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Interfaces

MAP Position Paper



SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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1. Introduction

This MAP Position Paper builds on the information provided in the [SHERPA Discussion Paper on the social dimension](#). Within SHERPA, the social dimension specifically refers to people-to-people relations and encompasses a wide range of topics including: 1) well-being and social relations in rural areas; 2) the provision of public assets and social networks; 3) reducing the rural-urban fission by promoting cultural activities; and 4) the social inclusion of migrant populations in rural areas.

In this context, the MAP Wallonia has focused on well-being in Wallonian rural areas, and in particular its link with housing, past and present infrastructures, mobility and social inclusion. Firstly, the paper provides a general description of the current situation, followed by the identification of the current needs as well as the levers of existing and future actions. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for future rural policies in the areas pertinent to the paper.

This work was conducted in collaboration with the members of MAP Wallonia and builds on two participatory workshops organised with its members during the course of the project.

2. Current context

2.1. Structures of the present and legacy of the past

Wallonia, a dense but very dispersed territory

The Wallonia region covers an area of 16 906 km², or 55.1 % of Belgian territory. The Walloon territory comprises 59% of rural areas, 28.9% of so-called intermediate area, and 12.1% of urban areas. According to the typology established by the European Commission on the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) of municipalities, more than half of the Walloon municipalities (151 out of 262) are classified as rural.

Despite the fact that the Walloon territory has a very dense network of towns and villages, Wallonia is characterised by a highly dispersed pattern of settlements and services. Thus, differences in term of urbanisation rates arise between the northern and southern parts of Wallonia, the latter showing a much lower urbanisation rate. The province of Luxembourg is a good example that illustrates this trend, as it has a density of 64 habitants/Km² (for an average of 375 habitants/Km² for the country).

A publication by the Permanent Conference on Territorial Development (CPDT) refers to concepts such as "*a city diluted in the countryside*", "*peri-urbanisation*" and "*rurbanisation*". The term '*scattered city*', which Bénédicte Grosjean uses in his work, is also applicable in the context of Wallonia. In this sense, rural areas cannot be defined as in opposition to urban areas. As a result, there are numerous areas that are not classified as either rural or urban, but rather part of peri- or sub-urban territory (defined above as 'intermediate' areas). As a relevant indicator of this phenomenon, the Walloon road network is about four times denser than the average European road network.

Historically, economic activities as well as targeted policies have been determining factors in shaping this so called 'scattered city'. In this context, the subjects covered in this document, such as mobility, housing, and infrastructures, shall be analysed through a historical "lens". More specifically, the dispersal of Belgian urbanization is largely due to three laws that were introduced in Belgium in the second half of the 19th century. Through the first law, adopted in **1834**, the Belgian State committed to create its own rail-based network. As a result, in 1835, the first railway on the European continent, connecting Brussels and Mechelen, was inaugurated. To date, the Walloon railway network has more than 1 800 km of tracks and it is an excellent example of a physical network that has played a pivotal role in the structuring of the territory and facilitating the mobility of workers, who were therefore not obliged to move to the major urban centres to find employment. The second law, introduced in **1869**, concerned worker travel subscriptions for said railway network, offering favourable deals on commuting (up to 100 kilometres). The National Railway Society, created in 1884, completed the network with a set of local railway lines, which by the beginning of the 20th century had grown to 4 000km of tracks, including 1 500km of electrified lines served by fast, comfortable vehicles. The third law of **1889**, also known as the 'worker-owner' law, aimed at multiplying the number of workers' dwellings and facilitating their ownership by workers.

Combined, these political-economic phenomena have profoundly influenced the Walloon reality, resulting in a scarcely inhabited, hybrid area, yet organised by a vast infrastructure network and a large number of "nodes", defined by the presence of villages and towns of different sizes and types. The legacy of those historical developments has heavily influenced aspects such as mobility and housing in Wallonia, which, in turn, have an impact on the social dimension of local communities, as discussed later in this document.

2.2. Well-being and habitat

The definition of well-being is, by its very nature, multidimensional and encompasses numerous factors. Even limiting the scope of the definition to its 'social' aspects, the concept of well-being still appears as closely linked to other dimensions (e.g. occupational, environmental, physical, etc.). Therefore, measuring well-being is an extremely difficult exercise, posing its limitations. Despite the challenges arising when attempting to define and measure this concept, the Walloon Institute of Evaluation, Foresight and Statistics (IWEPS) has developed an index of well-being conditions (ICBE) which represents a first step towards the measurement of well-being in Wallonia. This index takes into account eight criteria, i.e. livelihoods, living (physical) environment, institutional relations, personal relationships, family relations, social networks, personal balances, perceived feeling of well-being, and societal engagement. In future phases of this challenging exercises, the IWEPS intends to extend the measure of well-being to factors that are rarely taken into account in previous exercises, with the aim of developing a "true" and comprehensive Well-being Index (IBE).

Beyond the challenges in isolating the various components of this concept, the definition of the 'subject' (i.e. the well-being of *who?*) is key to really grasp this concept, it is often a result of some sort of comparison with other individuals of a system. In addition, it is a concept that evolves over time, thus being contingent at a specific historical moment. Nowadays, the notion of well-being echoes widely in different spheres of social life, also stemming from a widely spread attention to the quality of life and concept of "care".

