

SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

MAP Position Paper

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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<https://rural-interfaces.eu/maps/estonia/>

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1. Summary and key messages

Based on consultation with the MAP Estonia members, the thematic focus for the first MAP cycle was set "Social dimension of rural areas". Members indicated that this theme is relevant because the population in rural areas is both ageing and declining which hinder the development of these regions and the sustainability of Estonian rural life. Therefore, it is important to explore how to attract young people to the countryside and create attractive jobs in the rural areas. After brainstorming with MAP members we decided to concentrate on three subtopics:

- How to involve community members in the development of the region (both long-term residents, newly settlers, migrants and refugees, e.g. Ukrainians)?
- How to promote a smooth generational renewal and young people moving/staying in the rural areas?
- How to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas?

The greatest value of the rural area is a beautiful and peaceful close-to-nature living environment. A third of Estonians find that the countryside is the right place for them to live, because it gives them the opportunity to live and raise their family in a safe and healthy environment. During the last wave of the pandemic, the demand for country homes increased and many people considered moving permanently to the countryside as a result of the popularity of remote work. At the same time, these pursuits were hindered by the lack of elementary infrastructure: roads, including those for cycling and walking, transport, child care, schools, high-speed internet and other vital services.

In order for Estonia to develop equally everywhere, active and forward looking people are needed. To achieve good results, we must ensure that EU, regional and national politics are linked together and all planned activities support people living in the countryside and take into account the different needs of the regions.

Estonian MAP members emphasised that life in the countryside must be diverse, with strong and cohesive communities, developed, highly valued and with a good reputation. There must be room for both large businesses and SMEs, young and elderly people. But for the people to move or stay in the countryside there has to be good infrastructure and services - good schools, kindergartens, entertainment possibilities, suitable transportation means and high-speed internet. And above all, people must have a possibility to buy or rent themselves a nice and comfortable home. Also, the MAP members concluded that in order for life in rural communities to be more socially sustainable, there should exist bright, active and sturdy local community leaders who unite the community and facilitate the communication between local municipalities and the community.

Life can bloom in the rural areas when there are enough attractive jobs. For this we need the people who are willing to build their companies and hire people in the countryside. Currently the subsidies for entrepreneurship in the rural areas are mostly directed to the people who have been active in the agriculture or rural entrepreneurship for a long time, but the measures should be more diverse, more flexible and take into account the startups, non-agricultural activities and younger generation taking over.

It is possible to cope with the shrinking population and urbanisation, but in order to do that we need to implement more coordinated, coherent and comprehensive solutions at the EU and regional level.

2. Introduction

Estonian MAP is a newbie in SHERPA project being formed in the autumn of 2021. While looking over the four proposed topics provided by SHERPA we immediately recognised that the social dimension would be the most relevant to Estonian current situation where we currently fight with urbanisation, ageing population and the poor condition with peripheral areas.

During the first Estonian MAP meeting we quickly recognised that active community life, inclusion of young people and promoting innovation and entrepreneurship in the rural areas are the key sub-topics to discuss while dealing with our main topic. We then moved forward with much more concrete proposals and suggestions while keeping in mind these three focus areas.

After three meetings with Estonian MAP members we have managed to compile a comprehensive list of proposals and suggestions on three different level - local, national, and EU - how to involve community members to actively participate in the development of their home region in the countryside; how to encourage young people (25+) to stay or move to the countryside; and how to boost innovation and entrepreneurship in the rural areas. There were quite many keywords that were similar under all these three topics - for example the availability of loans, good infrastructure and strong community leaders. This shows that the different aspects of social sustainability of rural areas are tightly intertwined and cannot be really seen as totally stand-alone.

Although rural life is not clearly identified by traditional areas of the rural economy such as agriculture, forestry or fishing, it is nevertheless related to them. Though most of us would not want to live in the countryside in the middle of a thousand-hectare field or next to a piggery with five hundred pigs or on the edge of a clearing, the majority prefer to live in a village or community with at least one but preferably several functioning farms. For example, in a village or community where someone is making wooden products from their forest or selling firewood, where there is a local farmer or a fisherman and one can buy food directly from them etc.

We also discovered that there are quite many knowledge gaps about rural life in Estonia. We think that we know the situation but there are not enough national or EU-level orders for specific research, which would validate our opinions. In our position paper, we provide some suggestions for the future research and topics to focus on.

3. Current situation based on background research and evidence

Many Estonian MAP members pointed out that there are not enough comprehensive studies that explore Estonian rural life and its socioeconomic and social aspects. The authors of this current document have to agree with that.

According to [OECD](#) many lower density regions face shrinkage and countries will need to manage decline in remote regions. Half of Estonia's counties experienced population decline greater than 25% since 1991. Shrinkage leads to problems including lower municipal revenues, ageing, and greater per capita costs of service and infrastructure provision. To tackle these challenges OECD suggests we have to respond in a smart and sustainable manner. A policy framework that emphasises a spatially oriented, coordinated approach for responding to shrinkage should be developed.

The data collected from the registers during the [2021 census](#) show that Estonia's population has grown in ten years, people are living longer, and the number of people of working age has decreased. However, in the counties of South Estonia, the population has decreased during the last ten years. The number of inhabitants has increased mainly in larger centres such as Tallinn and Tartu. 61.2% of the Estonian

population of 815,003 people live in urban areas, which is 4.2% more than in 2011. The median age in urban areas was 42 in 2021, 39 in 2011, and 37 in 2000. In rural areas, the median age was 44 in 2021, 43 in 2011, and 38 in 2000. At the same time the median age in smaller towns and villages in the close vicinity of cities (essentially suburbs) was 38 in 2021, and 36 both in 2011 and 2000.

