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Interfaces

SHERPA Position Paper

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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1. Introduction

This Position Paper builds on the contributions of the nine Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) involved in the third cycle of the SHERPA project that chose to reflect on the social dimension of rural areas. It focuses on the needs and challenges, as well as existing initiatives and activities in rural areas covered by MAPs, and proposes recommendations for policy and future research on the chosen topic. Each of the MAPs reviewed and summarised the issues they found most relevant and worthy of consideration in their area. The contributions of MAPs that have been incorporated into this Position Paper are based on the definitions and reflections on the main concerns set out in the Discussion Paper prepared by Černič Istenič (2022).

The SHERPA process supported the collection of evidence from across Europe on the social dimension of rural areas and proposed four initial sub-themes to be addressed: 1) wellbeing and social relationships in rural areas; 2) public goods provisioning and social networks; 3) bridging the rural-urban gap by promoting cultural activities; and 4) social inclusion of migrant population in rural areas. In addition, the MAPs were asked to discuss the following key questions on any or all of the above topics:

- What are the needs of the area covered by the MAP in relation to **the social dimensions of rural areas**?
- What are the policy interventions already in place, and what are examples of actions taken by local actors addressing these needs implemented in the area covered by the MAP?
- Which policy interventions (i.e. instruments, measures) are recommended by MAP members to be implemented at the local, regional, and/or national levels? How can the EU support these **interventions**?
- What are the knowledge gaps, and what research projects are needed?





2. Key messages

The European Commission's Communication on a Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (European Commission 2021) is a response to increasing societal demand for food, housing, jobs, and key ecosystem services, and aims to equip rural areas with the right tools to meet these challenges. The vision identifies four complementary action areas to create stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous rural areas by 2040. Strengthening the social dimension of rural areas is an obvious aspect and a prerequisite for the success of this vision - it depends on active, committed, and qualified people and especially on the cooperation between them at different levels of the social fabric. Previous rural development policies, especially the LEADER approach under the Rural Development Programme, which has recently been transformed into the CLLD approach, have already given considerable recognition to the importance of social inclusion and broad participation of different actors inside and outside the rural areas to address the social challenges and problems of the rural areas while activating their various assets.

Such an ambitious vision must be supported by solid, science-based evidence. As the analysis of Horizon 2020 projects (Čerňák Istenič, 2022) shows, the social dimension - factors of participation and social inclusion, building social capital and social support networks - has not been explicitly and comprehensively considered so far. It has only played a supporting role to other issues of interest (i.e. economic, technological, and environmental goals) but has not been detailed in how the relevant instruments need to be designed and developed to serve these goals, which is essential from the perspective of social strengthening of rural areas.

Observations, monitoring, and insights into the situation on the ground are the approach that underpins the work of the MAPs described in this Position Paper and point the way to achieving the desired vision. They show the successes and potentials of rural areas, but also the problems and challenges that need to be carefully addressed through actions and measures at local, regional, and EU levels.

3. Current situation of the MAPS

The description of the current situation of the social dimension in the MAPs, and in particular the many initiatives and activities that are being carried out there, show the great commitment and involvement of many different actors in the rural areas, as well as the potential and opportunities that need to be further exploited for the well-being and prosperity of all people living in the rural areas. The box below presents some initiatives that illustrate this commitment very well. More details on these and other initiatives are presented in Section 4.2.

Opinion Festival (Arvamus Festival) in Estonian

A special summer event known throughout Estonia is the Opinion Festival, where important problems of regional development and social dimensions of rural areas are often discussed. The festival takes place in August in central Estonia, in a pretty little town called Paide. It brings discussions and debates to life in an ideal setting, inspiring people from governmental and non-governmental organizations, cultural workers, entrepreneurs, universities, journalists and citizens to come together and create and bring together new ideas, perspectives, viewpoints and actions. In this way, the festival aims to develop a culture of discussion in society. The festival was launched in 2013 and is based 99% on volunteer work. The festival thrives on a decentralized structure: public discussions on a wide range of topics, from national security to health to social innovation, are proposed and held by people and organizations following an open call for ideas each spring. In 2022, for example, there was a discussion about people moving from the larger cities to the countryside. There was a discussion about whether this is temporary or permanent and what can be done to make this situation permanent (<https://arvamusfestival.ee/en/what-is-arvamusfestival/>).



Thriving activities of rural housewives' circles - "Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich" (KGW)

In November 2018, the Law on Village Household Circles came into force in Poland, and systemic support for KGW activities from the Agency for Rural and Agricultural Restructuring appeared in the form of granting annual support for each unit registered in the KGW register, ranging from PLN 5,000 to PLN 7,000 (depending on the number of members). The example of the MAP region shows the emergence of several village circles that are experiencing a renaissance (21 in 2018, 41 in 2022). They bring together mainly women from the village, but also other women and sometimes men. Such organisations have existed in Poland since the second half of the 19th century. They involve local people, produce regional products (which they sell and which become KGW's income), organise many activities for local people, and share their knowledge - for example, circles from all over Poland were given the opportunity to financially support picnics to promote Covid 19 vaccination in their community. KGW members, with the help of the Green Bieszczady Local Action Group and the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, produced a recipe book entitled "Taste the Bieszczady. The culinary, cultural and natural heritage of the Bieszczady Mountains using the example of the commune of Solina". The recipes were collected in all villages of the commune. Such an action had the task not only to save old recipes and traditional dishes from oblivion, but also to bring together the inhabitants of different villages (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063865189806>).



However, the MAPs also indicate and highlight challenges their areas are facing. There are general trends highlighted, such as the rural depopulation related to the ageing and dispersion of the population. Thus, the members of the Galician rural interfaces Spain MAP emphasise that rural areas are facing the following trends: sharp decline and severe ageing of the population, extreme dispersion, negative natural growth rates, loss of demographic and economic weight of rural areas, growing volume of daily mobility flows. This current situation is also described by the members of Bieszczady Poland MAP, who point out that the region suffers from low population density, negative net migration (especially outflow of young people), isolation, risk of permanent marginalisation, and high unemployment and poverty rates. Estonia MAP members have also noted population decline in rural areas due to urban sprawl, leading to issues such as lower municipal revenues, ageing, and higher per capita costs for providing services and infrastructure. However, socioeconomic issues arising from processes, such as population ageing and urbanisation, are not among the priorities of Estonia's current Rural Development Plan.

The **Belgian MAP**, which also highlights issues related to changes in the structure of the population, such as the ageing of the population and changes in the composition of households (smaller households in rural areas), points to the lack of availability of social housing in rural areas and the difficulties in providing public transport, which pose a real threat to the well-being of the most vulnerable groups (non-motorised people, the elderly, people in social and economic insecurity, children and young people, and people with reduced mobility). The phenomenon of "newcomers / neo-rural" migration exacerbates the above problems and requires the development of appropriate infrastructure. Sofia Bulgaria MAP adds further insight to the description of the current situation in rural areas by highlighting the need to improve access to social infrastructure, particularly in the areas of health care, education, and child-care, as well as to ensure access to drinking water and Internet connections.

While the **MAP Vital Villages** in the Netherlands underscores that their rural areas offer much potential and opportunity, it also points to a number of socioeconomic challenges resulting from demographic change: ageing and out-migration to larger cities. Most pressing is the mismatch between supply and demand in the labour market, which is leading to an increasing shortage of skilled workers and affecting the declining demand for housing and the availability of a good and accessible structure of facilities, especially in the area of health care. Nevertheless, the perception of quality of life, especially satisfaction with life and living environment, is still relatively high, which is related to stable social contacts (especially with family members) and trust in other people, which is most evident in the high number of volunteering in the region.

