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Interfaces

SHERPA Position Paper

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



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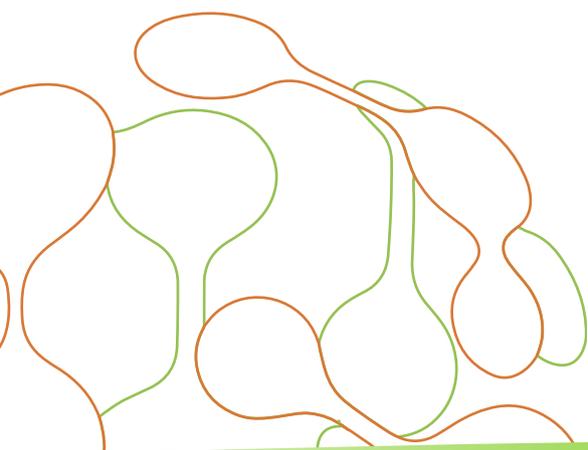


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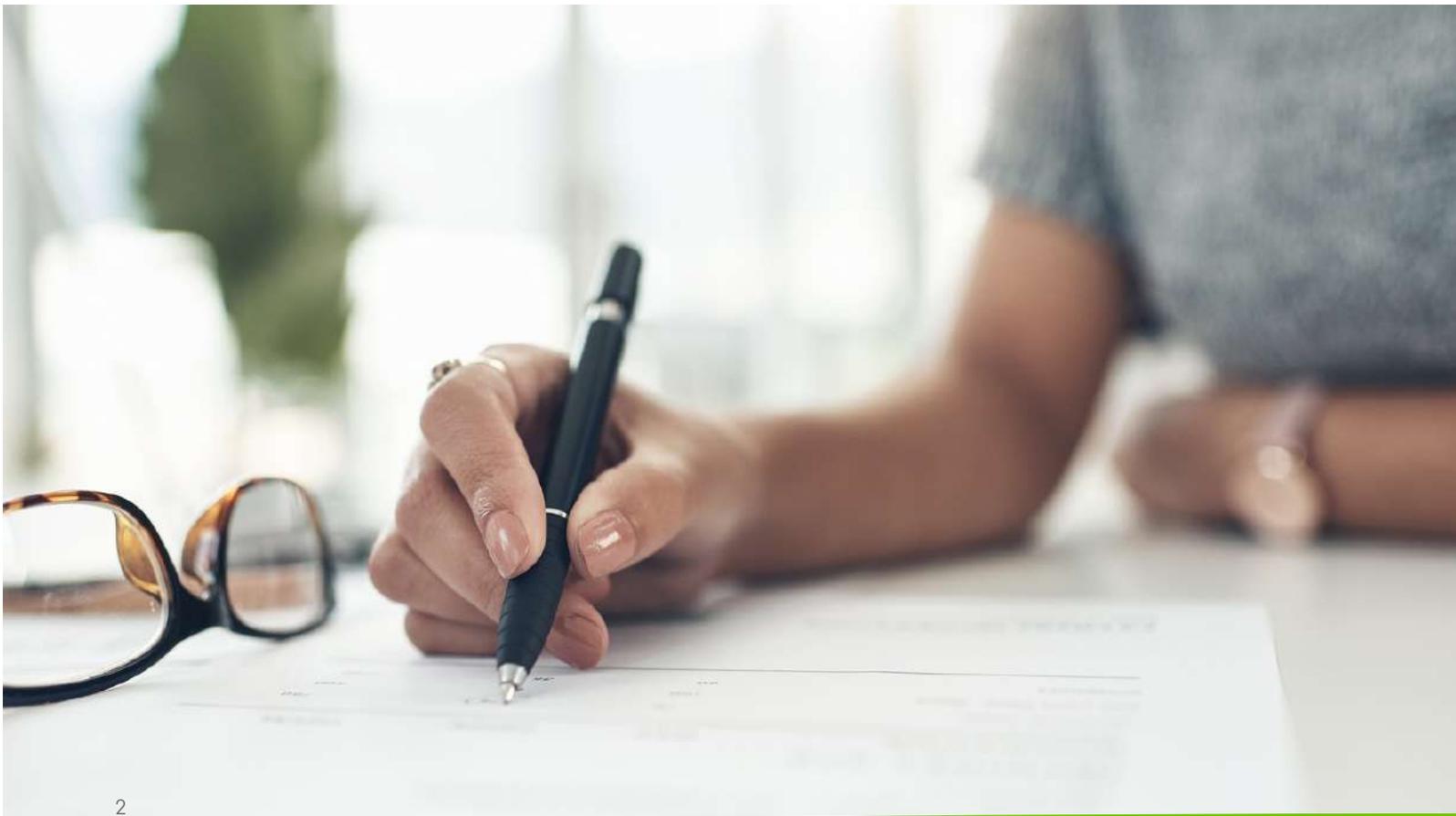


1. Introduction

This SHERPA Position Paper builds on the contributions of all 41 SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) involved in the fourth (and final) cycle of the SHERPA project. During this final cycle, MAPs were asked to reflect on how to empower regional and local institutions and actors in multi-level decision-making processes in rural areas, and propose recommendations for policy and future research on this topic. Each MAP discussed the elements they found most relevant for their geographical area in relation to multi-level governance in rural areas, and used this as their MAP input for the development of this Position Paper. More information on this topic from each individual MAP can be found in the [MAP Fiches](#).

The MAPs were asked to consider the following key questions for the collection of information on multi-level governance across Europe:

- What are the key strengths and needs identified by the MAP concerning governance within the MAP area?
- What examples of existing or emerging best practice examples identified by the MAP have helped address regional and local needs? What existing or emerging bad practice examples would the MAP like to share?
- What kind of policy support could help to improve governance and stakeholder engagement at the local, regional, and/or national level (e.g., policies, platforms, forums)? How can the EU support these interventions?
- What are the knowledge gaps on governance and stakeholder engagement, and what future research projects are needed to address these gaps? What could be specific research questions that should be answered?