According to the lead analyst of the Statistics Estonia, urban sprawl has accelerated. The urge to settle in bigger cities has stabilised or is coming to an end, but rural areas have not benefited much from this - especially families with children increasingly prefer small towns around big cities.

According to Statistics Estonia's report in April 2022 remote working has gained a lot of popularity in recent years. If ten years ago only 7.3% of employed people in Estonia used remote work, then last year (2021) 28%, or 181,600 people. The years of pandemic have shown that in many cases the work can be done successfully from any part of Estonia or even from abroad. It has become the new normal in a way and can be an incentive for people who have wished to move to the countryside but who so far have not seen any job prospects there.

[Estonian Rural Development Plan](#) (ERDP) for 2014–2020 brought out six priorities which serve as a basis for the programming of rural resources. Only one of them had a socioeconomic dimension: Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and rural economic development. There was one other priority which links to our field of interest: Improving knowledge transfer and innovation in the agricultural and forestry sector and rural areas. The aspects of ageing population and urbanisation were not included in the aforementioned priorities.

During the last decade, there has been an intensification of several rural economy areas such as agriculture and forestry. In agriculture, this trend can be seen even since joining the European Union.

The Agricultural Research Centre carried out an [evaluation of the results and impacts achieved through the ERDP 2014–2020](#). It turned out that for all projects completed in 2021, 327.5 full-time jobs were created as a result of the investment.

The Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs submitted the Long-Term Vision of the development of Rural Areas of the European Union until 2040 to the Estonian government. It contains the possibilities of the Member States to use various financing options in order to achieve the sustainable development of rural areas. The development of local strategies, the production and services in the context of the digital and green revolution are also important. In addition, the implementation of the rural proofing methodology at the EU level was supported and attention was drawn to the need to maintain the role of agriculture, fisheries and forestry and to the aspects that accompany the demographic changes.

In May 2021 the county development advisor in the Estonian ministry of Finance, Urmas Kase, [concluded several activities which could promote the sustainability of rural areas](#) in Estonia:

- It is cheapest for the society to first "keep" the inhabitants of rural areas in the countryside - this must be taken into account when designing rural and regional policy measures.
- Basic needs are important - clean drinking water and sewage, electricity (availability and security of supply), dust-free roads and high-speed internet.
- It is not promising to focus on the age group of 15-25 years old, who are about to finish their education, when it comes to keeping residents in the country and attracting them to the country. Rather, the focus should be on the next age group, i.e. young families with children.
- The most successful are those places and regions where there is close cooperation between different levels such as local government and community members.
- In Estonia, it is important to continue with long-term and precisely targeted place marketing.
- It is necessary to deal with the market failure when purchasing your home outside the major cities and their suburbs.

- In addition to the living environment, it is necessary to deal with the development of the business environment, i.e. creating and maintaining jobs.
- In the case of measures to support rural entrepreneurship, contributions must be made not only to agriculture, but also to the diversification of the business landscape, the increase of added value and joint activities
- A diverse and active housing market is necessary. It may be expedient to continue with the rental house program.
- Strengthening the local community, including by supporting the village movement.

4. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

4.1. Identified needs

Estonian MAP members agreed that in rural areas there is a need for a generational renewal but unfortunately the new generation who would take over is largely missing. Young families who would otherwise be willing to move to the countryside and who would benefit from the quiet and close-to-nature environment are driven away by the lack of appropriate infrastructure, lack of transportation, schools, child care, governmental services and suitable housing possibilities. Same applies for the war refugees and other migrants who are especially vulnerable and need greater support from the government. However, economic activity is clustered in the cities and towns and vital services (banks, post offices, medical facilities, food stores etc) are not available in many rural regions.

Narrow selection of job opportunities is also a problem - both for the people who are already living in the countryside and the possible newcomers. There are few available jobs and the existing ones are usually unattractive with a low salary and fall into the agricultural sector which is not suitable for everyone, especially for the people coming from the cities. In addition, the pay gap between men and women is much higher in the countryside. Possibility to work remotely can somewhat relieve this problem but then the need for high-speed internet arises.

Although Estonia is referred to as a highly digital country where 99 percent of public services are available online 24 hours a day, the high-speed internet does not really reach to the periphery of rural regions. That is a big problem both for the people working from home but also for the potential entrepreneurs and companies who would like to operate in the rural area and also offer up some new jobs.

General public perceives that living in the countryside usually equals working in agriculture. At the same time, not every person is an entrepreneur or a farmer by nature so they are not even thinking about living in the countryside. Therefore, rural areas should market themselves more and present rural life in all its diversity.

Furthermore, the existing measures and financial instruments directed to rural areas are mainly meant for agricultural activities and leave out all the other possible endeavours - rural tourism, IT, art, music or anything else. The main focus should be on giving yourself and your family members a job, and such people should be valued. But even when a person wants to move to the countryside and start farming, the threshold is usually still too high. If you do not already have some agricultural land and equipment, it is almost impossible to raise money for that and later remain in profit. There is low competitiveness and lack of investment opportunities in the countryside also.

