of education and training for all-ages** (Hungarian and French MAPs), advancement in reconciliation and overcoming the traditional roles that link family care to **gender** (Galician MAP), and improved **social cohesion** of rural areas (Tuscan and French MAPs).





Identified goals and targets, and pathways to achieve them

After the MAPs made clear what their desired futures were, they were asked to define specific goals and targets to achieve their ambitions as described in their desired future that would support the MAP in achieving it. Following this step, they were asked to develop pathways (e.g., specific – policy – actions, milestones) that the MAPs consider necessary to bring about deliberate change and achieve the identified goals and targets. It is noteworthy that the MAPs do not always set goals, targets, or pathways for each mentioned element of their desired future.

To reach the desired future of positive demographic change in their rural areas, the MAPs identified **the overall goal of improving population retention and increasing migration to rural areas**. The Galician MAP emphasised that they do not develop specific goals related to demography because a positive trend depends on factors such as improved services and employment opportunities. Other MAPs identified specific targets and actions for their regions to achieve this overall goal. In particular, the Portuguese MAP set the goal of defining a regional policy and related action plan that will attract immigrants. These tools are

to include a set of actions to attract and maintain immigrants, such as the development of reception centres, implementation of a public management network, and the implementation of welcome programmes to rural territories. The Hungarian MAP set the specific objective to achieve: (i) increasing living standards and well-being by developing the local economy in a sustainable way, (ii) improving local cooperation and communities by developing local social media channels, digitally organised physical and online events, podcasts and blogs, local identity formation, and by creating more social spaces, and (iii) ensuring positive migration via all the other goals. They also reported that developing network collaborations and strengthening synergies among people can be enhanced by local governments and NGOs by organising local events, programmes, and thematic groups to share knowledge and cooperate for common goals.

When it comes to **digitalisation**, the targets set by the MAPs cover two main aspects: **strengthening the capacity** of actors involved in the digital transitions, and the **extension of a digital infrastructure** tailored to the needs and characteristics of the rural territories. In particular, the Portuguese MAP considered actors' capacity-building as a necessary and important step to make them more active in the territory undergoing the digital transition. The Hungarian MAP identified digitalisation as a means to enable home-based working and the diffusion of precision farming. Moreover, this MAP underlined the importance of financial public support to reach a high-quality digital infrastructure. To achieve the set targets, the MAPs identified several **pathways** consisting of common strategies to make rural areas "smart", to reduce the digital divide and digital illiteracy, and finally to share experiences among territories. According to the Portuguese MAP, the improvement of digital networks can be achieved through the integration of digital targets in their regional programmes together with the improvement

of communication networks and broadband coverage. The French MAP proposed to train residents on IT tools with the aim of resolving the digital divide and improving accessibility to digital technology which is considered a vector of social and territorial innovation. As reported by the Hungarian MAP, the digital transformation for small companies and municipalities can be reached through governmental support that should actively participate in the process of digitalisation by providing digital tools.

In terms of **economy, employment and innovation**, the MAPs put in place a set of goals covering different economic sectors, ranging from agriculture to tourism. In particular, the Galician MAP established the goal of **improving the value of forestry and agricultural products** through the valuation and diversification of the local production, awareness and promotional campaigns, design of quality labels based on consumers' needs, creation of innovative processing companies and marketing channels (i.e., online, short chain, collaborative platforms). This vision on the development of marketing channels is partially shared by the Portuguese MAP, which promoted short production circuits and virtuous models of circular economy. A different approach is the focus of the French MAP on its promotion of new models of rural tourism (especially in mountainous areas) that address climate change challenges and societal expectations. This MAP believes that specific aids for agritourism are necessary, more attention should be given to the complementarity between winter resorts and summer tourism, and strengthening the special status of seasonal and "multi-active" workers.