2. Key messages

There are common challenges and experiences in rural governance shared by the SHERPA MAPs, such as the inclusion of marginalised groups in decision-making, bureaucratic hurdles and complex decision-making processes, the influence of climate and environmental factors on governance, regional disparities and challenges, and limited participation and representation of rural interests. Recognising these commonalities is crucial for informing future policies and research agendas in rural areas. By understanding and addressing these shared challenges, policymakers and researchers can develop effective governance strategies that promote inclusivity, overcome bureaucratic barriers, address regional disparities, and enhance participation and representation in rural decision-making processes.

The key needs identified for future rural governance include improving vertical coordination between different levels of government, empowering citizens through inclusive and accessible tools for participation, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Challenges such as bureaucracy, limited policy coherence, and lack of trust in decision-making processes need to be addressed. On the other hand, identified strengths lie in well-coordinated multi-level governance systems, active networks and communities, and the engagement of diverse local actors. Enhancing the role of local authorities, valuing citizen opinions, and building a collaborative culture is essential in this matter. These findings emphasise the importance of effective multi-level, participative, and collaborative governance in rural areas to address the identified needs and capitalise on their strengths.

The existing actions and interventions highlighted by the MAPs encompass a range of governance practices in rural areas. Stakeholder engagement is emphasised through networks, cooperation platforms, and incentives for local businesses to revitalise disadvantaged regions. Community and citizen engagement initiatives include consultations, co-creation platforms, and the revitalisation of communal lands to involve residents in decision-making processes. Data and information initiatives aim to enhance access and sharing, with examples such as land banks and digital tools for information dissemination. Urban-rural collaboration is fostered through mechanisms like producers' associations, urban-rural food systems, and optimised supply chains. Vertical coordination is crucial, with dialogue and cooperation mechanisms established between different levels of government to address rural issues and demographic challenges. Finally, horizontal coordination efforts seek to promote collaboration and integration across sectors for policy coherence and address rural areas' multifunctional nature. These actions and interventions reflect the diverse approaches being taken to establish effective, efficient, and inclusive governance systems in rural contexts.

The key recommendations for future rural policies involve promoting participatory and inclusive governance, implementing place-based and multi-level governance approaches, and fostering collaborative governance. To achieve participatory and inclusive governance, it is crucial to establish clear and transparent frameworks, provide support and capacity building, focus on civic education and training, build trust and improve communication, empower marginalised groups, and promote cooperation with civic organisations. Place-based and multi-level governance should prioritise coordinated policies and regulations, transparency and accountability, policy support based on local needs, improved policy management and linkage, and strengthened regional coordination. Collaborative governance calls for stakeholder participation, representativeness, trust-building and communication, empowerment of local representatives, promotion of information actions, improved collaboration and digital tools, expansion of successful bottom-up approaches, cross-sectoral learning, support for rural development initiatives, and fostering a cooperative culture. These recommendations aim to foster inclusive decision-making, effective governance structures, and stakeholder collaboration to ensure sustainable rural policies' development and implementation. Further support can be addressed through sustained, flexible and accessible funding mechanisms that prioritise equitable distribution and address the specific needs of rural areas.

Future rural research should prioritise several key recommendations to advance knowledge and understanding of rural governance. This includes conducting research to assess the state of good governance and governing performance in rural areas, exploring different governance models and approaches tailored to rural communities, and developing methodological approaches to governance research. Additionally, there is a need to investigate the impact of policies on multi-level governance, improve stakeholder engagement strategies, and study the effectiveness of participatory and inclusive governance initiatives. Other research topics should focus on knowledge transfer and capacity building, address conflicts in decision-making processes, strengthen social capital in rural areas, and explore the importance of civic education. Encouraging interdisciplinary and intersectoral research, supporting existing networks, and utilising universities as facilitators of synergies are also important recommendations. Furthermore, research efforts should be tailored to address specific barriers and challenges in rural areas, emphasise local and regional perspectives, and promote inclusive research teams and approaches.

3. Current situation of the MAPS

Their unique socio-economic and political contexts have shaped the MAPs' positions on multi-level governance. Therefore, considering these contexts when reviewing their successes, challenges, and recommendations for future policies and research is crucial. Given this, it is notable that many of the MAPs had similar contexts and current situations. Thus this section seeks to present some of the commonalities among the MAPs, as well as some unique situations.

Several regions have actively included marginalised and socially excluded groups in decision-making and governance processes, recognising that extra effort is needed to ensure all citizens are engaged. The Zachodniopomorskie MAP in Poland has operated the National and Regional Network of Rural Areas since 2007, whose purpose is to, among others, increase the participation of interested parties in the implementation of initiatives for rural development; activate rural residents to take initiatives aimed at social inclusion, in particular the elderly, young people, the disabled, national minorities, and other socially excluded people. The Portuguese MAP of Alqueva has taken significant strides to ensure marginalised groups are included in decision-making processes, as they have been historically underrepresented in governance structures. Similarly, the Southwest Alentejo MAP in Portugal is working to integrate marginalised groups into policy-making, recognising the value of an inclusive and collaborative approach involving various actors that can lead to more sustainable governance. In Bulgaria, the Sofia MAP noted that there are efforts to include minorities and other groups, such as youth, migrants, and women, in decision-making processes. However, ensuring their participation is meaningful and effective is coming up against structural barriers such as discrimination and exclusion and limited resources and capacity for participation.