In Estonia, there is a saying that you have to own a car in order to live in the countryside and it is quite true in many places. Estonian network of light traffic roads is very sparse compared to the network of motorways. The traffic can be surprisingly dense even where there are no people, so no one feels safe on the roads with a bicycle or a baby carriage. Also, banks are not willing to give out loans to buy real estate far from the

bigger cities - in the so called periphery. As a result, people are quite trapped - they cannot finance their home in the countryside and even when they inherit the land or some old house, the building or renovating costs are higher than the value of the completed house.

As most Estonian rural areas are quite sparsely populated they do not have close-knitted communities. At the same time while living in the countryside there are many situations where help and support from the neighbours is strongly needed - especially for the newcomers. Young people especially need entertainment possibilities which are offered near their home, but when the community is not strong and active there is not that much going on and life can get quite lonely. When the newcomers do not build strong relationships in their community they don't feel like they belong there and are not interested in contributing with their ideas or work to develop and improve their living environment.

Based on the aforementioned needs and challenges Estonian MAP members decided to concentrate on three bigger questions:

- How to involve community members in the development of the region (both long-term residents, and newly settlers)?
- How to promote a smooth generational renewal and young people moving/staying in the rural areas?
- How to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas?

4.2. Existing interventions and actions

Table 1 – Examples of actions taken by local actors

Open Farm Day

In order to introduce the possibilities of rural areas, an **Open Farm Day** is organised every year on July in Estonia by the Ministry of Rural Affairs, the Rural Economy Information Centre (now part of the Agricultural Research Centre), the Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce and the Central Union of Estonian Farmers. About 300 farms or rural businesses are open to visitors. Both larger farms and smaller farms, exciting animals and plants, awesome agricultural equipment, real farm food, excursions, workshops and much more is offered. Each farm has its own program that shows the special features of the place. The Open Farm Day provides a good opportunity to see how the food is grown, where the milk and eggs actually come from, what a modern farm or agricultural enterprise looks like and how diverse rural life is. The initiative was founded in 2011 and has become one of the most popular and crowded events during the summer.

<https://www.avatudtalud.ee/>

A Day of Countryside Living

A Day of Countryside Living is held in September. People can come and see how people live in the countryside - for real. 35 rural municipalities across Estonia are welcoming visitors and more than 500 institutions, including schools, village centres and enterprises are opening their doors. Come and find a home for your family!

<https://maalelamisepaev.ee/en/eng-esileht/>

Opinion Festival

A special summer event known all over Estonia is the Opinion Festival where important problems of regional development and social dimensions of rural areas are often discussed. The festival is held in August in the centre of Estonia, a lovely little town called Paide. It brings discussions and debates to life in the ideal environment, inspiring people to create new ideas and deeds, bringing them together. Through

this, the Festival aims to develop a culture of discussion within society. The festival started in 2013 and is based on 99% of voluntary work.

In 2022, for example, there was a discussion about people leaving bigger cities and moving into the countryside. It was argued if this is temporary or permanent and what can be done to make it a more permanent situation:

- https://soundcloud.com/arvamusfestival/kogukonna-ala-leaving-biq?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing
- <https://arvamusfestival.ee/en/>

Exhibition "Entrepreneurial Rural Youth"

The European Commission has declared 2022 the European Year of Youth to show how important Europe's young people are in building a better - greener, more inclusive and more digital - future. There are many active and enterprising young people in rural Estonia. They can be entrepreneurial in many ways: become an entrepreneur, participate in the development of your hometown, initiate or participate in exciting activities.

In September 2022, the Estonian Agricultural Research Centre collected project examples of the Estonian Rural Development Plan 2014–2020 in the field of youth. The rollups bear the name of the project, description and illustrative photos. The exhibition will be shown in different regions of Estonia.

The purpose of the exhibition "Entrepreneurial Rural Youth" is to highlight entrepreneurial rural youth through projects with the participation of young people and to show what has been done in the agriculture and rural life with the help of grants from the Estonian Rural Development Plan 2014-2020. Through these stories different ideas and young people are brought out and highlighted to inspire other young people. Project examples indicate what is considered important at a local level.

Vunki mano! – The Estonian Pilot of CoSIE project

Vunki mano! Is a social hackathon - an intense weekend where everyone is welcome to participate in developing innovative services and working on solutions that promote life in Võru county. The ultimate goal is to empower the creative mindset: by engaging in problem solving, all potential parties can be sure that the solution is well thought through. The hackathon brings together creative experiences for citizens, the realism of entrepreneurs, the competence of experts and the responsibility of officials. With every idea, special attention is paid to the interests of people whose voices are not heard in everyday life, such as people with special needs, minorities, and so on.

<https://vunkimano.ee/english/>

Mud Month Festival

Porikuu festival (Mud Month Festival) is an autumn festival in North Western Estonia. It was first introduced in October/November 2018 in Western Harju County with a purpose to enliven low season and invite visitors to the region. During the festival different events from hiking and craft workshops to concerts, theatre and gourmet tours take place. Last year, almost 80 events attracted over 10 000 visitors.

www.porikuu.ee

Evil Weather Festival

When the summer is over and the fall is coming, we can feel that days are getting shorter, and temperatures are going down. But this is then when the party is starting in the centre of Estonia. Evil Weather Festival offers to those who enjoy fall a lot of memorable events. The festival's aim is to initiate new events in autumn, in order to bring up more interesting events and make the tourist season longer.