Meanwhile, the description of the current situation in **MAP Aragón** focuses mainly on weaknesses in social relations, such as the low level of associative culture, weak social networks, the lack of social spaces, the low interest of the rural population in public participation, and the low level of cooperation between civil associations and public administrations and between districts to address challenges together. In addition, members of MAP pointed out that in some Aragónese districts the immigrant population from other countries is becoming a challenge, as their unemployment rate is high and their families are large and increasingly at risk of poverty. The lack of initiatives to reconcile work and employment hinders the integration of women and older people in rural areas.



Portugal as a whole has also experienced a decline in rural population in recent decades. However, the rural economy is still largely concentrated in the primary sector, which is more than twice the EU average. In the Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP region, however, the population has remained relatively stable, largely due to a doubling of the employability of local businesses. Agriculture is the largest employer in the region, accounting for nearly half of the jobs, and is the sector that pays the best wages in the region. The foreign population living in the municipality already has a significant weight in relation to the total population and its share of the population is increasing due to the needs of the agricultural sector. The presence of migrant communities in the region has forced and will continue to force people, businesses and public services to adapt to a new reality with different challenges and needs that require different dynamics and strategies, and to strive for peaceful coexistence between native and immigrant communities.

The presentation of the **MAP Svarun Slovenia** on the social dimension of rural areas is based on some of the few studies on the stock of social capital and the quality of life of the rural population. They show that the level of social capital in village communities is low compared to urban areas, both in terms of general trust in other people and trust in institutions (church, media, political parties, state authorities, legal system, army, police, banks, humanitarian organizations, EU institutions). However, the greater reserves of social capital in rural areas compared to urban areas were shown in social networks: belonging to various organizations, especially associations, in which rural residents are more active. Moreover, research on the quality of life in rural areas shows that the profile of the socially excluded person in Slovenia is an older, less educated person, living in a small place (village), alone or in an extended family, either (mostly) living and working on a farm or unemployed or occasionally doing paid work or working only as a housewife. As research has shown, the problem of poverty is also related to the way rural people think and act: it is much harder for people from rural areas to ask for help. As a result, they are more inclined to hide their poverty, which is often seen as a sign of incompetence, unless there is an obvious misfortune.



4. Positions from the MAPs

This chapter refers to the discussion in the MAPs that took into account the definition of the social dimensions of rural areas suggested by Černič Istenič (2022) for further discussion in the third MAP cycle of SHERPA project. The Discussion Paper took into account that the social dimension of rural areas is a broad concept, but it is best reflected in social relations, social networks and social capital.

4.1 Identified needs and challenges

Nine MAPs used a variety of approaches (i.e. desk research, face-to-face and online surveys, interviews, group discussions, workshops, secondary data analysis) to collect data, and identify and address the various needs and challenges related to the social dimension of rural areas that they found relevant to their area. The evidences collected reflected the natural, geographic, historical, cultural, and social features and characteristics of each rural area.

First of all, it should be noted that the needs and challenges identified by the nine MAPs are not based on a single definition of the concept of the social dimension of rural areas, and that their starting points are more or less close to the definition that was defined quite broadly in the Discussion Paper (Černič Istenič 2022: 5): etymologically "[it] refers to a very wide range of topics and issues ... In SHERPA's case, it refers to the relationships between people living in rural areas, which vary in intensity, extent, and quality, and which influence the life of the individual for better or for worse." This definition is used in exactly the same way in the Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP. In the Galician rural interfaces Spain MAP, the focus is also on social relations, but the tangible and intangible living conditions are added to the social dimension of rural areas. In the Bieszczady Poland MAP, the focus is on what you do with other people and what you do for other people. In their meetings, members of the Estonia MAP have noted that the social dimension encompasses a wide range of issues that are interwoven and sometimes difficult to measure, and they narrowed their focus to the topics as social inclusion, poverty reduction, and well-being. The analyses of the Belgium MAP and the Vital Villages Netherlands MAP are based on the concept of well-being or prosperity, which in addition to material well-being, also includes informal and formal relationships and issues such as health and education, in addition to material well-being. The contribution of the Svarun Slovenia MAP is based on a study of social networks in rural areas (four case studies), in particular how well they function, what problems and needs they address, and how well people's needs are met through their activities. The members of the Sofia Bulgaria MAP emphasise the importance and relevance of social infrastructure - health-related services, education and training, social welfare and support programmes, justice infrastructure, public services, entertainment, and recreational facilities. While in the Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP, the focus is mainly on "improving the well-being of the rural population" and "promoting social inclusion (of migrants)", without elaborating on the understanding of the concept of the social dimension of rural areas. MAPs have identified a number of challenges and needs in their areas, which are summarised below.

Regarding social relations, several challenges and needs are noted. First, it is highlighted that rural communities are losing their sociability, that close-knit communities are vanishing, and that interest in social relations is declining due to the disappearance of the social and community structures associated with the traditional agricultural system, which translates into lack of time due to increasing off-farm jobs and fewer neighbours – there are fewer and fewer farms in the village.



This is especially true in remote rural areas, burdened with loneliness where the older generations are the most affected, and the mistrust in the results of collective action and conflicting interests (Spain MAP Galician rural interfaces, Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP). The disappearance of cohesive communities, which manifests itself in the absence of neighbours and meeting places and affects the quality of life of residents and makes it difficult for potential new citizens to integrate, is exacerbated by the exodus of young people from rural areas, as urban areas and other non-agricultural sectors offer them better opportunities to earn a living and combine family, work, and leisure, while rural areas do not provide suitable jobs for the better educated and the social services they expect (Estonia (MAP Estonia), Poland (MAP Bieszczady)). Consequently, in this regard, the need to adopt measures that facilitate the consolidation of **new structures for social relations** and participation as well as measures to stop the outflow of young people from rural areas is recognised as essential.

To tackle the **low participation of people in the activities and projects** of their communities, which is also identified as a problem and challenge in rural areas, additional details are presented that need to be addressed through further reflection and action. In this context, it is highlighted that rural communities lack volunteers and people's interest to participate in the development of their community, e.g. it is difficult to find **local leaders** - village mayors (Innovation in rural development in MAP Aragon Spain, MAP Bieszczady, Poland. Another challenge is the low level of commitment of **local councils** and the insufficient capacity of **administrative staff** in municipalities to meet the needs of rural residents. Another problem is **inadequate legislation** that is not adapted to the rural context. For example, when **applying for public funds** for the construction of social infrastructures (e.g., kindergartens, schools, homes for the elderly, etc.), criteria are applied that can be met in urban areas with bigger populations, while rural areas are excluded from tenders for this reason, which affects their social development. The weak participation of people in rural areas may also be related to the increasing difficulties in funding intangible interventions, as there are no clear indicators to verify investments and monitor impacts. As a result, most funding is allocated to tangible projects (i.e., investments in fixed assets), which reduces interest in creating collective projects. Declining support for intangible projects, as noted, has a negative impact on social dynamics in rural areas (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP) as they prevent e.g. the creation of inclusive places outside their homes where residents can meet and socialise (MAP Bieszczady, Poland).

Regarding the need for greater participation in rural areas, some MAPs felt that certain **mechanisms** should be put in place to achieve this goal also by addressing other important challenges in their regions. In this context, the need to promote citizen participation, for example in the **management of nature and habitats**, as a contribution to the quality of life in the targeted rural areas is highlighted. (Belgium MAP, Vital Villages Netherlands MAP). At the same time, as the members of the MAPs point out, there are other conditions and prerequisites that must be met in order to **give local people a greater say**: knowing how certain processes work and the importance of their actions, strengthening civic politics, revitalising volunteerism and involving young people more, better coordinating civic initiatives with government administration, having good working relationships and coordination with municipal staff, enabling adequate financial support for civic initiatives, aligning the views of leaders with the broader community, creating a shared vision of the landscape, and constructive dialogue between citizens and politicians, both locally and nationally.