Various MAPs set goals to be achieved regarding **governance**. The Galician MAP consciously made the choice not to do so, even though coordinated and participatory governance is a defining part of their chosen scenario. Its rationale is that it is unnecessary to act upon this aspect immediately and explicitly, since governance in their area was expected to improve as far as progress was made on their other goals. Goals related to governance set by other MAPs include the Tuscan MAP's highlight of the creation of an enabling environment for rural communities to prosper. This ambition is reached by supporting and reinforcing available forms of innovative governance and building forms of multi-level cooperation. The Portuguese MAP established the goal of greater integration of public policies (i.e., health, education, and housing), and facilitating flexibility and territorial adequacy for policy measures. The latter is something that the French MAP also underlined, while setting the goal of using types of governance to steer the development of rural territories. They envisioned this advancement to be facilitated by the construction of an inclusive and integrated governance network (with mechanisms that are suitable for smaller municipalities to access and use), by the financing of projects in rural areas,



and by favouring participatory projects that include all levels of governance as well as projects that involve other municipalities to develop and strengthen territorial approaches.

Sustainability and climate change represent two other relevant topics for the MAPs, which defined specific goals and actions for the future of their rural areas. As already mentioned when discussing the economic ambitions, some MAPs stressed the importance of sustainable practices (local production, short supply chain and circular economy) and new approaches that consider the evolution of the climate (new rural tourism models). In addition to that, the Galician MAP indicated that **an adequate remuneration must be granted to farmers and forestry producers for their environmental services**. Under this goal the MAP established objectives ranging from improving areas dedicated to organic production and traditional crops, identifying the most demanded environmental services, raising awareness and knowledge of civil society towards these services, and improving green areas dedicated to leisure activities. According to the Galician MAP, sustainable organic production needs to be fostered, and this objective can be reached through the promotion of consumption of organic products both in households and in restaurants, the strengthening of supply chain, training, and adequate aids and tax benefits for producers. The valuation of environmental services and agricultural landscape in the Galician region passes through the remuneration and tax benefits for the producers of environmental services, training and sharing of information on the importance of these services, introduction of local products in school catering, and the introduction of taxes for the tourism and recreational use of green areas. The Hungarian MAP shared the perspective of the Galician MAP and highlighted the importance of maintaining the quality of the natural environment offering recreational opportunities, thus contributing to better life conditions. The preservation of the environmental quality of rural area is obtained through sustainable practices, such as precision farming, that contribute to the state of environment optimising the usage of hazardous inputs (e.g., high-risk pesticides, chemical fertilisers). The French MAP highlighted the importance of the preservation of its natural environment setting the objective of improving the management of the water resources and rural areas through actions aiming at enhancing the quality of water and the prevention of natural disasters (especially floods,

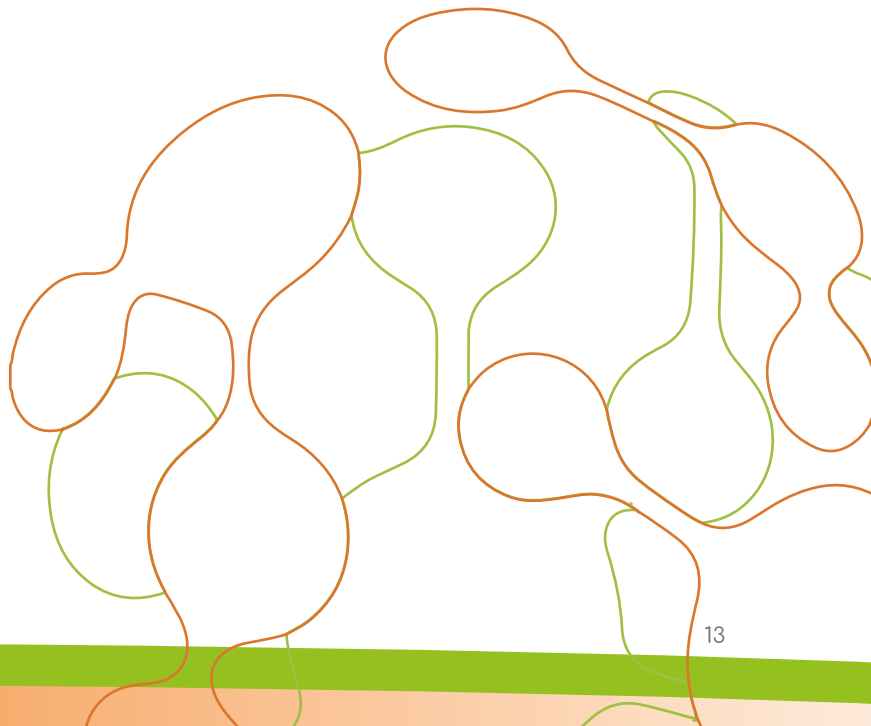


droughts and fires). In terms of sustainability and protection of the environment, the Portuguese MAP sets the objective of responding to challenges of climate and energy transition by building the capacity of local actors to become more active in their territories.