"Well-being is plural"

Quote from MAP member

Discussions within the MAP confirmed that the level of well-being of rural communities in Wallonia can be indeed linked to several factors, including access to and quality of housing. As already mentioned, national policies encouraging property have been implemented in Belgium since the creation of the Belgian state in 1830, thus leading to a high rate of homeowners and a shortage of rental accommodation. Beyond the sole access to property, it is worth mentioning that not all homeowners are in an ideal situation, as the ageing of the housing stock reflects a serious lack of equipment, particularly in Central Wallonia, a region of old industrialisation characterised by a rather stagnant housing market.

A significant increase in the construction of apartments in Wallonia has been observed since the 2000s, in response to new housing models, which includes more flexible housing solutions. The constructions of apartments in rural areas is supported by a strong demand in this type of accommodation. This which is linked, in turn, to factors such as the ageing of the population, migratory flows, a widespread tendency to downsize households, and the need to develop the rental housing stock. By 2050, an additional 350,000 households are expected in the Walloon region. Moreover, emerging dynamics linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and remote working could further highlight problems related to the lack of rental accommodations. In fact, without the obligation to commute daily between their home and their place of work, an increasing number of people coming from urban areas could move to peripheral and rural areas, leading to an increase in the number of 'neo-rurals' (i.e. people living in rural areas coming from the city) and thus exacerbating rental tensions between newcomers and 'historic' residents.

Furthermore, the Walloon Region is currently facing a shortage of social housing in rural areas, the latter being a key factor in ensuring the well-being of the most vulnerable section of the population. Whilst Walloon legislation imposes a target of 10 % public housing per municipality, this objective is achieved only by about 20 rural or semi-rural municipalities, mainly in the province of Hainaut or Liège. In fact, historically, social housing has developed in or near such industrial areas (Haine-Sambre-Meuse-Vesdre). However, progresses in terms of availability are being made in rural municipalities with low availability of social housing, whilst municipalities with sufficient housing sometimes see their population decline due to renovations, demolitions, and sales which are not compensated by new constructions.

2.3. Well-being and territory, landscape and environment

Strategies to address this housing shortage include from one hand the construction of new buildings, or, on the other hand, upgrading existing ones (insulation, energy class, etc.). This results in a tension between the artificialisation of soils (also known as *soil sealing*), which is linked to a real need for new housing solutions, and the achievement of climate and environmental objectives. Notably, according to a study carried out by the Rural Analysis and Prospective Unit, the built-up area reserved for housing increased by more than 90% in 10% of municipalities in the Walloon Region.

In this context, the '*Stop Concrete*' movement takes shape, which favours actions aimed at renovating and adapting existing buildings, rather than demolishing and building new ones. Although this movement is not explicitly mentioned in the Regional Policy Declaration for Wallonia 2019-2024, the latter mentions several objectives related to '*Stop Concrete*', such as '*Reduce consumption of non-artificialised land by 2025, preserve as much as possible agricultural land, maintain, reuse or renovate existing buildings*'. The fight against urban sprawl and the rational use of land and resources are also mentioned among the priorities of the Wallonia Territorial Development Code.

However, land planning tools such as the sector plan and the land use plan still allow significant urbanisation rates, which is not necessarily in line with the above-mentioned regional priorities and with the need to secure certain parts of the territory subject to flood hazard, as well as with the European directives aiming at the 2050 carbon neutrality goal. Adapting the land planning strategy to such goals would require, however, reflection on how to ensure proper financial compensation to land owners, in the event that they could no longer realise the expected capital gain on the sale of their land.

2.4. Well-being and mobility

Closely linked to housing issues, the MAP Wallonia also identifies mobility as a key element in assessing the well-being of rural Walloon communities. In fact, due to the scattered nature of livelihoods and services that characterises Walloon rural areas, ensuring appropriate public transport appears particularly challenging, as compared to urban areas. This mainly affects non-motorised groups, i.e. the elderly, individuals who are experiencing social and economic insecurity, children and teenagers, and people with reduced mobility, thus posing a real threat to the well-being of these already vulnerable segments of the population. Many initiatives have been implemented on this regard, as mentioned in the Wallonia Policy Declaration for the period 2019-2024. The ultimate goal of those initiatives is to facilitate equal access to services, employment and leisure, while ensuring road safety and the sharing of public spaces. However, the effectiveness of these instruments remains to be assessed.

A thematic dossier published by the Network of Mobility Advisors also identifies other issues that need to be addressed as part of a rural mobility strategy. One of the challenges is to define a proper "hierarchisation" of the mobility network, in order to be able to define the role of each type of road and mobility service.

Emerging phenomena, such as teleworking, a rising interest for active and 'multimodal' mobility, and shifts in energy prices, are causing shifts in mobility needs. As car usage is significantly higher in Wallonia compared to the other Belgian regions (Flanders and Brussels-Capital Region), Wallonia has committed, through the Wallonia Policy Declaration, to provide significant support "slow" and active mobility (i.e. walking, cycling, soft micromobility, etc.) and to promote the development of suitable infrastructures for the latter. A remarkable example on this regard in Wallonia is the RAVeL, the Autonomous Network of Slow Ways, which was created in 1995 by the Walloon Region with the aim of developing a network for the most vulnerable users, including pedestrians, cyclists, riders or people with reduced mobility, while respecting the environment. Since its inception, the RAVeL has steadily grown and accounts now for more than 1 400 km of roads reserved for non-motorised users. With respect to multimodal transport, a report by the Federal Public Service shows that only 2% of journeys in Belgium involve the use of more than one means of transport. Although this figure refers to the whole of Belgium, this suggests that there is room for improvement for the whole country, thus including for Wallonia. In this context, new developments in

mobility such as MaaS (*'Mobility as a Service'* or 'mobility as a service') could change travel habits and promote intermodality. In particular, the MaaS allows the combination of public transport, shared car and bike, taxi rides, etc., via a single mobility platform. Notably, at the level of the Walloon Region, MaaS is mentioned in the Regional Mobility Strategy adopted in May 2019.