Research on the **functioning of social networks in rural areas** has revealed (Svarun Slovenia MAP) that rural areas, especially the more remote ones, face significant phenomena of social exclusion and poor quality of life, which are not captured by general statistics and existing rare surveys on the quality of life in rural areas. These are the phenomena of severe but hidden poverty, especially among the elderly (women), widespread gender inequality in farm households (with one of the most difficult situations for women in society in general), increasing conflicts in intergenerational relations (over issues of farm handover and sharing agricultural property among siblings), mental health problems, and psychological and physical violence in the family, loneliness and neglect of the elderly, lack of information and direct support for those in need, and a culture of shame and stigma that discourages those in need from seeking help, all of which points to a low stock of social capital of all kinds (bonding and bridging) and low levels of trust. Research in this framework has also shown that the group of seniors and younger retirees in rural areas represents an untapped social potential. The public welfare system takes care of the oldest population, but not the retirees, who are an important source of social capital that could be used for various locally specific projects in rural areas, e.g., under the LEADER / CLD policy.

Another **problematic aspect of rural social relations** highlighted by members of MAP concerns **tensions and conflicts** between different users of rural areas, e.g., locals and tourists, employed residents/citizens, farmers/forest managers, and secondary residents who declare an interest in assets such as land or housing availability (Belgium MAP). Tensions in rural areas have also been identified between locals, especially farmers, and newcomers and weekenders due to a mismatch between their expectations and the labour needs of locals (Svarun Slovenia MAP). Mechanisms need to be created to anticipate and manage such tensions by improving urban residents' perceptions of rural realities (Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP).

The social (non)inclusion of immigrants is also a pressing problem or challenge in some rural areas (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP, Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP): their lack of knowledge of local culture and customs, as well as their low level of engagement with the native population, indicate that they are poorly integrated into rural communities. Some of the most problematic immigrant groups do not have legal residency, but only access to jobs with low pay and poor working conditions. They do not have the means to maintain the lifestyle of their neighbours, participate in recreational activities, and maintain social contacts. **Educational communities** (schools and parents' associations) are seen as key actors in strengthening the integration of migrants. They can promote the social inclusion of migrant children and families through their activities, such as sports activities and celebrations of "national days". There is a need to focus on families as a whole, e.g. organising childcare so that they can be integrated into the rural community.

Most MAPs emphasised the dependence of the well-being/quality of life of rural populations, especially the more remote ones, on the availability of **jobs**, access to **housing**, **public services** (kindergarten, school, post office, bank, health care - access to general practitioners, community multipurpose facilities (meeting places, cultural-artistic events, lifelong learning, etc.), stores, pubs, sport facilities), the availability of **infrastructures** (rail connections, roads, bicycle paths, Internet access), and the ability to overcome **mobility problems**, such as the distance to the community centre, for the entire population, including the most vulnerable.

4.2 Existing interventions and actions

The interventions and actions reported by MAPs members show that there is a wide variety of interventions and actions and that most of them address the needs of rural areas identified by MAPs (presented in the previous section). As shown in the table below with background information on the interventions reported by MAPs, they mainly cover the need for "new structures for social relations (as rural communities lose their sociability) and social cohesion". All MAPs reported such interventions. In second place are measures for "social integration (of migrants and other vulnerable groups)" reported by six MAPs. This is followed by measures to address social exclusion and poor quality of life (including hidden poverty), reported by five MAPs. A smaller number of interventions address the need to "provide infrastructure, jobs, housing, social services, and solve mobility problems" and "stop the outflow of young people". However, none of the interventions address the "tensions and conflicts between different users of rural spaces," which were also mentioned by some MAPs as an important need.

The table below also shows the actors at local/regional/national/EU level who have been involved in the implementation of the initiatives and the resources on which they have relied. The actors involved in these diverse activities include various associations and societies, volunteer groups, i.e. representatives of the so-called third sector and municipalities, companies, local action groups and public (research) organisations. The vast majority of interventions and actions (14) are based on public funding, while some (8) combine public and private funding. A significant number (10) rely on funding through LEADER, some also on donations and volunteer participation.

The full list of initiatives and actions and their descriptions can be found in the Annex.



Table 1: Examples of interventions and actions reported by MAPs.

MAP	Identified needs/interventions				
	New structures for social relations (as rural communities are losing their sociability) and social cohesion	Stop outflow of young people	Combating social exclusion and poor quality of life (hidden poverty)	Social inclusion (migrants and other vulnerable collectives)	Provision of infrastructure, jobs, housing, social services and overcome mobility problems
BE	<p>The development and creation of public spaces, village houses and other reception, information and meeting places (Commune & Association /Public funds)</p> <p>Projects on social cohesion and other similar themes in the frame of Interreg France - Wallonia - Vlaanderen programme (Municipalities/ European Regional Development Fund (ERDF))</p>				<p>Several measures to change the design of housing and to support alternative and adaptable housing (state agencies & companies / private and public funds)</p> <p>Alternative rural mobility initiatives to complement public transport solutions (private companies / private funds)</p>
BG 1	<p>Exchange of knowledge and care between urban youth and rural elderly (Association / private donations & charity)</p> <p>FB groups to discuss problems or events to be taken under consideration in the villages (small villages / no funds)</p> <p>Yearly / biannual cleaning of the villages with maintaining of public property (Local groups / volunteering)</p>			<p>Supplying people in need with food, household goods, furniture, electrical appliances, etc. (NGO / public funds, private donations, charity)</p>	

Table 1: Examples of interventions and actions reported by MAPs (continuation).

MAP	Identified needs/interventions				
	New structures for social relations (as rural communities are losing their sociability) and social cohesion	Stop outflow of young people	Combating social exclusion and poor quality of life (hidden poverty)	Social inclusion (migrants and other vulnerable collectives)	Provision of infrastructure, jobs, housing, social services and overcome mobility problems
EE	<p>Summer events to discuss regional development (civic initiative, NGOs, volunteers /public-private funds, donations)</p> <p>Open farms - rural businesses to visitors (Ministry of Rural Affairs, the Rural Economy Information Centre, Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce and the Central Union of Farmers / RDP-public fund)</p> <p>Promoting activities that give people the chance to visit the countryside and see how people live in the countryside (municipalities/public funds)</p> <p>Festivals to make the tourist season longer (Cooperatives / private funds)</p> <p>Classes on traditional food cooking with locally sourced ingredients (LAG/LEADER).</p>	<p>Show what has been done in the rural areas by young people to inspire other young people (Public research organisation/RDP-public funds);</p> <p>Youth participation in defining how to enrich their living conditions (Association/ LEADER)</p>		<p>Weekends to develop innovative services to promote life in Võru county with special attention to people with special needs and minorities (Development Centre/public-private).</p>	
ES 1	<p>Exchange of knowledge and care between urban youth and rural elderly (Association / private donations & charity)</p> <p>FB groups to discuss problems or events to be taken under consideration in the villages (small villages / no funds)</p> <p>Yearly / biannual cleaning of the villages with maintaining of public property (Local groups / volunteering)</p>		<p>Integration of social excluded families through different food-related activities in Ordes (other private initiative/ Public -private funds)</p> <p>Public service health delivered in a vehicle that visits each rural municipality (Municipality/ Public funds).</p>	<p>Social community services and social/cultural revitalization (municipality, NGOs/Private-public funding)</p> <p>Educational services to children under three years old and self-employment (Association/Private and public funds)</p> <p>Inclusion of disabled people (municipality, association/Private and public funding)</p>	

Table 1: Examples of interventions and actions reported by MAPs (continuation).