When it comes to the **social aspects** for the desired future of the MAPs' rural areas, the Portuguese, Hungarian and French MAPs set the goal of **improving communication and transport networks**. The Portuguese MAP focused on connecting rural areas for remote working and improving transport network, and develop a course of action that includes the creation of a cluster of networking spaces, as well as improving the digital communication network by integrating this in the Regional Operational Programme. The French MAP focused more on collective and solidarity actions, such as the development of carpooling, multimodal transport platforms, and rural mobility plans and cycling schemes, as well as advocating for less use of transport through teleworking and the support for small daily rail lines and maintenance of rural stations. The Hungarian MAP envisioned achieving this goal by various digitalisation approaches in the form of digital tools and solutions. They also see this pathway as the way to achieve their other goals: **increased standard of education and training for all ages, and extensive availability of public and private services**.

The latter goal is also a goal set by the Galician and French MAPs, while the Tuscan MAP underlined the right for all citizens, both rural and urban, to have access to basic services as a priority. The Galician MAP members classified public and private services as education, mobility and transport, healthcare, and leisure. They see this goal to be achieved by maintaining and further developing network centres, improving public transport as well as establishing transport on demand and home-care services, creating new positions and bonuses for healthcare professionals, and the restoration of public buildings for leisure spaces. The French MAP developed similar actions related to healthcare professionals for this goal, and suggested solutions adapted to the demographic and geographic challenges of each territory based on a diagnosis shared by local actors, and use of LEADER support for the development of local shops and services.

Besides similarities among the MAPs' goals, there were also **a few distinctive goals**. The French MAP sets a goal for ensuring housing in rural areas, which they envisioned to be achieved through, among other ideas, opposing vacant housing, developing intergenerational co-rental housing projects, citizen participatory housing, and considering the type of housing that is needed to meet demand in rural areas. The Galician MAP was the only MAP to set a goal related to gender equality in rural areas: reconciling and overcoming traditional roles regarding family care and gender equality. Actions related to achieving this goal developed by the MAP are training and informative actions on this topic, as well as creating businesses that provide services for the population that demand care services to enable reconciliation of the traditional gender roles.





Contributions from the SHERPA EU MAP

The [EU-level MAP](#) met to discuss the foresight exercise carried out by the five SHERPA MAPs, based on the results of the MAP Position Papers. During the meeting, the EU-level MAP members reflected on the context, desirable future, challenges, objectives, and pathways identified by national and regional MAPs, and discussed the role of foresight exercises in informing policy, lessons learnt based on the results of the foresight exercise on the policy framework, and the links between the SHERPA foresight exercise to ongoing work on the LTVRA and related documents (i.e. Rural Pact, Action Plan).

Making the most of foresight exercises

The foresight discipline is gaining more consideration due to the modern challenges that the world is facing. Considering the current major societal challenges (e.g. impact of climate change, COVID-19 pandemic), foresight exercises can be important moments to contemplate the vulnerabilities of a territory. At the same time, foresight exercises are also suitable occasions to consider future developments, to explore solutions capable of coping with the current societal challenges, and to give space to the creation of new ideas. Furthermore, the world is rapidly evolving and developments are occurring at a fast pace to deal with societal challenges. Thus foresight exercises should not be seen as a one-off occurrence. To make the most of a foresight exercise, it should be repeated every few years, depending on the changes affecting the local conditions of the relevant territory. A lot of valuable information can be gathered from a comparison between the results of multiple foresight exercises that were carried out over a certain period, for instance by analysing the differences between the envisioned scenarios and the real developments, or by comparing differences among ambitions expressed for the same territory.