Across Europe, MAPs found themselves existing in situations where bureaucracy was burdening and unclear or complex decision-making systems hindered both multi-level governance and active participation and engagement of citizens in policy-making processes. Over the past decade, the Lithuanian government has increasingly recognised the modern paradigm of public administration and taken action to reduce the bureaucracy hindering efficient and effective governance. However, the Lithuanian MAP has noted that this remains one of the most inhibiting factors for the country's community-led innovations and rural areas' development. Challenges were also identified in the PACA Sud MAP in France concerning the multiplicity of European, national and regional administrative structures and systems, which are not always easy for local actors and project leaders to understand, and in turn, have led to problems of coherence and coordination. In the case of Slovenia, the SVARUN MAP remarked on the country's success in bringing together stakeholders from across the agricultural and farming sectors in formal and informal ways, most notably with the Council of Agriculture, to ensure a range of voices are heard when developing and implementing relevant policies. However, for other topics and issues affecting rural, the government's lack of clear jurisdiction has meant that such issues and rural interests are not represented at the national level, nor are the formal decision-making processes inclusive of the rural population.

The impact of climate was an evident factor defining the current situations in several MAPs. The Italian Emilia-Romagna MAP was most affected by a severe drought in 2022, thus, governance and decision-making processes related to water use, management, and planning are central to discussions around regional governance. In the Greenport Gelderland MAP located in the Netherlands, the region that includes a large fruit sector is facing an increasing number of droughts and extreme weather occurrences, therefore influencing governance and policy-making in the area is seen as increasingly essential to shaping the decisions being made at all levels which impact the sector and its vulnerability. Food systems were central to the situations in the other two Italian MAPs (Tuscany and Casentino). As such, they examined governance within the context of the local and regional food systems, including the valorisation of Traditional Agri-food Products of Tuscany (PATs). At the same time, the Montagna Toscana MAP in Italy is located in one of the largest exporting regions of chestnuts. This led to their focus on governance concerning the chestnut value chain and multi-level governance of policies impacting the chain.

Other MAPs found environmental-related concerns central to their situation, though on topics unique to their context. Some examples of shared or community energy exist in the Czech Republic, such as the Litultovice municipality, as noted by the VENUS MAP in the Czech Republic. An amendment to the Energy Act passed in December 2022 will simplify bureaucracy and increase the limit for the license-free operation of sustainable energy sources and is expected to open up the opportunity for energy communities to emerge across the country.



The Climate Friendly Village MAP, also in the Czech Republic, looked at multi-level governance and the role it plays within the context of land consolidation and agroforestry systems. The tool of land consolidation exists and is taking place at a slow but continuous pace. However, there is little financial or technical support from the Ministry of Agriculture to support agroforestry. As these instruments fall under the national government's purview, a multi-level governance approach is not functional due to regional authorities not being involved in related decision-making, in spite of the existing animation and promotion of the instruments at the local level through research initiatives and LAGs.

Other MAPs find themselves in opposite contexts, leading to different challenges and opportunities. The MAP Rural Mapping in Bulgaria operates in a region where 80% of the 2 million substantial population lives in urban areas, with 85% of production being industrial and 15% agricultural. The region has strong conditions for future economic development, with many qualified workers, large energy reserves and raw mineral resources, good transportation, climate, and a geographically convenient location. However, the rural areas in the region can be characterised by small populations and are often poorly developed, requiring external support to deal with many of their challenges. As a rural area, the Galician MAP in Spain found that the social and geographical reality of being a rural area has hampered the population's participation in the design and application of the policies that affect their territories.

While the current situations of the MAPs are remarkably different, many of them find themselves positioned in similar contexts and facing similar structural, bureaucratic, and environmental conditions that shape their focuses and work. It is worth keeping in mind the situations of the MAPs while reading the following sections, as clear connections and valuable insights can be linked between a MAP's context with their needs and strengths, interventions and actions, and recommendations for future research and policies.



4. Positions from the MAPs

This section refers to the main themes set out in the SHERPA Discussion Paper by Moodie et al. (2023) on empowering regional and rural actors in multi-level governance processes. The information provided in this section comes from the reflection and work carried out by the individual MAPs.

4.1 Identified needs and challenges

The challenges and opportunities of governance in rural areas of various regions highlight both potential benefits and obstacles. In the context of multi-level governance, involving different levels of government can lead to tailored policies and resource allocation, but fragmentation and limited coordination between levels can result in policy incoherence, inefficiency, and bureaucracy. In participatory governance, citizen involvement can bring diversity and transparency, but challenges include citizens' lack of information, digital skills, and trust, as well as authorities' capacity constraints. Inclusive tools, education programmes, and incentive systems can foster effective citizen participation. Collaborative governance involves stakeholders working together, but issues such as lack of clear incentives, trust, and balance between sectors can hinder horizontal cooperation. Strong networks and active local communities can create successful collaborative dynamics. In this section, MAPs' examples of challenges and opportunities are the vivid testimony of the potential of different approaches to governance in rural areas.

Multi-level governance

Involving different levels of government in decision-making brings different perspectives and expertise and can therefore lead to more tailored policies and effective resource allocation. However, the Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, Emilia Romagna MAP in Italy, the Aragón MAP in Spain and the RuraLPT MAP in Portugal noted that multi-level governance, in their case, tended to be fragmented. Limited coordination between different levels of government has resulted in low policy coherence, limited responsiveness to local needs, inefficient use of resources and increased bureaucracy.