MAP	Identified needs/interventions				
	New structures for social relations (as rural communities are losing their sociability) and social cohesion	Stop outflow of young people	Combating social exclusion and poor quality of life (hidden poverty)	Social inclusion (migrants and other vulnerable collectives)	Provision of infrastructure, jobs, housing, social services and overcome mobility problems
ES 2	<p>Cohousing model: building houses and common spaces (Other private initiative / Private funds)</p> <p>Schools for promoting collective actions (Association / Private funds)</p> <p>Creating new spaces for childcare (Association / Private funds)</p> <p>Online platform to inform urban people interested in rooting in rural areas (Other private initiative / Private funds)</p> <p>Social events to exchange information among rural citizens (LAGs / LEADER).</p>		<p>Create housing bank and provide job opportunities (NGO / European Social Fund)</p> <p>Enhancing cultural diversity (NGO / Public and private funds)</p>	<p>A rural ridesharing platform that addresses the lack of transportation in rural areas and strengthens connectivity between villages. (Other private initiative/ Private funds)</p>	
NL 3	<p>Several examples of the redevelopment of existing social infrastructure into multi-purpose space for greater cohesion and belonging in the village. Designing village centres and adding new functions (LAG / LEADER)</p> <p>Initiatives to renovate and protect the landscape (Public authority / Public funds & volunteering)</p>		<p>Social agenda: Training of experts in poverty and low literacy (Municipalities / Public funds)</p> <p>Projects on healthy living and exercise (LAG / LEADER)</p> <p>Monitor of Broad Prosperity Drenthe on a wide range of themes, ranging from material prosperity to well-being and housing (Research company / Public & private funds)</p>		<p>Social agenda: projects that increase the quality of life in villages in the area of housing, education, health and vitality (Municipalities / Public funds)</p> <p>Projects on sufficient / suitable housing, job prospects and appropriate care for older people (Municipalities / Public funds)</p> <p>Establishment of a multidisciplinary medical centre with various specialties (LAG / LEADER)</p>

Table 1: Examples of interventions and actions reported by MAPs (continuation).

MAP	Identified needs/interventions				
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PL 2	<p>A play area for children (Association/ Volunteering)</p> <p>Implement alleys, fencing and lighting, and green park (Municipality / Public funds)</p> <p>Publish a recipes book to retain knowledge and reinforce social cohesion (LAG / LEADER)</p>	Promote social economy (Wańkowa Ski Resort) to encourage entrepreneurship and give young people a reason to stay in their hometowns (LAG / LEADER)	Training on new technologies and social media to seniors (LAG / LEADER)		
PT 2	Managing, linking, encouraging, developing and promoting pedestrian routes (Private association / Private funds)		The psychological counselling of carers - to improve their psychological well-being & Support of active ageing and support for older people (Cooperative / Public funds)	<p>Local Centre for Support to the Integration of Migrants (Association, municipalities, agricultural association, private farm business, church / Private-public funds)</p> <p>The growth of intercultural interactions through gastronomy, dance, theatre, music, cinema, sport, painting, writing and video (Municipality, companies, Parish Councils / Public-private funds)</p> <p>Assisting immigrants to integrate or re-integrate into the labour market (Association- cooperative / Public funds).</p> <p>Personal development of women, promoting the consolidation of a community that promotes intercultural values and integrates human diversity (Association-cooperative / Public funds).</p> <p>Promotion of social, school and community integration of migrant children and young people (Association- cooperative / Public funds).</p> <p>Promoting good management of labour migration to Portugal (Intergovernmental organization & producer organizations / Public -private funds)</p>	

Table 1: Examples of interventions and actions reported by MAPs (continuation).

MAP	Identified needs/interventions				
	New structures for social relations (as rural communities are losing their sociability) and social cohesion	Stop outflow of young people	Combating social exclusion and poor quality of life (hidden poverty)	Social inclusion (migrants and other vulnerable collectives)	Provision of infrastructure, jobs, housing, social services and overcome mobility problems
SI	Adult education with the aim of better utilization of the social capital of the elderly in rural area (Association / Public funds - EU's Lifelong Learning Programme)		<p>Organization of training and lectures on health and interpersonal relationships, (Association/private funds)</p> <p>Workshops to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and empower stakeholders to identify and deal with mental health issues (Association/public funds)</p>	Raising awareness of development issues and their impact on the phenomenon of migration (Association / Public (EU) funds-The DEAR Programme)	

4.3 Recommendations from the MAPs

4.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

Many of the ideas and policy recommendations suggested by MAPs to make rural areas (even) better places to live relate to local, regional-national and EU level.

The local level

Measures developed by local authorities at the local level should include creating friendly public spaces or other places where local people can meet, engage in activities together, and organise events, as well as creating space for grassroots, community-based activities. Local authorities should also support local people to organise or participate in events where communities are introduced to other areas (e.g. information campaigns or marketing events), which on the one hand provide information about the area and the community, and on the other hand bring local people together and allow them to get involved in representing their community ('Galician rural interfaces Spain MAP' and 'Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP', Poland MAP Bieszczady, Estonia MAP).

In addition, services (e.g., reconciliation services, caregiver services for dependents, sports and cultural activities, neighbourhood clubs, people-friendly public spaces) should be provided that engage the local community and provide time for relationships, participation in cultural, sport, business, and grassroots activities. Plans for the provision of these services in rural areas should not follow urban patterns, but should involve local people in the planning process in order to achieve tailor-made solutions. This should take into account the different groups in the area, making sure to include all groups, both young and old, men and women, both old residents and newcomers/migrants (Estonia MAP, 'Galician rural interfaces Spain MAP' and 'Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP').

Furthermore, sufficient and two-way communication between local authorities and community members was emphasised. These processes need a strong and inspiring leader to act as a link between the community and local authorities, but a more team-based approach is also needed (MAP ESTONIA). In this context, it would be useful to promote the exchange of experiences between municipalities through citizen participation and between different citizen initiatives, for example by organizing field trips, study tours (inspiration for local authorities, for NGOs, for local activists), and disseminating information on different financing opportunities and best practices showing the efficiency of cooperative activities by producing a book on best practices (Vital Villages Netherlands MAP, Galician MAP, Poland MAP Bieszczady, Estonia MAP).



The policy recommendations referring to local level enhancing citizens' involvement encompass also the ideas as the creation of a mobile office (driving to the residents), so that official matters and advising can be dealt with in one's own neighbourhood without having to spend a whole day travelling several dozen kilometres to the office one way (Poland MAP Bieszczady). Strengthening municipal capacity to coordinate and collaborate with citizen groups in addressing issues important to citizens (e.g., environmental protection) requires adjusting the attitude and working methods of local government. Involving citizens in the management and co-creating knowledge requires a different attitude among local government employees. It is advisable to train local government employees to work and communicate with citizens (Vital Villages Netherlands MAP).

To improve the social inclusion of migrants at the local level, who bring "life" to villages, provide labour, and help make social services work, it is recommended that education/training/adult education be strengthened with a gender-sensitive approach and in accordance with local labour needs; transportation (since they do not have private transportation) and access to affordable housing should be improved; and integration-promoting activities such as sports and dual-focus intercultural activities should be developed. The management and responsibility for these activities should be clearly assigned to the competent authority, with an appropriate budget (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP).

Local governments should promote also networks for innovation and entrepreneurship among local entrepreneurs or businesses. Through this network, local governments could provide support, advice, and training to local entrepreneurs, co-working spaces, or hubs (Poland MAP Bieszczady).

The national level

At the national level, the MAPs also made a number of recommendations to improve people's living conditions that relate to the social dimension of rural areas. They note that existing national policies under the Common Agricultural Policy and the Rural Development Programme are inadequate, do not effectively address social relations, and disregard the social problems and needs of the rural population (including those of the farm population, e.g., social security, healthy and safe working environment, intergenerational relations, reconciliation of work and family life, etc.). The existing social policies also do not take into account the specifics of rural areas, the scattered settlement of the population, the mobility and communication difficulties due to inadequate infrastructure, limited access to services and facilities which is particularly the case in remote areas, and last but not least, their specific views and values that affect/limit the quality of life of the rural population. Therefore, a social policy specifically tailored to rural areas is needed.