2.5. Well-being and social inclusion

Rural areas of Wallonia are affected by intense and numerous flows of people, triggering reflections on the concept of identity, belonging, and integration into the local social fabric. As mentioned above, the phenomenon of "*Newcomers/neo-rurals*" can lead to rental tensions, but also to migration *among* rural areas. Interestingly, in the case of Wallonia, new inhabitants of a village often come from nearby localities.

A great diversity of profiles is established in rural Wallonia. Farmers, craftsmen, neo-rurals, tourists, secondary residents, employees or businesses, all willing to occupy the rural area and to project different uses and visions. Interestingly, a study on relations between farmers and society, commissioned in 2009 by the Walloon Minister for Agriculture and Rurality, reveals that the distinction between farmers and the "rest of society" is irrelevant from the point of view of sociological analysis. The survey concluded that, although some difficulties characterise relations between farmers and non-farmers in rural areas, this distinction is of little relevance to analysing Walloon village life.

In order to better understand the concepts and issues related to relations between rural and neo-rurals, a study on the notions of social relations and proximity was carried out on the Walloon municipalities of Assesse and Gesves, two municipalities who chose to reflect on 'improving relations between rural and neo-rurals' as a theme for their LAG activities. Since the 1990s, these municipalities have seen a significant increase in their population due to the arrival of new inhabitants mainly from the urban areas of Namur. The survey nuances the relevance of the distinction made between rural and neo-rurals, pointing out that the type of relationships between the inhabitants does *not* depend on the urban or rural origin of the inhabitants, but are rather depending on the length of the settling time. However, this diversity does not prevent the new inhabitants, coming from the city or the countryside, to meet the original inhabitants, despite the fact that their expectations in relation to the rural environment may diverge. In that sense, rural identity is often claimed in order to assert its own vision of the rural environment.

2.6. Common assets, natural resources and risk management

The MAP has also discussed about the shared management of common assets and resources, especially from the angle of social relations. In this context, the interrelationship between public authorities, companies (including the interesting case of social enterprises) and civil society is of high relevance for the Walloon context. As a matter of fact, Wallonia possesses a dense network of associations and social enterprises (e.g. ASBL) that can be activated, including for the joint management of risks and natural resources. In fact, the Walloon territory comprises a significant number of volunteers and mutual-help and solidarity associations. According to a survey conducted by the King Baudouin Foundation, at least 195 560 people are involved in volunteering activities in Wallonia, which represents 8% of the population. Alongside with 'individual' volunteers and networks established by the latter, social enterprises can play an important role in the joint management of risks and natural resources. The idea behind social enterprise is the 'articulation between a project of economical nature and the achievement of societal objectives within the same organization'. More precisely, according to the Social Enterprises Barometer in Belgium, a social enterprise primarily pursues a social mission, and doesn't consider maximizing shareholders profits as the foremost priority. These companies often experiment with original governance models, based on the principle of economic democracy and a participative and inclusive dynamic. Although they are often considered as social activities that fall outside the 'real economy', this type of companies brings forward a new entrepreneurial dynamic, together with the ability to mobilize a wide range of resources (collaborative economy, circular economy, corporate democracy, etc.), which is of high relevance when considering common management of resources and risks, as analysed in the following sections.

This capacity for innovation becomes particularly necessary in times of crisis, such as the crisis experienced by Wallonia in 2021 due to the floods that hit 209 municipalities out of 262, leaving significant damage to the territory. Beyond the measures taken by the government and the services of the Walloon Region to alleviate the impacts and help the victims, numerous volunteer support platforms have been set up to mobilize citizens willing to help the affected municipalities. Contributing to this momentum of national solidarity, social economy actors and social enterprises also participated through donations of items or sale of second-hand equipment at a reduced price. The floods of 2021 therefore revealed the dynamism and potential of Walloon associations and networks of volunteers.

3. Position of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform

3.1. Identified needs

For each of the six previously identified themes, MAP participants identified the main needs/challenges associated with them.

3.1.1. Structures of the present and legacy of the past

The needs identified relate to the availability of data, including historical data series, particularly when it comes to data related to mobility and transport networks, considered as a fundamental 'driver' of connectivity between rural areas.

In relation to the **availability of data**, although some databases have been developed by the Rural Analysis and Prospective Unit (CAPRU) and the work of the CPDT, the MAP stressed the need to improve the availability, quality, granularity and accessibility of data for Wallonia, for example by providing data on the topic of health, and statistics in cartographic form. The MAP also calls for deepening of the knowledge of the **environmental and political history of Wallonia**, which would make it possible to read through the structures of the present via a historical perspective.

3.1.2. Social well-being: definition and links to other dimensions of well-being

As a fundamental prerequisite for the well-being of local communities, the MAP stressed the importance of improving **the availability of services** in rural areas seen in a systemic approach (school, post, health, conviviality places, shops), while still considering that the availability of services is conditioned to the actual presence of potential clientele necessary to ensure their viability. In this respect, the scattered nature of the livelihoods that characterises Wallonia remains an important aspect to consider when planning the installation of new services.

In addition, the MAP also notes the need to increase opportunities in rural areas for participation in social life, including employment opportunities, volunteering activities, and opportunities for emancipation and personal development.