Local authorities are burdened with top-down regulations and often lack the necessary skills and training to carry out their duties effectively. For example, the Dutch Greenport Gelderland MAP pointed out that elected members of local authorities only focus on selected topics of interest and are not well-informed about relevant issues in the region. In addition, the Sofia MAP in Bulgaria and the Danish MAP pointed to a more centralised, rather than decentralised, decision-making in their countries. The Sofia MAP in Bulgaria noted that power and resources are more concentrated at the national level, leading to unmet local needs. Furthermore, the Danish MAP also pointed out that centralisation has meant that business support efforts do not reach ordinary companies needing funding but rather 'wealthy' companies with a professionally established structure to apply for EU regional funds. Besides, the Montagna Toscana MAP in Italy, the Climate Proof Ruralities MAP in the Netherlands, the RuraLPT MAP and Southwest Alentejo MAP in Portugal mentioned the difficulties in navigating the different levels of governance without losing meaning and connection. As such, the Climate Proof Ruralities MAP in the Netherlands highlighted the need to foster joined responsibility and trust among different levels of policy-making.

The Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, the Montagna Toscana MAP in Italy and the Aragón MAP in Spain, therefore, concluded that better vertical coordination between actors is needed to ensure that rural issues are more central to governance at all levels. The Finnish MAP identified some of its strengths in the governance of rural areas. Over the years, institutional structures have been established and refined in Finland to support the development and implementation of rural policies.



This has led to a well-coordinated and functioning system in which actors from multiple levels of governance are involved in dialogue and collaboration. Other strengths in multi-level governance mentioned by the MAPs included the willingness to experiment with new forms of governance in rural areas in the Tuscany and Casentino MAPs in Italy and the strong involvement of rural actors and local governments in the Rural_PT MAP in Portugal.

Participatory governance

A greater diversity of perspectives, transparency and trust in the policy-making process can be achieved by giving citizens a voice in decision-making. Nevertheless, as the Wallonia MAP in Belgium, the Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, the Estonian MAP, the Zachodniopomorskie MAP in Poland and the Aragón MAP in Spain have pointed out, meaningful citizen participation is challenging. On the one hand, citizens may be uninformed or demotivated and often lack the digital skills or legal knowledge to participate in the policy process. Having seen limited evidence that their participation has made a difference, they may not trust these processes to work effectively. On the other hand, local and regional authorities often lack the capacity to involve citizens effectively and in an engaging way. The Aragón MAP in Spain highlighted that public consultations had become mere processes in their case, with organisers lacking the time and training to prepare and analyse the results adequately.

There is a growing need to identify easily applicable and inclusive tools for citizen engagement. For example, the Lithuanian MAP Circular Bioeconomy (CBioLit), observed a high level of local participation as its strength but lacked the means to achieve greater participation. The Galician MAP in Spain also stated that it is not enough to regulate the formal structure of participation but that it must be made accessible to the rural population in a way that encourages a proactive attitude. The Zielone Sqsiedztwo MAP in Poland also stressed the need for a better system of incentives that could encourage community participation. Moreover, the Aragón MAP in Spain and the Wallonian MAP in Belgium indicated an important need to involve often underrepresented groups in the decision-making process, such as rural women, young people, and minority groups. This can bring new perspectives to the discussions on the future of rural areas and create added value for local communities.

The Greek MAPs, the Region PACA Sud MAP in France, the Tuscany and Casentino MAP in Italy, the CBioLit MAP in Lithuania, the Bieszczady MAP in Poland, the South-East Drenthe MAP in the Netherlands, the Galician MAP in Spain and the UK MAP have also identified many strengths and good practices in citizen participation. For example, the Greek MAPs of South Aegean, Peloponnese and Central Greece, suggested organising campaigns and events to inform citizens and raise awareness of current social and political issues. Training and education programmes can also help citizens develop the relevant knowledge and skills for effective civic engagement. Furthermore, the Bieszczady MAP in Poland showed practical examples of participatory budgeting (the 'Village fund') and public village meetings as crucial tools for involving citizens in decision-making. The South-East Drenthe MAP in the Netherlands highlighted that their strength lies in not only the variety of engaged citizens taking initiatives but also a strong motivation coming from the provincial organisations to involve citizens. Lastly, the Galician MAP in Spain raised the importance of providing feedback on the results of public consultations to show that the opinions and interests of citizens are valued.



Collaborative governance

Collaborative governance occurs when different stakeholders – including community members, civil society representatives, government officials and private sector actors – are involved to work together and solve problems jointly. In the long term, it can lead to more productive and equitable partnerships that benefit rural communities. The Aragón MAP in Spain found that its implementation in practice between (government) actors can be hampered because objectives, strategies, budget allocations and project implementation are sometimes defined at the level of sectoral departments, and there are no clear incentives to strengthen horizontal cooperation. Moreover, due to a lack of collaborative culture, there is often a lack of trust in the personal relationships between departments that could enable horizontal cooperation.

There are also some challenges regarding the relationship between government officials, the private and/or NGO sectors. On the one hand, the Estonian MAP mentioned that there are many municipalities where discussions with partners are not considered essential or are seen as troublesome. Two Polish MAPs, namely the Zachodniopomorskie MAP and Bieszczady MAP, also stressed the need for good leaders who see these partnerships as a support rather than a threat. On the other hand, more support is needed in the form of capacity building or funding to better involve NGOs and smaller actors in the policy-making process. In this regard, the Romania MAPs stated that there is also a need to balance the power in the decision-making process between smaller and larger actors. There was a broad consensus among the Romanian MAP members that this imbalance resulted in a low level of involvement of small local producer associations in public debates. Similarly, the Wallonian MAP in Belgium emphasised the importance of mobilising underrepresented actors, while recognising the diminishing momentum in association representation due to increasingly stringent legislation.