The MAPs made a number of specific proposals on what social policy or rural areas should look like. For example, a principle of positive discrimination against rural areas should be established when setting social policy at the regional/national level. It should be taken into account that rural areas are undoubtedly context-specific and diverse, and that the different interests of groups in rural areas exists and should be taken into account when designing plans and strategies, such as the Comprehensive Plan for the Management of Cultural Diversity in Aragón, 2018-2021, which does not mention the specificities of rural areas (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP). Therefore, the MAPs propose to define the exemption for rural areas in the existing legislation in the areas where rural areas have proven to be particularly vulnerable, and to reform the status of municipalities with small populations to give them equal opportunities, for example in tenders (MAP Aragon).

In this context, it is suggested that the granting of subsidies should not be made dependent on a conversion factor based on population density, so as not to exclude the sparsely populated peripheral areas and that application deadlines should take into account the seasonal work of rural residents; the call and submission deadlines should take into account the "off-season" and. (Poland MAP Bieszczady).

In addition, social legislation should also clearly define the objectives and measures to promote rural diversity (again, positive discrimination) and provide tools to evaluate the impact of social policies. The adaptation of legislation to rural areas and the territorial approach should also apply to other national programmes, such as (social) entrepreneurship and innovation. In addition, more needs to be done in the area of national financing of social services. Some MAPs ("Sofia Bulgaria MAP") consider that public support for direct social services is more beneficial for local communities than support for building physical infrastructure at the national level. Therefore, support should be dedicated to the priority social needs of the dependent population: access to housing, ensuring mobility and transportation, access to health services and medical care, social welfare and services, infrastructure for better access to education, and administrative services.

In addition to the administrative improvement of the functioning of local communities (municipalities) and the support of non-governmental organizations, the changes are also needed in the functioning of public institutions. In particular, their social responsibility, professionalism and dialogue must be strengthened at the intersectoral level - rural challenges and needs are not only the responsibility of the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment but also of the Ministries of Social Affairs, Education, Health, Finance and Technology, all of which must pay attention to the situation "on the ground"; they must review and refine practices, such as administrative obstacles and insufficient information flow to the beneficiaries of services, which limit the quality of life of people in rural areas, especially the most vulnerable. Therefore, the establishment of a cross-sectoral rural authority and effective integration of agricultural policy and financial resources with other ministries is necessary (Svarun Slovenia MAP, 'Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP', MAP Estonia).



The national level

The MAPs believe that the EU's role in future rural social policy should be more active than the current one, which focuses on providing funding and setting general guidelines. The social pillar of EU agricultural policy should be significantly strengthened, both in terms of providing expertise to relevant actors (e.g. LAGs) and support for monitoring (data), and in terms of a clear distinction between agricultural and other (social) measures.

The previous actions of LEADER /CLD have produced a number of good practices to strengthen the social dimension of rural areas, but they are not adopted in the public system after the completion of the projects. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the role of LAGs as the main instrument to address the needs related to social relations and inclusion. To this end, MAPs propose to define more clearly the social objectives for LEADER at the EU level, to improve/rethink the multi-fund solution - the integration of the European Social Fund (ESF) into the LEADER /CLD policy - and to give more space to result-oriented programs, as well as to increase support for projects targeting intangible values. Integrating ESF into LEADER /CLD policy and using also other funding opportunities, e.g. Horizon Europe, would allow to better address the growing (or at least increasingly urgent) social problems in rural areas (Svarun Slovenia MAP, Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP, Estonia MAP). However, the question of how to organize and finance LAGs to promote the social dimension of rural areas, cohesion and greater integration is a task that needs to be further addressed in the future. The debate on this is not unanimous - there is no consensus between policy makers and civil society (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP).

Certainly, the CLLD methodology should be made simpler and more flexible to be effective. In this regard, EU policies should take into account the specific characteristics of each member state as well as regional differences. The EU should put more trust in the national level and allow each member country more freedom to apply its own judgment. The flexibility of EU legislation should also be increased (Estonia MAP).

The proposals also include the following ideas: The establishment of a program for the exchange of experiences between rural areas in the EU facing similar social problems, the inclusion of the rural perspective as a cross-cutting issue in all European policies; a more active policy to attract foreign immigrants by regulating migration flows and actively promoting immigration to rural areas (Galician Rural Interfaces Spain MAP).

4.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

The first problem that arises in formulating recommendations for research (and policy) regarding rural areas is that they are not very clearly defined. While there are statistics, particularly on social issues and quality of life indicators (EUROSTAT, EUROFOUND), these are aggregated at the level of administrative units - municipalities, statistical regions, or cohesion regions - so there is no clear definition of what a rural area is in a given EU country. At the same time, there are studies on various aspects of rural areas in different countries, but they are more or less complete and do not provide an in-depth and systematic overview of the impact of social policies on the lives of the inhabitants of these areas.

Thus, the list of knowledge gaps related to the targeted rural areas identified was quite extensive. However, only those related to social dimension of rural areas and broader EU context are listed here:



- How to place the social issues of rural areas into public policies, especially into the mechanisms of measures of the Common Agricultural Policy? (Svarun Slovenia MAP)
- What is the role and extent of social networks in rural areas? What types of networks exist? How to encourage their creation? (Svarun Slovenia MAP)
- How to empower and provide a supportive environment for rural people in the field of mental health care? How to reach those who do not seek help? (Svarun Slovenia MAP)
- It is recommended to increase the level of knowledge about the possibilities and ways of cooperation between the social economy sector and business and NGOs. (Poland MAP Bieszczady)
- The research related to the mobility of the population for work and access to different services, especially in rural areas with a very dispersed population is rare. More research is needed on the current reality and mobility needs of the population, and the design of innovative ways of providing these services that are better adapted to reality. (Galician Rural Interfaces Spain MAP)
- There are shortcomings in the statistical information available for rural areas, such as an insufficient incorporation of gender perspective in these statistics, which hinders or prevents an adequate understanding of the reality. (Galician Rural Interfaces Spain MAP)
What is the situation in the field of gender equality in rural areas? (Svarun Slovenia MAP)
- Research focused on bringing public administration closer to citizens is rare, especially in rural areas. In this context, it would be worthwhile to consider measures aimed at bringing administration closer to the citizen and making digitization accessible to different groups of the rural population, including the elderly. (Galician Rural Interfaces Spain MAP)
- Research on mechanisms on how to adapt social legislation to the needs of rural areas. (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP)
- Research on double direction of knowledge transfer methods. There are already many studies in rural areas, but they neither comprehensively reflect their needs nor provide applicable results. (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP)
- Research on methods for the evaluation of impact of social policies in rural areas. (Innovation in rural development in Aragon Spain MAP)

- Research topics in rural areas are largely related to issues of agriculture, employment, diversification, and income, while less attention is paid to social infrastructure, which is an important element in people's well-being. It is worthwhile to look more closely at the background of rural areas compared to urban areas in terms of social infrastructure and to identify the differences in actual opportunities for communities in different types of areas in terms of health, social protection, education, social contacts and connections, etc. (Sofia Bulgaria MAP).
- Develop tools to quantify the value of citizen participation so that it can be better considered in policy decisions. Although the added value of citizen participation should not be sought in terms of efficiency and monetary gain, it is important to quantify its value in order to consider citizen participation in nature management in policy-making. This requires the integration of different policy areas. It is easier for policy makers to attach importance to it if the value is quantified. It can then be part of a social cost-benefit analysis. (Vital Villages Netherlands MAP)
- Develop integrated studies that address the various dimensions of the well-being of rural populations (and not only with a sectoral focus). (Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP)
- Evaluation of the impact of migrant worker presence/absence on agricultural activity. (Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP)
- Conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of the local community in relation to the phenomenon of immigration, with constant monitoring over time. (Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP)

5. Contribution from the SHERPA EU MAP

The EU-level MAP met in November 2022 to discuss the social dimension of rural areas, informed by the results of the MAP Position Papers of the SHERPA national and regional MAPs. During the meeting, members of the EU-level MAP reflected on the recommendations developed by the MAPs and discussed how these recommendations, regarding rural policies related to the social dimension of rural areas can be supported at the EU level, as well as which research gaps and needs to be addressed by EU programming. The reflections of the meeting are summarised below.