3.1.3. Well-being and habitat

Several needs related to **housing** emerged during the MAP discussion, starting from the need to improve access to housing, which can be achieved by diversifying the types of housing solution offered. Moreover, in line with the demographic changes occurring in rural areas of Wallonia, new criteria must be taken into account in order to 'redefine' the concept of livelihood, i.e. reducing dependence on cars, quality of public spaces, proximity to amenities, etc. In this context, the need to move from the mere concept of housing to that of 'habitat' arises, which also integrates environment around the livelihood.

With respect to the need to increase the availability of housing, MAP also mentioned the relevance of harmonising **building renovation programmes** for rural buildings.

3.1.4. Well-being and mobility

With respect to **mobility and infrastructures**, MAP members expressed the need to develop and strengthen mobility networks in rural areas, with particular attention to ecological and shared solutions. The MAP thus stressed that transport networks should be able to effectively link villages and livelihoods, yet taking into account the relationship between population density and the viability of services, following the idea of different areas of influence, i.e. "zones" dedicated to health, education and habitat (concept of 'basin of life'). The MAP has thus identified the need for a more rational management of mobility, taking into account the different users.

Examples of mobility solutions mentioned in the MAP include pedestrian cycling networks, e.g. RAVel, multimodal transport (subject to the availability of multimodal stations) and railways.

3.1.5. Well-being and social inclusion

As a lead-up to the discussion on well-being and inclusion (as well as social cohesion), the MAP recalled that a better availability of socio-demographic data will enable **to better characterise the Walloon population**, including so-called 'ghost' populations and those living in secondary residences. As such, this will counter the risk of deterritorialization.

In relation to the housing issues mentioned in the previous section, the MAP considers it essential to establish mechanisms for anticipating **tensions among different users over the availability of housing** between, in particular between local residents, tourists, farmers, foresters, and people having secondary residencies.

Finally, strengthening the **event and festive dimension** as well as promoting the creation **of shared facilities and meeting places** were mentioned as important drivers for promoting social inclusion in Walloon rural areas.

3.1.6. Common assets, natural resources and risk management

For this theme, the MAP identified the need to raise awareness among local residents about the risks and opportunities stemming from natural resources, including those related to setting up sustainable energy and agricultural supply chains. The aim would be to promote, through education, the region's patrimony, including natural, cultural, gastronomic and know-how heritage. The creation of new professions, such as "heritage agents", could also help to meet this need.

The MAP also mentioned the need to stimulate and encourage the activities of civil society and businesses in terms of management of risk and resources, for example by setting up structures, equipment and facilities for collective practices. In turn, these initiatives can make a positive contribution to strengthening social links, which is particularly relevant for the subject of social well-being. In this context, one strategy could be to rethink the peripheries of villages, towns and cities (i.e. mirroring structures used in the past, such as crop gardens around villages) as a support for the shared handling of resources and to meet contemporary challenges (water management, renewable energies, renewed food self-sufficiency, recreation, landscape values, etc.). At the same time, such strategies would help curbing the artificialization of the land (see reference to the movement 'stop concrete' above).

Finally, as part of a rational land management, and linked to the topic of housing covered above, the distribution of land for buildings and agriculture uses needs to be better balanced, as highlighted by MAPs, for example through instruments such as the "community land trusts".

3.2. Existing interventions and actions

Since 1991, Wallonia has adopted a local rural development policy in the form of 'Rural Development Operations'. A rural development operation consists of a coordinated set of development measures carried out in rural areas at municipality scale, with the aim of revitalising and restoring municipalities, whilst respecting their own characteristics and improving the living conditions of their inhabitants from an economic, social and cultural point of view. The figure below shows Walloon municipalities where a communal rural development programme (PCDR, in French) has been put in place.

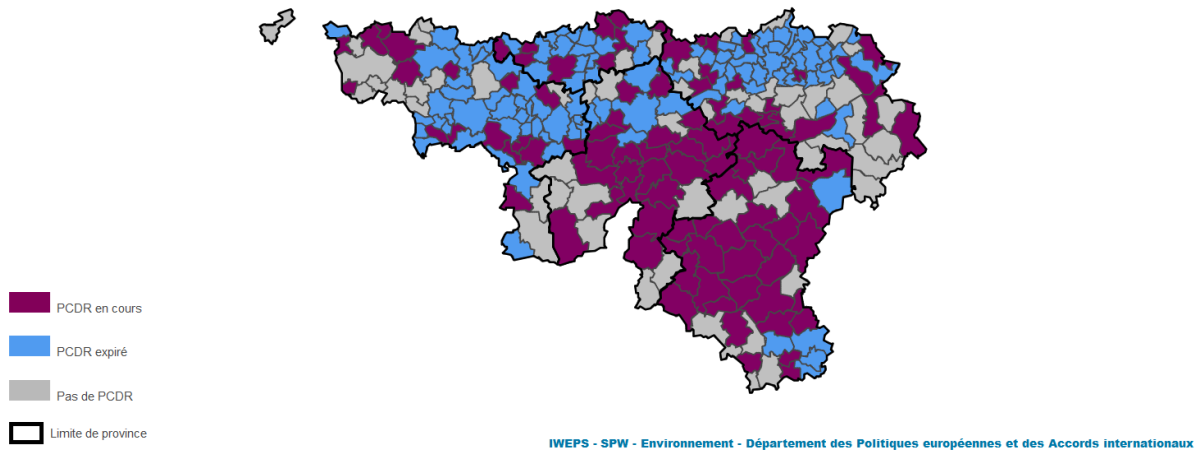


Figure 1 Walloon municipalities with a municipal rural development programme valid on 1 January 2019

Certain objectives of these programmes are of particular relevance to the issues addressed in this Paper, such as:

- The creation of public spaces, meeting facilities in villages and other places dedicated to social gatherings, shared events and meetings;
- The protection, improvement and enhancement of the environment, both in terms of natural heritage but also urban areas;
- The development and creation of roads and transport facilities of interest for the municipality.