<https://kurjailma.ee/>

Some Leader action groups are also very active themselves:

The Tartumaa Youth Association in cooperation with the Tartumaa Development Society, the Tartu Business Council and the Tartumaa Youth Workers Association announce the application rounds for small projects of youth events. Supported activities and application conditions were developed in cooperation with young people. The goal is to support the personal development of young people in the area of activity of the Tartumaa Development Society and to enrich their living environment. The areas of activity are a healthy lifestyle and a clean environment, open education and versatile learning opportunities, the development of entrepreneurship and social skills, and the development of active communities and the distinctiveness of the region.

<https://www.tas.ee/arendustegevus/noortefond/>

With the help of the LEADER program, several local festivals have been started and supported, which activate local communities and bring guests to the region. Some examples:

The Onion Route in Tartu region

The Onion Route is located at a perfect distance from the university town of Tartu – the heart of the Onion Route, Alatskivi, is just 40 km away. The Onion Route offers participation in various handicraft workshops and classes where one can learn to cook traditional food from locally sourced ingredients. Onion Rote development has provided opportunities for locals to sell their products and brought life to the area.

<https://www.sibulatee.ee/en/>

Romantic Coastline in Pärnu region:

Development project the Romantic Coastline in Estonia, which runs along the coastline of Pärnu county through the juniper fields of Virtsu to the sandy beaches of Ikla. The coastline includes Kihnu and Manija island along with their special atmosphere, as well as inland areas with deep forests and bogs. It is a place to stop for a moment and to enjoy a vacation in romantic coastal villages. This project has also provided opportunities for locals to sell their products and brought life to the area.

<https://www.visitestonia.com/en/why-estonia/romantic-coastline-250-km-of-poetry>

4.3. Recommendations from the MAP

4.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

How to involve community members in the development of the region?

a) Local level

Estonian MAP members acknowledged that in order to make the rural life more socially sustainable and to involve community members in the development of the region, living and working in the countryside must be made more attractive, particularly for the young people who have finished their education and are starting their own family or have already small children.

At the local level, it was advised that the local authority **should create venues or other places where the local people could meet up, join the activities and organise events.** The local authority should also organise or participate in the **information campaigns or marketing events**, which on one hand provide information about the area and the community and on the other hand unite the local people and empower them to also step in while introducing their community. Sufficient and two-way communication between the local authorities and community members was also emphasised.

These processes need a **strong and inspirational leader** who acts like a link between the community and the local authorities, gathers ideas from the local people and tries to implement them. Such leaders are hard to come by - usually they end up unmotivated and tired. Therefore, there should be a **training program** which educates and motivates community leaders, which is organised by the local authority.

Often these community leaders develop so-called "community blindness" - they are so focused on their own community and its problems that they do not realise what kind of new options and developments are possible. We are so used to seeing the community as this one leader who does everything. Instead, a more **team based approach** should be adopted. This way the responsibilities are shared but also the power is more equally distributed and the community is more democratic.

It was also suggested that **young people should be more included in the discussions about the developments and future of the community**. Currently there are many 50 or even 60+ people acting as leaders of communities and they tend to overlook the ideas of the younger people. There should be a special platform for them so that they could speak their mind and contribute to the community. It was also mentioned that the youth workers in the countryside tend to change so often that they cannot even formulate a strong bond with local youngsters in order to empower and inspire them to be more active. As school children are one of the most difficult target groups there should be special training for youth workers on the community level.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that while it is important to keep school children included in the community life, the **young families** are even more important in terms of the **local development**. Their needs and problems should be addressed and their voices heard. Usually young families are very active in the community life while their children are small, but as soon as they reach a certain age and do not need different playgrounds etc. anymore, the families tend to recede from the community life because they do not have a clear purpose or a goal anymore. They should be included before that happens.

As the living arrangements are one of the most important topics in one's life the community should create some **solutions to offer its members possibilities to buy or rent real estate**. It can be some sort of crowdfunding or rental apartments owned by the local government or local company looking for new employees. It is quite hard, almost impossible to get a loan in order to buy a home outside the bigger towns in Estonia, therefore **loan possibilities and financial instruments should be flexible and diversified**.

Also, different financial opportunities are important while developing the local community life. Few members of the community are willing to take a loan for the community while pledging their own property. Therefore, **a local guarantee mechanism** should be created. It is also important to **share information about different financing opportunities and success stories from other communities** - which was the loaning process, what was the purpose of the loan and which are the results. This kind of inspiration is really good for everyone and can spark new ideas and initiatives.

Trust in cooperative activities should be increased through sharing good examples and practices and showing the efficiency of these kinds of activities. Training and education are also important so the community members have appropriate knowledge and also self-esteem to start some kind of joint activity, for example rental apartments, renewable energy solutions etc.

b) National level

As already mentioned in the previous section, getting a loan is highly problematic in the rural areas. Therefore, national regulations should address that problem in order to maintain life in the peripheral regions. It should be considered **how big of a risk the Estonian Rural Development Foundation is willing to take while giving out the loans** and what kind of **guarantees can be offered to the banks** so that the people who want to buy a home in the countryside can get a loan also.

Local governments should develop a close and reciprocal communication with its people and the national level should empower and also use it while gathering information about the state of rural life and making new plans and decisions.