Integration of rural aspects in EU social policy

Even though social policy is primarily the responsibility of EU Member States, certain aspects are a shared competence with the EU. Grounded in Article 151 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, the EU has various social policy objectives and Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union gives binding force to the social rights in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. One cornerstone of the EU when it comes to social competences is the European Pillar on Social rights, funded by European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and it is of the highest importance to ensure that the 20 principles of the Pillar are also integrated and applied to rural areas. In the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), the Pillar is seen as a guidance for LTVRA actions, that should be observed by seeking support for quality, rural employment, decent work, and decent working conditions in rural areas. There is a need to push for a rural perspective within the Pillar, and to have more integration of rural aspects within social policy in general.

The European Pillar on Social Rights

The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, which sets out 20 key principles that represent the beacon guiding Europe towards a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity in the 21st century. However, more needs to be done so that the 20 principles actively help us to build fairer and more well-functioning labour markets as well as good welfare systems for the benefit of all Europeans. With the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Commission has set out concrete initiatives to achieve just that. Delivering on the Pillar is a joint effort by EU institutions, national, regional, and local authorities, social partners and civil society.

More information about the European Pillar of Social Rights can be found here: [Link](#)

This is why rural proofing, a mechanism to ensure that all policies are aligned with rural needs and realities^[1], is important to be implemented for social (and all other) policies of the EU, and also for national and regional social policies. It is important to clearly highlight why certain key social aspects (e.g. less access to services for the integration of migrants, depopulation of rural areas, constrained access to healthcare and education) are different in rural areas as a justification for including specific rural aspects in relevant social legislation. Rural proofing starts with showing what is occurring on the ground and what should be done to solve this.

The integration of more social-rural aspects is also important for other policies, such as the EU Green Deal, Just Transition Mechanism, the Cohesion Policy, especially in regard to the policy objective 'a Europe closer to citizens. Social issues in rural areas cannot be solved solely using agricultural and rural development policies and funding (e.g. the European Agricultural fund for rural development). Other EU policies and funding (ESF, European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund) also need to be adapted and used to address social issues in rural areas. One such adaptation could be the inclusion of a priority factor based on the living location to a variety of EU policies to ensure equality and equity between rural and urban areas. Another change could be to include members of the rural population, specifically rural workers, in the development of future programmes to ensure that rural areas and their specificities are kept in mind.



[1] ENRD – Rural Proofing: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/rural-proofing_en

LEADER as the main CAP instrument to address social issues in rural areas

The main instrument that the EU has used to improve social conditions in rural areas is the LEADER programme within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). LEADER has been addressing social issues for over 30 years and there is now a strong need to bring in a whole range of other EU policies that are critical for rural areas (aside from agricultural policies) to adequately address all social issues.

A first step in this is the wider application of the LEADER approach under the term of 'Community-Led local Development' (CLLD), introduced for the 2014-2020 funding period. CLLD can be used under European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EARDF) (referred to as LEADER), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Social Fund (ESF+), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and if the Member States programming allows for it, Local Action Groups may now prepare integrated strategies using multiple funding. As highlighted in a policy brief by SIMRA ('Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural areas', a Horizon2020 project), social innovation is a key aspect of CLLD and can address social exclusion and disadvantages, strengthen social capital, and drive place-based development. However, the role of social innovation in CLLD (and so LEADER) needs stronger recognition, mandatory inclusion, and targeted policy support[2].

For LEADER, it is important to emphasise what the programme has delivered in regard to addressing social issues in rural areas, how the good practices learned can be shared, and how LEADER can continue to address social issues in rural areas. To continue to deliver the successful work of LEADER in regard to social aspects, it is necessary to redefine the social objective of LEADER from the EU-level to modernise the programme and include new aspects (i.e. the Just Transition Mechanism). It was also stressed that LEADER cannot continue without ESF+, and additional inclusion of the social dimension in LEADER should be based on increased budget from this fund for LEADER. In regard to LEADER in the new CAP programming period (2023-2027), a main concern is that the social dimension is not seen as a priority and that more importance and attention is given to other areas, such as food security. As LEADER was the main instrument used to address social issues in rural areas, there is a fear that attention given to the social aspects in rural areas will reduce even further in the new period.

This concern relates strongly to a lesson learned from LEADER addressing social elements in rural areas in the past: if flexibility is given to Member States about if and how to address social aspects in rural areas, this dimension will be diminished. Therefore, if such flexibility is to be stimulated in EU policies such as the CAP, it should be strongly linked to fundamental conditions.



[2] http://www.simra-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SIMRA_Final_policy_brief.pdf

The implementation of basic but fundamental conditions for addressing social issues in rural areas will ensure that Member States, even if not given a high priority to this topic, will still have to focus and deliver on this. Another way to ensure that Member States will prioritise addressing social elements in rural areas is to earmark parts of various relevant funds for rural areas.

Five suggestions for future research at EU level

When it comes to the research into the social dimension of rural areas as part of the EU programming, it would be beneficial to prioritise the following research topics:

- The role of social networks, social capital, and local empowerment within rural areas.
- Relevant tools that could be used to quantify the value of citizen participation in rural areas.
- How to bring public administration closer to the rural citizen.
- How to accelerate the sharing of best practices and potentially establish a mechanism for this.
- To develop innovative ways for cooperation between stakeholders involved in aspects of the social economy, businesses, the public sector, and non-governmental organisations in rural areas.

Another research need would be to produce knowledge on mechanisms that would support the identification and definition of rural needs in the purpose of redefining EU, national, and regional legislation. In relation to this, it is important to underline the importance of the recently published Rural Observatory (contains statistics, indicators and analyses based on data from multiple sources and at the most appropriate territorial granularity), which could be used as a tool for future research projects funded by Horizon Europe.

The contribution of the SHERPA EU-level MAP has been developed based on oral and written comments from its members, each participating in a personal capacity as an individual expert.



6. Concluding remarks

The nine MAPs Position Papers on the social dimension of rural areas summarised in this synthesised Position Paper confirm the importance and urgency of shedding light on this topic, which until recently was mostly overshadowed in scientific and political debates by other, seemingly more "concrete" and relevant issues (agriculture, rural economy, innovations, environment) when talking about rural areas, and which was often taken for granted, self-determining and self-regulating. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, rural residents and their living conditions, needs and interests cannot and must not be ignored in any actions and measures to address current and future challenges of rural areas. Observation, monitoring and overview on the ground are approaches that provide validated evidence that should support and encourage the development of the right tools to help rural areas address their challenges and move forward.