This policy is perfectly complementary to the RDP measure M19 — Support for Local Leader Development (CLLD – Community led local development), which constitutes an innovative approach of supra-communal partnership and is of crucial importance for the social dimension of rural areas in Wallonia.

A cross-cutting instrument setting out the orientations of the various policy areas in Wallonia is the 'Regional Policy Declaration for Wallonia 2019-2024', which defines guidelines for all actions at regional level.

3.2.1. Well-being and habitat

Wallonia has several policies and instruments aimed at addressing housing-related needs. Firstly, the Territorial Development Scheme (SDT) explicitly takes into account the emerging needs for rental and flexible housing solutions, also in the light of socio-demographic, energetic and climatic changes. The scheme therefore entails measures aimed at changing housing design and supporting alternative and adaptable habitats.

Several housing subsidies and bonuses are available to the most vulnerable segments of the Walloon population. Since 2016, the Walloon Government has introduced a mortgage credit tax advantage known as the Habitat Cheque, targeting individuals based on their income and number of children. Additionally, the

'acquisition premium' consists of financial assistance granted under certain conditions to individuals purchasing a property on mutual agreement or dwellings belonging to the public sector sold through public sale. The latter are households sold by bodies such as a social housing company, a municipality, or any other public body and bearing a housing commitment for a minimum period of 10 years.

In addition, Wallonia finances, through its Housing Fund, social real estate agencies (AIS) which manage rental real estate reserved for households with modest or even very modest incomes. To this end, AIS act as an important intermediary between landlords and tenants. Moreover, still on the topic of rental housing, moving and rent allowances (ADeL) are financial aids aimed at renting a dwelling under certain conditions, for example in the case of evacuation of a dwelling recognised as uninhabitable, overcrowded or in case of disability of the tenant. The Walloon region grants further subsidies to households, owners or tenants in precarious conditions, e.g. those whose dwelling is located in specific areas indicated in the Habitat Permanent Plan, including the so-called 'light' dwellings such as chalets, caravans and mobile homes, and which require improvement work.

Finally, Walloon legislation imposes, through the Housing Code, a target of 10% of public housing per municipality.

3.2.2. Well-being and Mobility

Many alternative rural mobility initiatives (in short IMRA) are implemented in Wallonia in addition to public transport solutions, including a wide range of transport services such as scooter rental, carpooling. These initiatives mostly target at a particular municipality or specific public. In this regard, the TEC (the public transport operator of Wallonia) has implemented various services complementary to regular routes in collaboration with the municipalities, including the "Proxibus" — an on-demand mobility solution specifically adapted to rural areas. Currently, several Walloon municipalities have this service. Furthermore, the TEC group is a partner of the Belgian car-pool company 'Cambio', which allows for an efficient extension of public transport.

Round tables bringing together the actors of these alternative rural mobility initiatives (IMRAs) are regularly organised by the Minister of Mobility in order to better coordinate, optimise and improve transport services for the population. In particular, these coordination activities are implemented at both regional and local level.

In addition, some mobility initiatives are carried out under the Social Cohesion Plans. Examples of these initiatives are the setting up of 'social taxis' in the municipalities of Châtelet and Hannut and the organisation of bicycle workshops in Ottignies-Louvain-La Neuve.

At the level of active mobility, Wallonia also displays a policy to actively support the use of bicycles (WACY, cycling Wallonia), which includes the Wallonia Cycling Investment Plan 2020-2021 (PIWACY 20-21) aimed at subsidising cycling infrastructure. As an illustration, the City of Liège recently presented new bike parking projects, which will be funded under the PiWaCy regional plan.

Since 2014, through the Regional Policy Declaration, Wallonia has been committed to systematically taking active mobility into account in road and public space developments. That ambition was materialised by a decree which aims at implementing the systematic consideration of bicycle infrastructures when developing, repairing or maintaining roads or public spaces.

Finally, improving mobility constitutes one of the objectives of the multi-communal development scheme, a rather specific instrument of Wallonia administrative reality which covers the contiguous territories of two or more municipalities.

3.2.3. Well-being and social inclusion

Wallonia has several instruments aimed at promoting the creation of common venues and convivial places, which are fundamental for social cohesion, especially in rural areas. In this context, the so-called village houses (specific type of infrastructure where community events and activities take place), where they exist, represent a real example of a multifunctional place, prone to the promotion of interconnections.

In this regard, Wallonia already has more than a hundred village houses, newly constructed or built as part of rural development operations by the regional rural development budget as well as through municipal funds.

Specifically, the Common Rural Development Programme (CPDR), in consultation with the Local Rural Development Commission (CLDR), is implementing a series of coordinated actions culminating in a call for projects (of 10 years) aimed at improving services through the deployment of such common venues and the strengthening of multi-service facilities. Several projects have already been selected in this context, including the development of a convivial and meeting space and the renovation of recreational facilities in the villages in the Municipality of Hamois. Interestingly, these projects stem from public consultations.

From a social cohesion perspective, the Interreg France — Wallonia — Vlaanderen programme is of significant relevance for the cooperation with cross-border regions. Wallonia participates with the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est regions in France and West and Eastern Flanders in Belgium. EUR 170 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is allocated to the programme to support projects related to different themes, including **social cohesion** of the cross-border municipalities.