Using foresight exercises at the local level

Rural areas are characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity, and it is important to encourage the use of foresight exercises at the local level to capture the distinctiveness of individual rural areas. This would function as a tool to support policy-makers to capture the specific vision of the rural territory, and thus develop tailored policies to shape a better future. Furthermore, the foresight technique should be based not only on data and research, but should tap into the intuition and creativity of the rural actors involved. For this reason, it is important to guarantee a certain level of rural representativeness in the exploration of future scenarios in rural areas, for instance by inviting experts from different fields of expertise and/or different backgrounds. The European Commission already provides several tools that can be used to facilitate the execution of foresight exercises in rural areas: these tools range from specific guidelines⁵ providing instructions on how to implement the foresight exercise to trend cards that can inspire practitioners on the analysis of multiple trends.

Promoting the results of foresight exercises

Communicating the results of foresight exercises in a specific and useful manner is of the utmost importance, as this would stimulate concrete action-taking and involving all the relevant actors of a rural territory. The outcome of the foresight technique should function as an inspiration for people, and so the results must be reported through an appropriate process that involves the most suitable style of storytelling which will allow people to understand and connect with the resulting vision of a foresight exercise. This is important as without an appropriate narrative that guides the result of the foresight exercise, there is a high risk that a vision merely gathers dust and is not used to stimulate further action.

Links between EC Communication on the LTVRA and Foresight exercise

Several initiatives for European rural areas have been launched as part of the EC Communication on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas⁶. The Communication sets out a long-term vision for EU's rural areas up to 2040, and identifies areas of action towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas and communities. To support achieving the established vision, a Rural Pact and a Rural Action Plan providing tangible initiatives and new tools for rural areas and communities have been designed. Within the framework of the Rural Action Plan, the Commission will set-up a Rural Revitalisation Platform: a one-stop shop platform for information on existing projects and funding possibilities for rural communities, rural project holders, and local authorities to facilitate collaboration. The platform will provide an opportunity for rural citizens and communities to highlight how they have been able to leverage the specificities of their territory into new economic opportunities or provision of services for their population⁷.

⁵ https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/forlearn-online-foresight-guide_en

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/strategy/strategy_documents/documents/ltvra-c2021-345_en.pdf

Concluding remarks

When drawing conclusions from the SHERPA foresight exercise, the MAPs showed that they have become more aware of where they are now, how far they are from their desired future, and what they can do about this. The MAPs emphasised that there is a long way to go in achieving the desired future for their rural areas, but that they are optimistic about the possibility of getting there. The Galician and French MAPs recognised that there is a significant distance between the desired future of their rural areas and the current situation. The Galician MAP stated that the developed goals and pathways need great investment and management effort from the public and private sectors in order to achieve the desired future. The Hungarian MAP emphasised it is unavoidable that some rural regions will develop faster than others, and that some rural areas might take a few steps backwards before moving forward again, but that there are programmes, strategies, and plans ready to be implemented to achieve their desired rural vision. Both the Portuguese and Tuscan MAP acknowledged that the foresight exercise was a valuable first step to explore potential synergies with policy processes addressing similar issues in the same area, and the Tuscan MAP underlined that, while there is a need for further steps and research, the region is well-positioned to follow the pathways developed for attaining the long-term rural vision.

Some MAPs also gave further recommendations and suggestions on what they think could be done to support rural areas in achieving the desired futures. The Portuguese MAP indicated that, before moving forward with the developed goals and pathways to achieve the desired future, a necessary step is to improve sectoral coordination between different governmental areas in order to organise the territorial policies of the region itself. The Hungarian MAP stated that cooperation and exchange of knowledge between rural and urban areas should be stronger and that this should be enabled by national and international organisations. The French MAP mentioned something similar; based on the exercise, they concluded that an approach as close as possible to the territories is of the essence and the different levels of decision-making need to be better known and coordinated. Furthermore, the French MAP found that administrative and financial procedures, in particular concerning European projects, should be simplified.



Annex. Supporting documents



FRANCE



HUNGARY



TUSCANY, ITALY



CENTRO, PORTUGAL



GALICIA, SPAIN



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