The **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) multi-funds of other ministries** except the Ministry of Rural Affairs **should also contribute to the development of rural areas**. For example, while the Rural Development Plan or LEADER must contribute to reducing poverty, these programs do not contain activities for doing that. There is a social dimension in the objectives, but it does not appear in the measures. **These other measures of other ministries should contribute to poverty reduction** - the multi-fund is needed because of the social dimension. So far different ministries are dealing with different aspects of rural life but their activities are not related to each other - they can be planned and implemented totally separately which can sometimes lead to inventing a bike all over again.

c) EU level

Transferring the CLLD methodology to other ministries is behind the bureaucracy: all practical activities become too complicated for the countries. They should be made **simpler and more flexible**. At the European level, other policies could be brought more to the community level. Monitoring and reporting drives many people away, because EU bureaucracy can be quite rigid. The practical management of funds has grown so far apart from the initial aim that the simple solutions to harmonise systems have become complicated and expensive. The solution for that problem would be [Smart Villages](#), where common wishes are considered and local people are participating in improving their economic, social, or environmental conditions, cooperation with other communities, social innovation, and the development of smart village strategies.

The loan topic was addressed also under EU level. It was discussed that **the state aid rules regarding the aid rate of loans granted for community services should be mitigated** - for example, Estonia could support loans on preferential terms through the Estonian Rural Development Foundation and the rules could be simpler for these kinds of loans. Also there should be more special approaches at the community level.

Estonian MAP members emphasised the **possibility of advance payment of subsidies**. There is a great need to make investments on more favourable terms. Many people struggle with it, because one has to make the investment in full and will only get one's money back later. The support could be paid in advance so that one can undertake these activities more successfully. Otherwise, one has to take out additional loans and pay extra costs. As a pilot, such an approach could be tried in the **case of social measures - projects jointly managed by the community, for the benefit of community development**.

Estonian MAP members were convinced that **EU policy should take into account the specific characteristics of each Member State as well as regional differences**. The strategic goals at the EU level are the same, but the methods of implementation are different, so the Member States should be allowed flexibility in their regard, rather than prescribing everything in great detail. For example, peripheral areas in Estonia are not peripheral in the European sense.

How to promote a smooth generational renewal and young people moving/staying in the rural areas?

a) Local level

During discussions between MAP members we discovered that solutions which were offered under one question were applicable also for the other question. Same applies here. The first thing that could promote a smooth generational renewal and attract younger people to the countryside would be **a strong community and consistent interaction between the members**. This would create security, belonging and stability which everybody needs, especially the young families who are quite important for the social sustainability of rural areas. Community leaders and local authorities have many possibilities how to move

things in that direction, but the foremost important thing would be to establish a clear and transparent communication which would lead to trust and constructive discussions.

The second factor that was mentioned under this subtopic has also been mentioned before - to **provide affordable housing** for the young families and other people who would like to live in the countryside. For example, in the end of August 2022, a little Tõrva municipality in Southern of Estonia launched a home program for young families, which helps families with children from all over Estonia to purchase a property with all communications on favourable terms to build their own home in Tõrva municipality. To create a better living environment, green areas and a playground are planned between the properties. The program was very popular and the sites ran out very quickly.

Thirdly it was stressed that the **existing community members should value their own living environment, make it more attractive and promote it more vigorously**. They should promote their greenery and varied landscape and create opportunities so that there would be something to do in every season, f.e. local skating rink, playground, soccer field etc. **Different opportunities for entertainment, good schools, good restaurants** etc. should also be created in smaller Estonian towns so that there would be more attraction centres in Estonia and people would not have to drive far in order to entertain themselves or get a good education or a good job. Local authority has the key role here. Those local governments that turn their face towards the communities, will have people moving in their direction.

Also **participation in big pan-Estonian or local campaigns** would be very beneficial - Day of Countryside Living, Open Farms Day, Open Fishing Port Day, Open Homecafes Day etc.

b) National level

The most important thing on the national level is **conscious infrastructure**: well-maintained roads and good transport possibilities (e.g. bicycle and pedestrian tracks), high speed internet, energy security, readily available services (as in the city), schools and kindergartens close to home, etc. Providing services in rural areas is a perennial issue. It should be considered for example if small schools are competitive or not and how to increase their competitiveness. Whether to bring in special teachers to mentor local teachers? This is a very important topic for young families and could become a decisive factor while deciding where to live.

A great and efficient solution would be a **demand-based transport**. People don't only need to drive to work or grocery stores, they also need transport to the cinema, restaurant, gym, etc. In Estonia the bus schedules in the rural areas don't take this into account.

Community-friendly solutions in the infrastructure need money. Therefore a **tax distribution** would be beneficial - people who own a summer house or some other property in the rural area but live also in some cities could have a possibility to distribute their taxes between both places. This would help to increase the budget of the local government.

Once again we have to mention the **loans on favourable terms**. Getting a loan to buy a house or a property in the countryside is difficult, because banks only give loans to larger hubs. The **state should provide guarantees and measures** so that large commercial banks would provide loans for the purchase of high-risk real estate.

State programs should be modernised, made more responsive and flexible. There are no scientific studies on the needs of rural areas. The state must finance and initiate these kinds of studies in order to make smarter decisions and to solve problems based on the needs of the people living in the countryside.

c) EU level

Estonian MAP members said that the **EU should create measures which would encourage the transfer of businesses to young people**, for example there should be a clause about bringing your family and offering jobs to family members. Moreover,, the **awareness of the older people should be raised** about the terms on **how to pass on their farms to their children** and at the same time maintain the

rights to stay there until their death. In addition, their children should be offered **loans on favourable terms** so they can buy their parents' farm either from them or from their siblings.

Farmers have usually paid themselves the minimum wage, therefore they receive the minimum pension and do not want to sell their farm when they have reached the age of retirement. The solution would be an **additional pension insurance for agricultural entrepreneurs** on the EU level or some **social guarantees** within a specific time frame after selling their farm.