3.3. Recommendations of the MAP

Maintaining the quality of statistic and data relevant to rural areas of Wallonia and ensuring their constant updating.

Although socio-demographic datasets have already been developed and published in Wallonia, the MAP stressed the need to continue to improve the availability but also the quality, granularity and accessibility of data available for rural Wallonia. Specifically, the granularity of the databases shall be adapted to the relevant scale, according to the different areas of influence, i.e. places dedicated to health, education, habitat etc., and through infra-communal data. This will allow data to be oriented according to the political will and needs of the different users (researchers, administration, etc.). Alongside to the regular update of the data, the MAP also recommends the development of new indicators, in order to be able to reflect on new phenomena, such as the effect of teleworking on mobility, employment and housing, as well as new trends related to the 'neo-rural' population and their contribution to the socio-demo-economic fabric. In fact, as the Walloon reality is changing rapidly, statistical data shall rapidly capture these emerging changes. These new indicators will also allow to better understand the evolution and determining factors of well-being, as well as their interconnection. In addition, socio-demographic data at more granular level will allow to better characterise the Walloon population, including the so-called 'ghost' populations and those living in secondary residences.

Encouraging the development of innovative mobility networks in rural areas, while creating the structural conditions for their economic viability.

The MAP recommends continuing the current efforts towards virtuous mobility initiatives (see IMRA), with particular attention to ecological and shared solutions that see an interaction between several actors, such as social and shared transport.

Furthermore, the MAP also recommends the re-boost the already existing railway network, which has been greatly replaced by car mobility, but which hasn't completely disappeared. Several abandoned railway

infrastructures still exist and represent an interesting potential for incrementing railway mobility for the wider public.

However, the economic viability of public transit infrastructure closely depends on the level of dispersal of populations and services. In fact, transport networks should be able to effectively connect different areas of influence. This being the case, the fighting against scattered livelihoods and services remains a fundamental recommendation of the MAP to ensure that future policies in rural areas can provide viable services, including for transport.

The multitude of existing nodes and urban units of different sizes - often under-equipped, poorly connected and fragmented - should work in a complementary manner by sharpening programmes, facilities, etc. Supported by a strengthened and more dense network of the public transport and active mobility, these units could form new "constellations", complementary and mutually supportive, capable of working together and capitalising on their own internal resources (landscape, social, economic, etc.).

At the level of active mobility, the MAP recommends continuing with the systematic application of the legal instruments which prescribes the integration of cycle paths during road network renovations and to ensure their safety (e.g. lighting, fitting-out, quality of road surfaces, etc.). In addition, in order to achieve more rational mobility plans, the MAP recommends applying the notion of a "hierarchical networks" in order to be able to define the role of each roadway in the wider transport system.

Also relevant to the theme of the social inclusion of vulnerable populations, the MAP also recommend to address the development of targeted mobility aid for job seekers, preferably through active mobility.

Facilitating access to housing through targeted instruments.

There are two types of housing assistance: dwelling subsidies, which help to encourage the construction of new housing or its rehabilitation, and subsidies to individuals, which assist households in the coverage of their housing costs. **In order to facilitate access to housing, the MAP recommends focusing on individual subsidies and rehabilitation of existing housing.** On this purpose, the MAP has identified several levers of action:

- **The establishment of an incentive policy for the rental of private property, in particular by promoting grouped housing and new forms of cohabitation such as the 'Kanguru habitat'.** In the absence of a regulatory framework, there are today many legal (especially fiscal) and administrative constraints that prevent the development of such systems on a larger scale.
- The MAP recommends helping social housing companies and social real estate agencies to **revitalise urban centres by subsidising the acquisition of housing for renovation or rehabilitation.** Moreover, public policies should focus on diversification of households supply contributing to enlarge the offer in terms of housing size, type, and occupancy status.
- **The MAP recommends the generalisation of formulas dissociating land rights and use, such as long-term lease or land rights** to allow public operators to keep control of the land they own while increasing the supply of housing.

According to the MAP, housing must also be adapted to the challenges of today's world, such as:

- Increased spread of teleworking
- Reduced mobility;
- Dispersal of housing;
- Increased demand for housing in rural areas;
- Significant secondary energy costs (heating, etc.);
- Multiplicity of habitat functions.

With respect to the emerging trends of "light housing", **the MAP recommends updating the urbanisation regulation for light habitat**, while encouraging coordinated approaches through

urbanisation permits, communal or even multi-communal development schemes. This would allow for better management and integration of these dwellings on a larger scale rather than on an individual case one.

The MAP recommends further reflection on the possible adoption of the BIMBY concept (“build in my backyard”) in Wallonia, which could limit the urban sprawl and the artificialisation (cf ‘Stop Concrete’) of the territory by exploiting already existing buildings. However, to avoid the risk of chaotic and uncontrolled urbanisation, this approach should be encouraged and developed in certain residential neighbourhoods characterised by low density and discontinuous and/or semi-continuous buildings, where higher urbanisation would be acceptable. As such, the objective would be to densify by “filling the gaps” between houses and to avoid urbanisation in the second zone.

Related to the need to increase housing availability, MAP recommends **harmonising building renovation programmes within rural areas** in order to raise awareness of the rural heritage, its valorisation and facilitate financial access — without evicting local populations at the same time. In this regard, a revision of the sector plan is desirable, for example, drawing on the example of Switzerland, which through the Land Use Planning Act (L.A.T) has shown that it is possible to limit building rights in time (about 15 years).

Developing a regional long-term vision for heritage management.