Besides the identified challenges and needs in horizontal cooperation, there were also many strengths among the MAPs. For example, the Hungary MAP indicated the presence of many active networks and communities in their area as well as the Alqueva MAP in Portugal with multiple associations and local groups. Likewise, the Emilia Romagna MAP in Italy indicated that the presence and strong cooperation between actors ensured that discussions increased in times of emergency, such as drought occurrence, and a coordinated approach was taken. Lastly, other strengths mentioned by the MAPs were the diversity of local actors providing different perspectives in the Southwest Alentejo MAP in Portugal and the strong engagement from local actors to defend the existence of their locality in the Swedish Norbotten MAP.

4.2 Existing interventions and actions

While a more detailed list of actions and initiatives is provided in Annex 1, this section provides an overview of governance arrangements and related good practices implemented at the country and at regional/local levels. These practices reflect how different national, regional and local stakeholders have designed and implemented effective, efficient and inclusive governance systems. These examples can help policy-makers, practitioners and other stakeholders to learn from each other and replicate inspiring solutions.

From the practices and arrangements analysed in the MAP Fiches, six categories of mechanisms and institutional arrangements have emerged: 1) stakeholder engagement; 2) community/citizen engagement; 3) data and information; 4) urban-rural collaboration 5) vertical coordination; 6) horizontal coordination across rural-related policies.

Numerous good practices mentioned are related to organisational structures to engage rural stakeholders (1). Involving rural stakeholders in local development and decision-making can be a way to address the so-called 'geographies of discontent'. In particular, the Montagna Toscana MAP in Italy is an original example of how to engage, incentivise and empower local businesses to revitalise mountain areas from a social, environmental and economic perspective. "Custodi della montagna" is a form of financial incentive offered by the Tuscany region dedicated to SMEs willing to start a business or to re-organise a pre-existing economic activity in a disadvantaged mountain area. Companies can also sign a "community pact" with the municipality, offering extra economic benefits in exchange for maintaining and protecting forests and biodiversity. Moreover, several networks have been created at the national and regional/local levels involving the business sector, academia, NGOs, and civil society organisations, among others. Some examples included the rural cooperation network "Eläköön maaseutu" in Finland, the Open Farm Network of Zala Thermal Valley in Hungary, Greenport Gelderland in the Netherlands or the AgroTransilvania Cluster.



Regarding citizen engagement in rural areas, several MAPs referred to practices that enable partnerships with residents (2). Examples mentioned involve conducting consultations and creating platforms for the co-creation of solutions for the territory, such as the Odemira Territory Forum, an initiative of the Odemira municipality to ensure citizens are involved in the co-construction of a sustainable region that promotes the well-being of all. The Galician MAP in Spain highlighted the “common lands” (Montes Veciñais en Man Común), a unique communal land tenure system. It is based on traditional customary systems that recognised community rights and obligations under the ancient feudal tenure system. This regulation has allowed Galician communities to regain control of their lands and bring forward a different way of relating to nature. Many scholars have associated “common lands” with the Community-Based Natural Resource Management concept, which devolves authority for ecosystem management to the local community[1].

The UK MAPs gave another example of citizen participation through the “Place Principle” in Scotland, which emphasises a collaborative and participatory approach to services, land and buildings in a place, involving the people who live in and invest in those rural areas. To support the implementation of the Place Principle, Public Health Scotland has also developed the Place Standard Tool[2]. It provides a means for participants to assess the physical environment (e.g. buildings, streets, public spaces and natural areas in a place; and the social environment, such as the relationships, social contacts and support networks that make up a community).

Using (new) technologies to engage with citizens is becoming increasingly popular in several MAPs. Digital tools and platforms (e.g., social media, mobile government, open data, etc.) can facilitate citizen engagement. MAPs have been experimenting with participatory budgeting in rural municipalities. This was often (but not always) accompanied by online tools to support voting, accountability and as a communication channel. The “Fundão Participa” in Portugal platform allows citizens to propose and vote on ideas for the city’s development.

In contrast, the participatory budget in the Fundão municipality enabled citizens to vote on the allocation of public funds. Participatory budgeting is also found in the Bieszczady MAP, where many municipalities have set up a “Village Fund” (fundusz sołdecki), which is a set amount from the municipal budget allocated to the village for the implementation of projects to improve living conditions. However, even though the digital divide is decreasing, many rural households still lack access to fast broadband connectivity, which can affect participation. The Finnish MAP note mentioned the broadband network deployment information website (Laajakaistainfo), offering tips for different needs and regions and information on funding opportunities for broadband projects.



[1] <https://thecommonsjournal.org/articles/10.5334/ijc.1055>
[2] <https://www.placestandard.scot/place-standard.pdf>



Data and information access and sharing are critical for economic and social activities in rural areas and beyond, as these underpin supply chains, logistics, and communication, among others (3). The Land Bank of Tuscany Region (Italy) is an inventory of public and private lands made available through rentals or other contracts to promote the use of abandoned lands by fostering young entrepreneurship, the safeguarding of biodiversity, landscape and forestry heritage, among others. In Italy, the Irrigation and Reclamation Consortia in Emilia-Romagna facilitate information flows to farmers, including weekly irrigation bulletin and live information through SMS and website.

Digitalisation, good policy coordination and identifying functional economic, business and public service interlinkages can help decrease the inequalities between rural and urban areas (4). The Portuguese Rura_PT MAP noted that Cerfundão is an excellent example of a producers' association helping farmers to reduce transaction costs and in the processing and commercialisation of their products, thereby creating stronger rural-urban links in the food supply chains. Also in Portugal, the RURBAN Link project aimed to develop an urban-rural food system that optimises the flow of products from production to processing, distribution, and consumption and the consequent optimisation of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and food waste.