It was brought out that there should be **specially focused subsidies for young people and the demand from the EU level that member countries should implement them**. These could be meant for utilising renewable energy sources, starting their own company and hiring local people or using innovative production solutions.

The MAP members outlined that we do not have a comprehensive knowledge of good examples and success stories: how the young people have moved to the countryside, which measures or programs have they used, how have they managed, how have they developed their activities and which have been the results. The EU could initiate a big **communication campaign** and **share good practices and success stories** in order to inspire other young people to move to the rural areas.

How to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas?

a) Local level

It was advised by the MAP members that in order to promote innovation and entrepreneurship **networks of local entrepreneurs or companies** should be created by the local government. Through this network the local government could provide support, advice and training for the local entrepreneurial people. Also, it would be a good possibility to create social capital which is especially needed in the rural areas. This kind of networks sometimes form naturally in **co-working spaces or hubs**, so it would be a great idea to have these in every bigger community.

While creating now so popular **industrial parks** it should be investigated beforehand **whether there are enough companies who would move there**. These parks should be situated in the locations where all kinds of **evaluations and bureaucracy would move faster** - the entrepreneur does not have time to wait for the solutions to break through the bureaucracy. In addition, every local government should create more **flexible and quicker solutions** for communicating with local companies - time is money, especially when talking about innovation.

Local governments should **promote the local products and services and make them also available for the local people**. It is quite usual that local people are not aware of the services provided by the people living in the same village or parish or can buy their products only from the supermarkets in big towns. Also, the **image of the rural areas should be improved and made more attractive**, so that the people from other areas would be positively jealous.

Innovation and entrepreneurship could be also promoted through **learning programs that offer solutions to different problems and give possibilities to learn from the experiences of others**. These programs offer inspiration, valuable knowledge, support and positive emotions for the business start-ups.

b) National level

The state should create **a working agricultural advising system, and to modernise and raise the level of the agricultural advisors**. In addition to agricultural advisors, there should be those who deal with non-agricultural matters as well (for instance rural tourism, entertainment etc). There should be more advisors and more available information about them - what kind of topics does the advisor deal with and how to contact him or her. Currently it takes a lot of effort to find the one who can help you.

A **centre for advisors** would be a good idea. It would be a place where a new advisor goes to study and an old advisor passes on his or her knowledge ensuring continuity and stability. It would be a place where all the advisors can update and refresh their existing knowledge to keep up with the changing times.

The legislation for the agricultural activities should be more flexible and the measures should be better targeted to small and medium-sized enterprises so that the big corporations would not be the ones who benefit all the time. **Financing means should be made more available**, because a start-up entrepreneur cannot get a loan from a bank.

The legislation and the **measures should take into account diverse rural businesses**. There are actually no limits on what you can do in the countryside. For example, you can start an IT-company and provide attractive jobs for many people. One does not have to concentrate on agriculture only.

c) EU level

It was emphasised by the MAP members that the EU should **trust the national level more** and give every member country **greater freedom to use their own judgement**. In addition, the **flexibility of the EU legislation should be increased**.

It was outlined that **scientific research should follow the needs of rural areas** and framework programs should be created to increase the value of the rural resources or opportunities. The MAP members were convinced that scientific research is underfunded and getting funding from the EU is quite difficult.

There are no studies concerning the socio-economic and entrepreneurial aspect of Estonian rural areas, there is no general overview of rural areas in Estonia. However, in order to improve the current situation and to create future plans, it is necessary **to specify what are the needs of the specific rural area**. If there are no requests for research from the state or the EU, the universities will not start researching it themselves.

The European Union's **resources, which are intended to meet research needs, must be flexible** so that even small countries can access knowledge. Various EU-funded research projects should have the **obligation to involve smaller countries**, even as consortium members, so that the smaller countries also have the possibility to do big things.

4.3.2. Recommendations for future research agendas

Estonia offers good opportunities for both vocational and higher education in agriculture, food and rural economy. In agriculture, an advisory service system has been set up and support for research and development, knowledge transfer and innovation is in place. However, there are some bottlenecks. The problem is an ageing workforce and a shortage of skilled labour. The succession of researchers and advisors is also insufficient, affecting the availability of advisory services and expertise and the development of scientific competence. More attention needs to be paid to the training of advisors. MAP members all agreed on that.

Funding for research and development is predominantly project-based and inadequate. It is not a good solution for a longer perspective. The cooperation measure of the Rural Development Programme is mainly directed to the bigger companies who have a greater financial capability. This leaves the smaller companies and organisations with empty hands.

Newest information about innovative solutions should become easily accessible to farmers and young entrepreneurs. Currently there is no centralised database or platform that assembles all the information about the food- and agricultural industry. Digital technologies must be used more to use publicly collected data to help create new services and improve the sustainability of the agricultural sector. A good example is the Estonian Rural Network Unit's initiative - four online thematic workshops called „Network to innovate“, which are organised in cooperation with Finnish and Latvian National Rural Networks and which introduce innovative projects in the Nordic-Baltic region: <https://maainfo.ee/index.php?page=3903>

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are no studies concerning the socio-economic and entrepreneurial aspect of Estonian rural areas. The general overview of rural areas in Estonia is insufficient and fragmented, and it can only be put together while combining the strategies of LEADER action groups. But, since there are no research demands or orders from the state or the EU, the universities will not start gathering the information themselves. Several entrepreneurial organisations are only focusing on the agricultural producers but besides the Estonian Rural Network who is strictly acting in the framework of Rural Development Programme nobody else is dealing with non-agricultural entrepreneurs in the rural areas.