The views of MAPs may be an incentive to gather such evidence and continue similar efforts. For example, among other initiatives for further research mentioned in the previous section, there is a need for a Europe-wide comparative study, similar to the ESPON 2013 EDORA project (Copus et al. 2011) and the Quality of Life in Urban and Rural Europe study (Eurofound 2014), to show who all lives in today's rural areas that are experiencing major demographic, social, and economic changes, what their socioeconomic position/status is, and how existing social structures and networks in rural areas are (not) functioning to the benefit of the entire population. Based on the work of the study and the discussions among the members of the MAPs, the situation of rural areas in terms of the social dimension has been roughly described for the time being:

- Rural areas in the EU have great potential and many advantages to become a home for an empowered and vibrant local communities. The many existing initiatives, especially at the local level, clearly demonstrate this. However, many rural areas, especially the more remote regions and those whose social composition is changing rapidly, are losing their sociability as interest in social ties wanes. The old, 'traditional' forms of community organisation and bonding are in decline, while new forms that could sustain sociability are not yet in place;
- Identified barriers to a good quality of life in many rural areas include low levels of people's participation in activities and projects, lack of volunteers and local leaders, low participation of local councils, insufficient capacity of administrative staff, and inadequate legislation, such as standardised criteria, that make it difficult for rural people to access subsidies and other public benefits;
- In many rural areas, segments of the population face social exclusion and poor quality of life, manifested in hidden poverty, gender inequality, domestic violence, mental health problems, a lack of information and direct support services, and a culture of shame and stigma. Tensions and conflicts over the use of rural space and intergenerational relations are also common stresses in the lives of many rural dwellers;
- The social (non) inclusion of immigrants is also a pressing problem or challenge in some rural areas. Their lack of knowledge of local culture and customs, as well as their low level of engagement with the local population, indicate that they are poorly integrated into rural communities. Some of the most problematic immigrant groups do not have legal residency status, but only access to jobs with low pay and poor working conditions.

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Annex 1 Examples of actions taken by local actors

A list of interventions and actions

MAP Belgium

On wellbeing and housing

- The **Schéma de développement du territoire (SDT)**, takes into account the emerging needs for rental and flexible housing, with the specific objective of meeting current and future needs for accessible housing adapted to socio-demographic, energy and climatic changes. The plan includes measures to change the design of housing and to support alternative and adaptable housing. [Link](#)
- The Walloon Government has introduced a tax advantage for mortgage loans called the "**Chèque Habitat**", targeting individuals according to their income and number of children. [Link](#)
- The "**acquisition premium**" is a financial aid granted under certain conditions to people who buy a home belonging to the public sector by mutual agreement or by public sale. [Link](#)
- Wallonia finances, via the Housing Fund, the **social housing agencies (AIS)** which manage rental properties reserved for households with modest or very modest incomes. The AIS play an important intermediary role between landlords and tenants. [Link](#)

On wellbeing and Mobility

- Many **alternative rural mobility initiatives** (abbreviated to IMRA) have been set up to complement public transport solutions. These initiatives offer services as varied as the provision of minibuses, scooter rental, access to driving licenses, transportation on demand, and carpooling. Most of these initiatives are targeted to a specific situation, community or category of people. [Link](#)

On welfare and social inclusion

- Wallonia has several instruments aimed at encouraging the creation of third places and places of conviviality, which are fundamental for social cohesion, especially in rural areas. In this context, the village houses, where they exist, represent a real example of a multifunctional place that creates links. In this respect, Wallonia already has more than a hundred village houses, built or developed within the framework of rural development operations by the regional rural development budget and communal funds. [Link](#)
- In the context of the Interreg program, France - Wallonia - Flanders program, makes these regions cooperate by erasing the border. Wallonia participates with the regions Hauts-de-France and Grand Est in France, and West and East Flanders in Belgium. 170 million euros from the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER) are allocated to the program to support projects around different themes, including social cohesion. [Link](#)

MAP Sofia, Bulgaria

Actions taken by local actors:

- Local government - Municipal fund to support local initiatives;
- NGOs like Big hearted people: help people in poverty by charity events;
- Yearly or biannual cleaning of the villages and help with maintaining of public property
- FB groups - many small villages now have FB groups to discuss problems or events that have to be taken under consideration in the villages.
- Association of Bulgarian Villages - ABV is the first non-governmental organization of its kind in Bulgaria, which for 14 years has represented the opportunities for the development of Bulgarian villages.
- MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELFARE has prepared a **STRATEGY FOR DECENTRALIZATION 2016 – 2025** with the aim of changes and prevention of aggravation of existing problems and reduction of administrative burden. **Healthcare and education, as key sectors in the social infrastructure, are one of the priority areas of the National Strategy for Regional Development (2012-2022).**
- Rural development program by EU. Measure 321 "Basic services for the economy and population of rural areas" during the period 2007-2014, the aim was to support investments in infrastructure for the development of services (cultural centers, theatres, libraries; sports centers, youth centers; training centers; kindergartens, crèches; day care centers), specialized transport services for the population in rural areas; training and services based on information technologies) for the rural population and economy in 178 rural municipalities.

- Rural development program by EU. Measure 321 "Basic services for the economy and population of rural areas" during the period 2007-2014, the aim was to support investments in infrastructure for the development of services (cultural centers, theatres, libraries; sports centers, youth centers; training centers; kindergartens, crèches; day care centers), specialized transport services for the population in rural areas; training and services based on information technologies) for the rural population and economy in 178 rural municipalities.
- Measure 322 "Renovation and Development of Villages" provided support for: investments in road infrastructure, water supply and sanitation, parks and green areas, and buildings.
- During the 2014-2021 programming period, Measure 7: "Basic services and rural renewal" aimed to stimulate growth and improve the environmental and socio-economic sustainability of rural areas through the development of infrastructure and basic local services in rural areas.

MAP Estonia

Examples of actions taken by local actors

- Open Farm Day: about 300 farms or rural businesses are open to visitors, [Link](#).
- A Day of Countryside Living: people can come and see how people live in the countryside, [Link](#).
- Opinion Festival: important problems of regional development and social dimensions of rural areas are often discussed. In 2022 for example there was a discussion about people leaving bigger cities and moving into the countryside, [Link](#).
- Exhibition "Entrepreneurial Rural Youth": 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.
- Vunki mano! – The Estonian Pilot of CoSIE project: 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, [Link](#).
- Mud Month Festival: during the festival different events from hiking and craft workshops to concerts, theatre and gourmet tours take place, [Link](#).
- Evil Weather Festival: the festival's aim is to initiate more new events in autumn, in order to bring up more interesting events and make the tourist season longer, [Link](#)

- Some Leader action groups are also very active themselves (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);
- The Onion Route in Tartu region (offers participation in various handicraft workshops and classes where one can learn to cook traditional food from locally sourced ingredients); [Link](#)
- Romantic Coastline in Pärnu region (Development project provides opportunities for locals to sell their products and brought life to the area); [Link](#)

MAP Galicia, Spain

Among the 166 respondents to the online survey, 63 of them identified initiatives and activities organized by local actors towards social revitalization. They cited 11 types of organizing entities and 13 types of activities, among them: popular festivals and dinners (25%), cultural activities (14%), walking trails or tourist tours (11%), sportive activities (11%), demonstrations, collaborative works around common lands, etc. Among organizing entities, they cited: neighbourhoods' associations (35%), cultural associations (20%), municipalities (15%), common land property owners (13%).

MAP identified several initiatives aimed at the provision of community social services (child and elderly care), the organization of cultural and leisure activities, job creation initiatives and social revitalization.