Rural policy concerns many public, private and not-for-profit actors from local, regional, national and international levels. Therefore, there is a need for engaging stakeholders that have a shared responsibility and enabling coordination mechanisms across levels (5). As the 'Identified challenges and opportunities' section states, vertical coordination between administrative levels is essential for several MAPs. In Spain, the government of Aragón has set up mechanisms to ensure a dialogue across levels around rural issues. The "Sectoral Conference for Demographic Challenges" is a cooperation body created in 2020 between the Spanish government and the Autonomous Regions to coordinate and cooperate in policies to tackle depopulation. In 2002, the Counties Cooperation Council body was established to reinforce the relationship and coordination between different administrations, mainly between the local administrations and the Aragonese Government.

Rural policy is affected and has spillover effects across many other policy areas, such as water, land use, transport, education, and health, among others. These sectors tend to be siloed, and further integration is needed to ensure policy coherence (6). Moreover, rural areas can have multiple functions, emphasising the need for collaboration between different actors and sectors. For example, the Finnish MAP alluded to the existing thematic rural policy networks under the framework of the Rural Policy Council, which is responsible for the National Rural Policy. The Council includes 34 members who represent actors from three different sectors of society, from the local to the national level. Administration, business, civil society, advisory organisations and research are represented. There are currently four networks in charge of implementing rural policy tasks, focusing on strengthening the preconditions for a good life in rural areas; developing employment tools and multilocational work; promoting new opportunities for work and entrepreneurship in Finnish rural areas; dealing with archipelago areas, particularly from a child and youth perspective.

4.3 Recommendations from the MAPs

The SHERPA MAPs have included in their MAP Fiches a wide array of recommendations for both future rural policies and rural research agenda. The recommendations presented in this section are a synthesis of all those put forward by the MAPs, looking to present here a short list of the most prevalent and common proposals found. In terms of future rural policies, the recommendations focus on suggestions for the different approaches to governance in rural areas: participatory and inclusive governance; place-based and multi-level governance; collaborative governance; and support and funding. With regard to the future rural research agenda, the recommendations focus on various aspects, from governance models, to stakeholder engagement, knowledge transfer and capacity building. Additionally, research could focus specifically on how to increase the participatory and inclusiveness of governance in rural areas. For a detailed account of MAPs' recommendations, please have a look at the [MAP Fiches](#) on the SHERPA website.

4.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

Participatory and inclusive governance

The participatory and inclusive governance of rural areas can become a catalyst for community development and empowerment. By engaging local actors in decision-making processes and ensuring equitable representation of all voices, this approach seeks to bridge the gap between citizens and local authorities. Through structured frameworks, educational initiatives, and collaborative channels of communication, participatory and inclusive governance not only addresses the unique challenges of rural settings but also cultivates a sense of ownership, fostering sustainable growth and collective well-being. In total, 23 MAPs have put forward recommendations linked to participatory and inclusive governance (Wallonian MAP in Belgium, Greek MAPs [South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese], Spanish MAPs [Galicia, Aragón], Hungarian MAPs [AKIS, Land-use, Rural Prosperity], Montagna Toscana MAP, Dutch MAPs [Greenport Gelderland, South-East Drenthe], Polish MAPs [Zachodniopomorskie, Bieszczady, Zielone Sąsiedztwo], Portuguese MAPs [Southwest Alentejo, Rura_PT, Alqueva], Romanian MAPs [Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges] and the UK MAPs [Rural Scotland, Dee Catchment]). The following recommendations offer a synthesis of the most widespread suggestions across the 23 MAPs.

1. Develop clear and transparent principles and frameworks for citizen participation adapted to local realities. Formalise the process of citizen participation to provide a structured and organised approach.
2. Provide the necessary resources, such as facilitators and moderators, to neutrally facilitate and animate the citizen participation process. Ensure facilitators have the required skills and training to engage and involve citizens effectively.
3. Implement civic education programmes, including activities for children in schools and open meetings for adults and seniors, to promote understanding and practice of civil society. Ensure rural residents have adequate knowledge and information about administrative levels, ongoing public consultations, and funding opportunities for citizen initiatives. Improve monitoring and evaluation systems for rural areas to address changing needs.
4. Building trust between citizens and government officials by enabling citizen participation in decision-making through public consultations, advisory groups and community-based development programmes. Establish continuous communication channels between the local government and citizens to bridge knowledge gaps.

5. Encourage active participation of women, youth and minority groups in decision-making processes and provide the necessary support and resources.
6. Support the various projects emerging from citizens' participation by adopting a dynamic and flexible subsidiarity approach. Public authorities should not only support pre-defined projects but also those resulting from citizens' initiatives. While long-term projects are essential, it is also vital to deliver tangible results in the short term to meet citizens' expectations.
7. Improve existing participatory tools by ensuring effective information dissemination and adaptation to different community groups. Encourage a culture of cooperation and inclusive policy-making through robust social consultation processes.
8. Strengthen the feedback process to civil society during and after public consultations. Provide individual feedback explaining how proposals have been considered and the reasons for which they have not been implemented.
9. Increase citizen engagement, promote transparency and facilitate the long-term sustainability of governance through collaboration with civic organisations. Explore tools for regionalisation and participatory democracy, considering restructuring local power to improve governance effectiveness.
10. Ensure that public participation is integrated throughout the design process rather than just collecting ideas for pre-selected proposals or pre-drafted documents

Place-based and multi-level governance

The paradigm of place-based and multi-level governance is emerging as a dynamic strategy to navigate the complex interplay between local contexts and broader administrative structures. This approach recognises the distinct identities and needs of rural communities while fostering connections with regional and national decision-making frameworks. By aligning policies, resources, and initiatives with the unique character of each locality, place-based and multi-level governance empowers rural areas to leverage their strengths, address challenges, and contribute effectively to their overall development. As such, 26 MAPs have addressed it within their MAP Fiches and have formulated several recommendations for future rural policies (Wallonian MAP in Belgium, Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, Czech MAPs [Climate Friendly Village, VENUS], Danish MAP, Estonian MAP, Greek MAPs [South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese], Aragón MAP in Spain, Suomi MAP in Finland, Hungarian MAPs [AKIS, Land-Use, Rural Prosperity], CBioLit MAP in Lithuania, Dutch MAPs [Greenport Gelderland, Climate Proof Ruralities], Polish MAPs [Bieszczady, Zielone Szasiedztwo], Southwest Alentejo MAP in Portugal, Romanian MAPs [Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges], Norbotten MAP in Sweden and UK MAPs [Rural Scotland, Dee Catchment]). The following recommendations are a synthesis of the most prevalent suggestions across all 26 MAPs.