What would be interesting and could bring benefits to regions is examples of how other EU Member States have implemented special economic zones. Meaning that a special economic zone is an area in which the business and trade laws are different from the rest of the country. Usually these zones are located within a country's borders. The aims include increasing trade, enforcing employment, and job creation. To encourage businesses to set up in the zone, financial policies are introduced. Measures usually encompass investing, taxation, companies may be offered tax holidays, where upon establishing themselves in a zone, they are granted a period of lower taxation, etc. Dissemination of good practices will help raise awareness and encourage countries to adopt such a method. It is appropriate to manage it at the EU level, offering studies that are necessary for implementing.

Conclusions

During the MAP meetings, we understood that social dimension covers a wide circle of themes that are intertwined and sometimes hard to measure. Estonia is a small and sparsely populated country, where a third of a population lives in a picturesque environment, but larger cities act as attraction centres for the countryside. At the same time regional differences in development are growing, along with the continued population growth in bigger cities and decrease in rural areas. Thus, the development of regional and rural life, being interrelated and directly dependent on each other, become more and more important.

Several Estonian MAP members were concerned about infrastructure and different services availability in rural areas. Second concern was the lack of jobs and sufficient income in rural areas, poor transport and digital connection. In Estonia, there are several ministries in charge for rural life, and responsibility is dispersed. The Ministry of Rural Affairs should take a clearer leadership role. Rural life must be addressed in all development plans related to it as a horizontal topic. Despite the work done so far, the goals of reducing regional development differences have not been achieved.

Above all, in order for the rural area to be sustainable there has to be enough people. A supportive community that embraces new people and ideas is important, because it is very difficult to start from scratch alone. The Covid pandemic has encouraged remote work, but fast internet is a prerequisite for this. It is important to help people acquire a first home so that they would come to live in the countryside. If a young person has a moment of choice, whether to go to a rural area or a city, then incentives should be given for purchasing housing in the countryside. If young families are well integrated into the rural environment the community will win a lot from their knowledge and technological skills. It also works well in reverse, with parents/old farmers passing on their knowledge to the young.

Rural areas need special measures in order to develop and evolve. Without entrepreneurship, regional development is not viable. Support must be provided in areas of market failure to ensure jobs and development of small business, that can be stimulated with the tax system. For example, one of the proposals which was brought up by MAP members was to allow tax division when the person has several homes (in the countryside and in the city).

Differences in regions and their economic prosperity means that no rural area is like another, even in little Estonia. Such diversity requires locally developed solutions that meet each specific needs and opportunities of the region. A local government can do a lot because it is near and knows the community and needs of its area. State measures are useful, but sometimes difficult and inflexible. All Estonian MAP members agreed

that the LEADER approach has several good features and the measure should definitely be continued. Different support measures should be more linked and serve a common purpose. LEADER local action groups should initiate projects also from other EU funds such as Horizon Europe where in some consortiums action groups are actually welcomed.

Joint events in the community and larger events introducing rural life opportunities in the country can help to introduce the possibilities and advantages of rural life. General social norms shape the decision-making context for younger people, so the reputation of rural areas is very important. The European Union, state institutions, politicians and farmers' organisations can do a lot to make the image of rural life more positive and also show the possibilities not only the obstacles.

Innovative service solutions should also be introduced, making the most of the possibilities of digital tools and encouraging them in every way. MAP members also talked about demand-based transport, because every day logistics are a challenge in rural areas.

Basic research is needed to make decisions that benefit the countryside. Rural life needs more systematic and all-encompassing research. Universities and research institutes would be willing to do more, but they are tied to a project-based system. The EU and the country must be better customers here.

Surveys commissioned at the national level show an average, but regional variations can be quite large. Therefore, it may happen that decisions are made based on the average, which does not give a good result. Ideally, while conducting the surveys there should be more cooperation with county development centres and LEADER action groups should also be included since they are familiar with the entrepreneurs in their region.

If there are no requests for research from the state or the EU, the universities will not start researching rural topics themselves. There may also be a knowledge gap, because information about scientific results does not reach rural areas.

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Annex 1 - Methodology used by the MAP

After careful consideration, we assembled a panel of fourteen members representing science, policy, and community in good balance. There was a good synergy between the members, the topic was incendiary and important for the future.

Based on consultation with the MAP Estonia members, the thematic focus for the first MAP cycle was set "Social dimension of rural areas". The Estonian MAP members indicated that this theme is relevant in order to explore how to attract young people to the countryside and create attractive jobs in the rural areas. These topics were linked to the keywords: social inclusion, poverty reduction, well-being and related to the area of action "Stronger rural areas" and Long Term Vision for rural areas.

MAP meetings were used to co-create and discuss opportunities, challenges, and recommendations to ensure positive development and outcomes for rural areas in future. Estonian teams working methods included online and face-to-face meetings and email consultations with MAP members. We held three meetings: February 21; May 18 and August 31 2022.

The first meeting on February 21 was held as a zoom meeting. At first we introduced our agenda and explained the goals of our project, then asked the MAP members to introduce themselves and bring out some words which relate to the subject "young people in the countryside". After the warm up we asked them to describe the challenges and the possibilities of Estonian rural life from the perspective of social sustainability. We used this input while planning the next meeting and setting the focus. We also shared the memo of the meeting with everybody.