- CDR ANCARES (*): Social community services and social/cultural revitalization. Mainly private funding and public funding. Since 1986.
- CDR O VISO (*): Social community services and social/cultural revitalization. Attention to elderly people with common housing facilities, community restauration and local transport. Public and private funding. Since 1986. [Link](#)
- CDR PORTAS ABERTAS (*): Social services and social revitalization. Since 1990. [Link](#)
- TEITOS DE PIORNEDO: this is a women association of a historic village, Piornedo. They launched a crowdfunding project in order to recover the roofs of ancient constructions made in rye straw. For doing that they needed to plant rye again, recovering local knowledge. [Link](#)
- ALLARIZ MUNICIPALITY: social services addressed to elderly people and children, job creation initiatives and other revitalization initiatives. Public aids funding. [Link](#)

- **PORTA A PORTA:** Public service health delivered in a vehicle that visits each rural municipality in Galicia offering basic health services, like memory workshops or chiropodist to people aged more than 55 years old. Since 2022. [Link](#)
- **Employment workshops, financed by the European Social Fund.** These workshops, financed by the European Social Fund are aimed at several crafts, for instance, the rehabilitation of ancient constructions to use them for social meetings or other social uses like offering housing facilities. This initiative was highlighted by the MAP.
- **ASOCIACIÓN ANTONIO GANDOY:** This entity approaches educational services to children under three years old living in rural areas. At the same time, it is an initiative of self-employment. Private and public financing. It is the continuity of a previous experience, Preescolar na Casa, founded in 1977. [Link](#)
- **CENTRO OCUPACIONAL VILALBA:** Private-public funding for the inclusion of disabled people in this municipality. [Link](#)
- **ARCA DA NOE:** private initiative to develop a cultural agenda in a rural area (Vilar de Santos). In place for 8 years. [Link](#)
- **AMIPA:** Private initiative (disabled people families' association) with public funding for the inclusion of disabled people in Padrón (A Coruña). 15 years of experience. [Link](#)
- **SEMENTEIRA:** Private initiative (Catholic organization CARITAS) with the collaboration of public entities at different territorial levels which promotes the integration of social excluded families through different food-related activities in Ordes (A Coruña). [Link](#)

MAP Aragon, Spain

Examples of the cooperation projects:

- **Tribu rural:** to provide services to rural population (school transportation, school canteen, or English classes for adults and children) [Link](#)
- **Jóvenes dinamizadores:** to promote shared learning and seek common solutions to the specific needs of young people living in rural areas and [Link](#)
- **Concilia:** to enhance rural women inclusion. [Link](#)
- **Jovenes dinamizadores rurales:** several initiatives have been carried out under this project. Regarding social relationships, it is worthy to highlight the development of cooperative labs as spaces for socialization, training, exchange of ideas, and strengthening of the community. [Link](#)

Examples of interventions related to migrants' inclusion:

- the Immigration Law to facilitate the access to the labour market for foreigners in Spain, through the reduction of procedures and the creation of new channels to request employment permits.
- At regional level, the Aragonese Government designed the Comprehensive Plan for the Management of Cultural Diversity in Aragon, 2018-2021, though no specific mentions to migrant inclusion in rural areas are included in the plan – no specific mention of migrants
- On April 2022, the regional government issued a tender to promote activities, conducted by NGOs, that facilitate inclusion of vulnerable communities (ORDEN CDS/555/2022), such as personal (personal development family support, health support, training), cultural, residential and economic activities. – no specific mention of migrants
- The General Directorate of Cooperation for Development and Immigration, that belongs to the Department of Citizenship and Social Right of the Government of Aragón, launched in 2022 an awareness campaign on the rights of the temporary migrant workers.
- The government of Aragón is participating until 2023 in the European project MATILDE aimed at promoting migrants' inclusion in rural communities.
- The Prevention and Social Inclusion Services that belongs to the General Social Services of the Aragonese Government. These services are provided at local level by the social services centres of the councils. For example, the council of Valdejalón launched a campaign to promote the inclusion of temporary migrant workers.

MAP Vital Villages, the Netherlands

- **Social Agenda**, together with municipalities and social organisations the province is working on the social agenda for and with the inhabitants of Drenthe. The province is committed to projects that increase the **quality of life** in cities and villages, train experience experts on poverty and low literacy, Municipalities are responsible for the social tasks and want to take innovative projects further. [Link](#)
- **Region deal South East Drenthe**, the government and the region are jointly investing 40 million euros in action which involves province and six municipalities and residents, educational institutions, housing corporations and companies that are focused on living, working and well-being to create sufficient and suitable housing, job prospects and appropriate care. [Link](#)

- **LEADER:** The MAP area has a status of LEADER area, can benefit from this European programme, (LAG) is the driving force, a connector, a collaborator at the forefront on behalf of residents, entrepreneurs and municipalities. [Link](#)
- **Monitor of Broad Prosperity Drenthe,** it collates and makes a comparison between the regions of Drenthe and with the Netherlands as a whole in respect to material prosperity, well-being and housing. [Link](#)
- **Landschapsbeheer Drenthe support to citizens' initiatives,** Drenthe works together with the village, governments and other organizations - connecting residents with organizations and governments to realize the wishes of the habitants to renovate and protect the landscape. many initiatives have got off the ground with wonderful results. [Link](#)

MAP Bieszczady, Poland

- **Creating a place for integration,** raising funds for statutory activities, creating a play area for children "Switching" Bieszczady Initiatives Association / "Przełączenie" Stowarzyszenie Inicjatyw Bieszczadzkich [Link](#)
- **Social economy enterprise** - Bieszczad.Ski Wańkowa (ski resort) Need: combat unemployment, stop young residents fleeing, activate residents, support entrepreneurship [Link](#)
- the number of social economy enterprises is increasing in the MAP area. Recently one more was established in the gmina of Lutowiska: Bieszczady Sp. z o.o. It runs a school canteen in Lutowiska. It provides green area maintenance, cleaning and minor maintenance services. [Link](#)

Need: Increasing public participation

- Ustrzyki Citizens' Budget. [Link](#)

Need: Increase digital competence of seniors, remove barriers related to movement between villages of older people, maintain intergenerational ties, two-way knowledge transfer grandparents-grandchildren.

- **Local Action Group "Green Bieszczady"** – "CHANCE project - new opportunities for adults" of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2014-2020 [Link](#)

Need: increase public participation, integration of residents, professional activation

- **Thriving activities of rural housewives' circles.** In November 2018, the Act on Rural Housewives' Circles came into force in Poland and systemic support for the activities of KGWs from the Agency for Rural and Agricultural Restructuring emerged in the form of granting each entity registered in the KGW register an annual support, which in 2022 is between PLN 5,000 and PLN 7,000 (depending on the number of members). Read more: [Link](#)

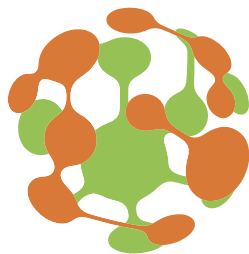
MAP Southwest Alentejo, Portugal

There are already numerous public interventions related to the Social Dimension in the MAP territory, among which we can highlight the following:

- Municipal Plan for the Integration of Migrants ([Link](#))
- Strategic Plan for Cohesion and Inclusion of Migrants in Odemira ([Link](#))
- Intercultural Municipal Mediators Project ([Link](#))
- Portuguese Language Learning ([Link](#)) (in the territory, the most visible example is developed by Maravilha Farms in partnership with the São Teotónio Group of Schools)
- Collective labour agreement between AHSA — Association of Horticulturists, Fruticulturists and Floriculturists of the Municipalities of Odemira and Aljezur e o SETAAB - National Union of Workers in Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, Tourism, Food Industry, Beverages and Related Fields ([Link](#))
- Removable Temporary Accommodation Facilities (IATA), permitted in the territory to help address the housing shortage ([Link](#))

MAP Svarun, Slovenia

- The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia: Women – the pillar of health (including men's) Organization of training and lectures on health and interpersonal relationships, including prostate cancer [Link](#)
- The Association of Slovenian Rural Youth: POWERlessness of Rural Areas Workshops to raise awareness of the importance of mental health, and empower stakeholders to recognize mental distress and deal with it [Link](#)
- Caritas Slovenia: MIND – Migrations. Connectedness. Development. Raising awareness of development issues and their impact on the phenomenon of migration. [Link](#)
- Slovenian Rural Development Network Adults above 50 as an instrument for rural development. Participation in the project and organization of a seminar in Slovenia on the topic of adult education with the aim of better utilization of the social capital of the elderly in rural area [Link](#)



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