The MAP advocates for the implementation of a regional long-term vision for heritage management which will allow to highlight the local heritage in terms of buildings, natural, landscape, cultural, gastronomic and know-how. This shall be achieved through education activities and through the creation of new profiles, such as ‘the heritage agents’, which will facilitate the management of heritage on a regional scale.

Finally, the MAP recommends more coherence and synergy between the different structural funding instruments, favouring, in the first place, long-term structural financing as opposed to short-term calls for projects. In turn, this will help to avoid the proliferation of individual actions that do not obey a systemic logic and to better ensure a rather long-term vision at the regional level.

Promoting the development of social links and “collective well-living’ and stimulating the shared management of resource civil society and businesses.

The MAP recommends promoting the creation of **shared facilities** and **meeting venues** which can represent powerful flywheels of social inclusion in Walloon rural areas. By doing so, the initiatives taking place in these places would contribute to federate and create new social networks.

Building on the flourishing network of volunteer and NGOs active in Wallonia, the MAP also recommends stimulating and encouraging efforts of civil society as well as businesses in managing the risks and opportunities stemming from natural resources. Moreover, such initiatives can contribute positively to social bonding, which is particularly important for the topic of social well-being. In this context, a strategy could be to rethink the periphery of villages, towns and cities (for example mirroring the crops gardens around villages) as a support for handling common resources and as a tool to meet modern challenges such as water management, renewable energies, renewed food autonomy, recreation, landscape values, etc.), hindering at the same time the artificialisation of the territory.

Conclusions

This document presents the position of the Wallonia MAP on the social dimension of rural areas. In particular, topics such as well-being (with its multiple facets), social inclusion and the link between social relations and joint risk management were discussed.

Among the components of well-being, housing and mobility are seen as essential aspects that must be addressed through a historical prism, in order to link its origin to the current function. The availability (and quality) of housing appears to be a fundamental challenge for rural Walloon areas, particularly as a result of new emerging needs such as teleworking. In fact, although the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased demand for housing in rural areas, the supply of rental, shared and 'flexible' housing does not meet this demand. The roots of this widespread housing problem in Wallonia are also found in the choices and strategies historically put in place by policy makers, who encouraged people to buy property rather than rent. Strategies to address this housing shortage include building *ex-novo* buildings and upgrading existing ones. There is thus a tension between artificialisation of soils (linked to a real need for new housing) and climate and environmental objectives.

The theme of mobility is closely linked to the availability of housing. In this context, the Wallonia rail network ("railway network") was mentioned as an example of public infrastructure, which played a key role in the development of rural areas. Nevertheless, there is a clear need to develop new types of green, public and shared mobility solutions, as well as to make better use of existing solutions.

In relation to the links between well-being and social inclusion, there is a great diversity of profiles in rural Wallonia. Farmers, craftsmen, neo-rurals, tourists, secondary residents, employees or companies all want to occupy the rural area and project different uses and representations. Studies in rural villages in Wallonia show that this diversity does not prevent new and old inhabitants from meeting, although their expectations in relation to the rural environment may diverge.

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Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP

Establishment of the multi-actor platform

The Belgium MAP was created in January 2022, and is part of SHERPA's second phase of MAPs. It focuses on the French-speaking Walloon region of Belgium through a bottom-up approach and its network will build on territorial development experiences. This paper represents the first output of the work of the Belgian MAP.

A list of actors involved in rural development activities in Wallonia has been drawn up. In agreement with the principles of SHERPA, three categories of actors have been considered for this purpose, namely actors from the associative world and civil society (NGOs, foundations, etc.), members from academia (UCL, ULiège, UMONS, UNAMUR, ULB), and officials from departments of the Walloon administration whose remit is relevant for rural areas. Notably, there are two language communities in Wallonia (French Community and German-speaking Community). Although members from both communities were invited to participate to the activities of the platform, there was no actor available from the German-speaking community to participate.

Since the establishment of the Belgian MAP in 2022, there have been various MAP meetings. In the beginning of 2022 (MAP Cycle 3), the Belgian MAP focused on the topic of social dimension of rural areas (object of the present document) and met twice physically as well as once virtually in the summer of 2022 to discuss on this topic. Near the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 (MAP Cycle 4), the MAP continued their work while focusing on the topic governance in rural areas, meeting a few times to discuss this topic more in-depth. A MAP Position Paper on this topic will be produced as well.

Interestingly, neither the facilitator nor the moderator of the Walloon platform for this first cycle were Belgian, thus they were not necessarily aware of certain specificities of the Walloon rural context. In the last meeting, the MAP collectively reflected on the composition of the MAP team and concluded that it beneficial to have a "local" person who comes from the country in which the MAP is created, alongside and a person who comes from another context, the latter bringing an external outlook and contributing to further clarify certain concepts. Nevertheless, the fact that the platform was facilitated by Ecorys, an EU-focused consultancy company, ensured a strong link with the EU policy arena, whereas the involvement of a local network such as RED helped to "root" it in the Belgian reality.

The link with EU policy has also been an important tool to stimulate MAP members to get involved in SHERPA activities. This has been achieved by showcasing the concrete contributions of SHERPA to EU rural policy throughout the different MAP activities. In the case of the Wallonia MAP, as the latter has been established in the second cycle of SHERPA activities, it was possible to show how the recommendations formulated by the MAPs in previous cycles have been discussed in the so-called EU MAP, whose members are high-level stakeholders from EU institutions, and finally integrated in the LTVRA staff working document. This allowed members of the platform to acknowledge the added value of SHERPA activities as a flywheel to make their voices heard and engage in EU-level debates.