The video of the first meeting can be found here: <https://youtu.be/AQIGMvh5GWI>

The second meeting was held on May 18 in a scenic Valgehobusemäe leisure centre. We started off with some notes from the previous meeting, introduced our goals again and let the MAP members know what was waiting ahead. Then we divided the MAP members into three groups and asked them to participate in the brainstorming. We gave them several big papers and asked them to offer ideas and solutions to three questions from local, national and EU level. The members who could not participate in the meeting sent the written ideas via email. The topics which were given to the MAP members were:

1. How to involve community members in the development of the region?
2. How to promote a smooth generational change and young people moving/staying in the countryside?
3. How to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in the country?

After brainstorming, every group introduced their thoughts and ideas and everyone had a chance to comment on them. The second part of the meeting which followed after lunch and networking was a group discussion about the characteristics of different communities - villages in remote areas, closely-knit villages, suburbs and cities. The memo of the meeting was emailed to all the MAP members.

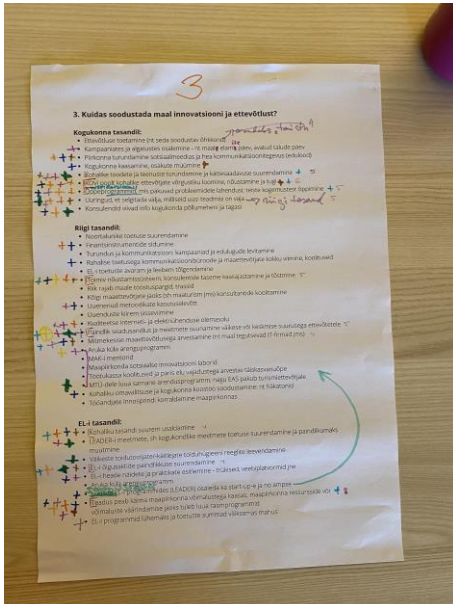
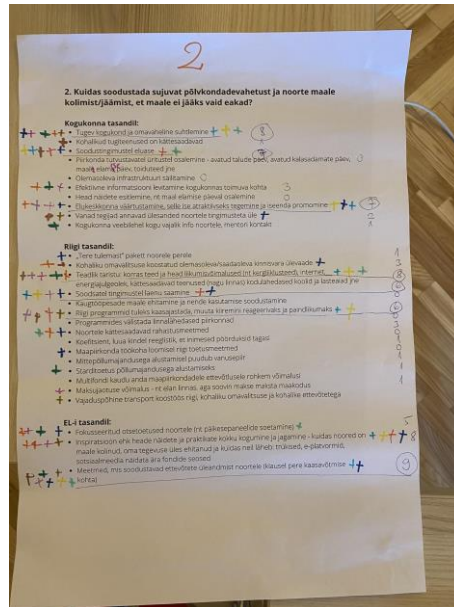
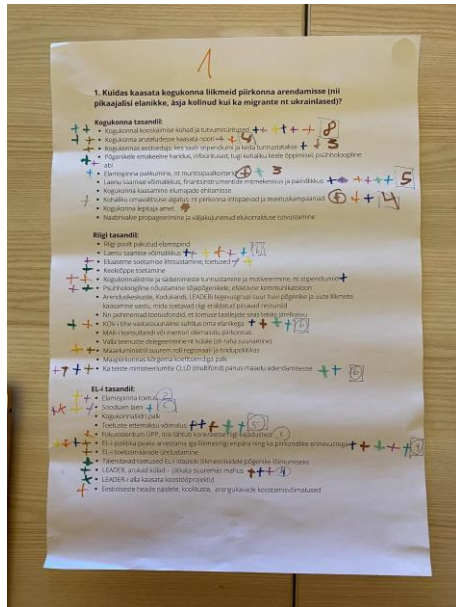
The MAP members said that it was really inspiring and somewhat therapeutic to talk about all the problems and think about the solutions. Also it was great to talk to other people during the lunch and coffee breaks. Many of them are working in the same field but there are not so many possibilities to meet in person and talk informally. Also they were really excited about what kind of results will follow our discussions.

For the monitor and facilitator the long day full of leading discussions and trying to comprehend everything was very tiring but at the same time very rewarding.

The photos of the meeting can be found here: <https://www.icloud.com/sharedalbum/#B0R5yeZFhGm96xG>

After the meeting we reviewed the offered solutions, grouped the similar together and created three documents. We printed these documents out for the third and final meeting where our goal was to sort out the most important proposals and solutions and to validate them with Estonian MAP members.

During the third meeting in Altmõisa manor on August 31 we once again went through the goals of our project, reminded the MAP members of what we had been doing and told them what will be expected of them during this meeting. First we hung the printout sheets with offered solutions on the walls and asked the members to mark three most important solutions under every question and every level (local, national and EU).



The MAP members who could not join us had sent their preferences via email. After the members had marked their top suggestions we quickly sorted out the three or four most popular ones under every topic and level and started to describe them more thoroughly. The results of this discussion can be found under the paragraph 4.3.1 Recommendations for the future policies.

More photos from the meeting: <https://www.icloud.com/sharedalbum/#B0RGI9HKKQBMuz>

Finally we sent the current document for the Estonian MAP members for final validation.

The key learning points were that in order to inspire and encourage people to talk their mind and provide their suggestions we have to offer them nice surroundings and good food. This was really appreciated by the MAP members. Also, the reminders of what and why has been done are important because everybody has so busy schedules and many details tend to slip their minds.



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