1. Establish a mechanism for coordinating agricultural policies and regulations between different levels of government to ensure consistency and coherence in decision-making.
2. Implement measures to increase transparency and accountability in decision-making, such as regular reporting on the implementation of policies and regulations.
3. Prioritise policy support based on knowledge of local and regional needs, skills and capacities. Address barriers such as complex administration and inappropriate conditions for obtaining interventions prepared by central policies.
4. Improve policy management and links between different levels (local, regional and national) through platforms or forums for dialogue.



5. Improve coordination across sectors and levels to ensure that European and national sectors, instruments and initiatives are mutually supportive. Enable municipalities and regions to play a coordinating role in relevant sectoral areas and to prioritise activities for rural development.
6. Consider local development strategies. Taking into account local development strategies drawn up by Local Action Groups (LAGs) at higher administrative levels should be a near-mandatory step to ensure alignment of the proposed actions. This can be done by establishing regulations and transparency procedures to report on the extent to which LAG strategies have been considered in the definition of regional rural development strategies.
7. Prioritise long-term commitment and action at all levels of government for policy development and implementation by overcoming sectoral silos and integrating place-based thinking into policy.
8. Use more coordinators at the regional level to test existing solutions and make adjustments to make them more place-based and functional. Focus on understanding what works and why through testing and modification processes.

Collaborative governance

This transformative approach of collaborative governance advocates for the active involvement of diverse stakeholders, ranging from farmers and rural communities to civil society organisations and private sector entities. By cultivating a participatory environment, policies and regulations are shaped to resonate with the authentic needs and concerns of those directly affected. Reflecting on this concept and experience, 31 MAPs have indicated suggestions on how to increase collaborative governance: Wallonian MAP in Belgium, Climate Friendly Village MAP in the Czech Republic, Estonian MAP, Greek MAPs (South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese), Galician MAP in Spain, Suomi MAP in Finland, Region PACA Sud MAP in France, Hungarian MAPs (AKIS, Land-use, Rural Prosperity), Italian MAPs (Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Casentino, Montagna Toscana), Circular Bioeconomy MAP in Lithuania, Dutch MAPs (Greenport Gelderland, Climate Proof Ruralities, South-East Drenthe), Polish MAPs (Zachodniopomorskie, Bieszczady), Portuguese MAPs (Southwest Alentejo, RuraL_PT, Alqueva), Romanian MAPs (Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges), Norbotten MAP in Sweden and UK MAPs (Rural Scotland, Dee Catchment). The following recommendations consolidate the most frequent suggestions spanning across the 31 MAPs.

1. Promote stakeholder participation through actively engaging rural stakeholders, including farmers, rural communities, civil society organisations and private sector entities, and to ensure that policies and regulations reflect their needs and concerns.
2. Ensure representativeness by using mixed sessions, weighting, mandates and outreach activities to engage and include under-represented stakeholder groups in joint governance processes.
3. Strengthen trust between management levels and promote behavioural change through improved communication channels and knowledge-sharing platforms.
4. Empower local representatives and provide training in inclusion, communication and strategic planning to enhance local representatives' ability to effectively communicate their regions' needs and concerns to the national government.
5. Improve cooperation between regional and local organisations by emphasising training and digital tools to deliver high-quality services and knowledge to citizens and businesses.
6. Extend the successful bottom-up approach of the LEADER programme to other policy areas and improve its application. Strengthen the programme by involving young people, women and minority groups.
7. Encourage policy-makers and implementers to understand rural development more by promoting cross-sectoral learning and knowledge exchange between different rural communities.
8. Promote collaborative approaches and encourage the creation of community cooperatives, energy communities and other joint initiatives to create new services and employment opportunities for local people.

Support and funding

Strengthening participative, place-based and collaborative governance in rural areas requires having the necessary technical support and funding in place. By adopting long-term approaches, enhancing funding flexibility, streamlining administrative processes and addressing specific needs, effective resource allocation for local governance initiatives can be achieved and have a meaningful impact.



This emerged from the recommendations made by 21 MAPs: Bulgarian MAPs (Sofia, Rural Mapping), VENUS MAP in Czech Republic, Danish MAP, Greek MAPs (South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese), Suomi MAP in Finland, Region PACA Sud MAP in France, Hungarian MAPs (AKIS, Land-use, Rural Prosperity), Italian MAPs (Tuscany, Casentino, Montagna Toscana), Polish MAPs (Zachodniopomorskie, Zielone Sqsiedztwo), Portuguese MAPs (Southwest Alentejo, RuraLPT, Alqueva) and the Norbotten MAP in Sweden. The recommendations that follow include the most common suggestions of the 21 MAPs.

1. Provide long-term forms of technical and financial support to avoid relying solely on project-based funding and improve the continuity of local development work.
2. Increase the flexibility of funding to address - and adapt to - a variety of governance instruments and contexts.
3. Streamline administrative processes for accessing funding and services in rural areas. Provide guidance and support to smaller rural communities and actors to navigate complex administrative requirements.
4. Consider targeting funding and support based on specific needs. Prioritise minority groups and under-resourced areas. This approach will ensure a fair and effective distribution of resources and support to those who need it the most.
5. Focus CAP rural development funding more on initiatives and local actors who aim to address the social, demographic, economic and development challenges facing rural areas.