The daily activities and management of the platform also provided occasions to keep the MAP members updated on latest EU policy development, e.g. new developments related to the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, the CAP etc. This was achieved via regular email updates, containing links to SHERPA deliverables of relevance for MAP members, information about upcoming events etc. Moreover, at the beginning of each meeting, a short recap on the ongoing EU level activities was foreseen.

MAP activities and logistic aspects

The venues for the physical meetings (i.e. the Headquarters of the *Fédération Wallonne de l'Agriculture* and a meeting room of the *Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech* Faculty) have been selected to allow participants to reach the venue using environmentally friendly means of transport. For this purpose, travel expenses of participants have been covered by the SHERPA project.

In preparation of each meeting, the necessary information and documents have been shared with participants. Moreover, a comprehensive presentation of the SHERPA project has been shared with the participants jointly with the invitation to join the MAP. Specifically, in preparation for the first meeting, the Discussion Paper, which brings together evidences from EU funded projects which are relevant for the topic of study, has been translated in French and shared with the participants to allow them to familiarize with its content, together with a Power Point presentation with summarized the main point per thematic area.

First physical MAP meeting on the Social Dimension of rural areas in Wallonia

On 2nd June 2022, the MAP Wallonia kick-started its activities with a first meeting at the headquarters of the *Fédération Wallonne de l'Agriculture*, in Gembloux. During this first meeting, the tools proposed in the SHERPA Stakeholder Engagement Tool have been exploited by the monitor and facilitator to keep the session as interactive as possible. As this was the first working meeting of the platform, a round on introduction on the members, including expectations vis-à-vis the project, has been organized.

Per each macro-area proposed in the Discussion Paper, the key ideas have been noted during the plenary sessions by the facilitator on individual posters. Then, during a dedicated interactive session, participants were invited to contribute to each point by writing their inputs directly to the posters. Participants were invited to interact with each other to enrich their contributions as well as to discuss with the monitor and facilitator. A final plenary session was moderated by the MAP facilitator, to comment on the contributions from MAP members and to set out a timeline for the next working phases. The content of the posters was then used to feed the structure of the Position Paper as a first step in the writing process, as described in the methodology section below.



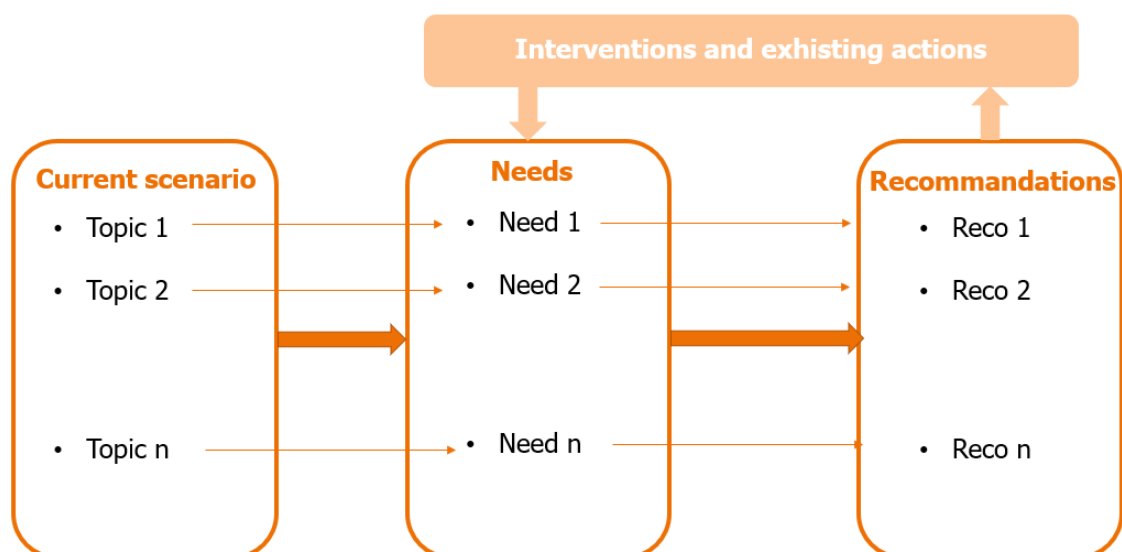
Methodology

The methodology envisaged for the creation of the Position Paper was based on a collaborative process of co-creation, during which the facilitator and moderator provided a solid framework which allowed the members to bring their knowledge in a structured and consistent way.

The structure of the Position Paper, as set by the central SHERPA team, helped structuring the conversations with MAP members around three main blocks, i.e. current context and state of play in the region, needs related to the topics, existing interventions and recommendations. Specifically, the working phases to produce the current Position Paper were the following:

1. French translation by MAP team of the SHERPA Discussion Paper on the Social Dimension of Rural Areas;
2. Preparation of Power Point with the main messages per each of the sub-themes covered in the SHERPA Discussion Paper;
3. Organization of the first MAP meeting, to select the sub-themes of relevance for the Belgian MAP and to obtain first inputs related to the state of play, needs, and existing interventions per each sub-theme, as depicted in Figure 2;
4. Write up of the "skeleton" of the MAP Position Paper, by using the technique of "paragraph-sentences", where the main idea of each paragraph is synthetized in a single sentence. Consequently, MAP members were asked to provide inputs, references and material per each paragraph;
5. Write-up of the first sections of the Position Paper and first round of validation via an online meeting
6. Second physical meeting to work on the recommendations for future policy and future research agendas
7. Finalization of the Position Paper and final round of validation with members

Figure 2 Logic of the Position Paper followed by the MAP team





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