4.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

Governance models

The MAPs indicated that the lack of knowledge/information is a significant challenge in multi-level governance in rural areas. In some instances, cultural barriers can hinder participation in the governance process. The willingness and motivation of citizens to participate voluntarily is essential for successful governance initiatives. It is important to understand stakeholders' local realities, aspirations, and perspectives in developing effective public policies. In total, 16 MAPs suggested ideas for future research into governance models in rural areas: Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, Danish MAP, Greek MAPs (South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese), Italian MAPs (Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Casentino), Portuguese MAPs (Southwest Alentejo, Alqueva), Romanian MAPs (Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges), the Norbotten MAP in Sweden, and the UK MAPs (Rural Scotland and Dee Catchment). These suggestions were synthesised into the following recommendations.





1. Conduct research to assess the state of good governance and governing performance in rural areas of the EU. This research should evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of governance practices and identify areas for improvement. A comprehensive literature review can further complement it to understand existing governance structures, cooperation mechanisms, and coordination challenges in relevant fields, providing a foundation for identifying gaps and informing future studies.
2. Explore different governance models and approaches tailored to the needs of rural communities, such as participatory budgeting, community-based decision-making, and network governance. Identify governance arrangements, policies, and practices that effectively address the needs and challenges specific to rural areas (i.e. islands and island communities). Assess the role of digital technologies in improving governance in rural areas.
3. Develop a methodological approach to governance research and establish a framework to collect data and indicators. This research should focus on developing standardised methods for assessing governance practices and monitoring progress. It could further address the gaps in information and understanding of governance issues and outdated management concepts by encouraging initiatives that promote innovation, collaboration, and building knowledge and experience.
4. Investigate the need for models, public policies, innovation, and effective linkages between rural, regional, national, and European governance. This research should explore integrating rural governance into broader governance structures and decision-making processes.
5. Investigate ways to improve horizontal and vertical coordination and communication in elaborating policies and programmes. This research should explore strategies and mechanisms to enhance collaboration, information sharing, and coordination among different levels of governance.
6. Conduct focused research on specific governance and stakeholder engagement topics to provide in-depth insights and recommendations. This includes addressing context-specific challenges, analysing the impact of interventions, and exploring novel approaches to governance.
7. Conduct research on the dependence mechanisms between urban centres and rural peripheries. Understand how urban areas rely on rural areas and vice versa. Explore the mutual dependence to gain insights into an effective governance structure. Improve the interconnections and interdependencies between rural and urban contexts. Enhance the understanding of local realities, aspirations, perspectives, ambitions, and strategies. Explore the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and services between urban and rural areas. Examine how power dynamics and resource allocation impact the well-being of residents.

Stakeholder engagement

There is a need for further research to assess the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and the role of various actors in multi-level governance, identifying problems that limit the involvement of rural communities in rural policies. About 9 MAPs provided suggestions for further research on stakeholder engagement: Wallonian MAP in Belgium, Sofia MAP in Bulgaria, Climate Friendly Village MAP in the Czech Republic, Spanish MAPs (Aragón, Galicia), CBioLit MAP in Lithuania, Romanian MAPs (Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges). The following recommendations present a synthesis of the prevalent proposals of these MAPs.

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement efforts and different forms of engagement on policy outcomes. This includes examining the impact of stakeholder engagement on decision-making processes and policy implementation.
2. Investigate the roles, challenges, and opportunities faced by local government authorities, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders in engaging with each other and implementing policies. This research can provide insights into the dynamics of multi-level governance and inform strategies for effective collaboration.
3. Research ways to reduce fragmentation among stakeholders to enhance their collective voice and influence in decision-making processes. This can involve exploring mechanisms for stakeholder aggregation, building networks, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholder groups.
4. Examine the impact of policies, particularly those implemented at the regional, national, or supranational level (e.g., EU policies), on multi-level governance. This includes assessing the effectiveness of policy instruments and funding mechanisms in promoting stakeholder engagement and achieving desired outcomes.
5. Explore strategies and tools to enhance stakeholder engagement in governance processes. This can involve examining innovative approaches, best practices, and lessons learned from various contexts to inform the development of effective engagement frameworks.
6. Identify and address bottlenecks in vertical (bottom-up/top-down) and horizontal coordination within governance structures. This research can help identify mechanisms and strategies for improving stakeholder coordination at different levels.
7. Study the impact of emerging technologies, such as digital technologies, on multi-level governance in rural areas. Understand the potential of these technologies for promoting stakeholder engagement, improving policy outcomes, and enhancing governance processes.

Participatory and inclusive governance

There is a clear need to understand participation patterns, incentivise engagement, address barriers, and harness digital tools. By exploring these aspects, 17 MAPs indicated that research can pave the way for more effective and inclusive governance, bridging gaps between stakeholders, encouraging citizen involvement, and leveraging technology for meaningful change: Wallonian MAP in Belgium, Rural Mapping MAP in Bulgaria, Hungarian MAPs (AKIS, Land-use, Rural Prosperity), CBioLit MAP in Lithuania, Greek MAPs (South Aegean, Central Greece and Peloponnese), Polish MAPs (Zachodniopomorskie, Zielone Sqsiedztwo), Romanian MAPs (Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges), South-East Drenthe MAP in The Netherlands, and UK MAPs (Rural Scotland and Dee Catchment). The following recommendations provide a synthesis of the most widespread suggestions across the 17 MAPs.



1. Conduct in-depth studies to identify the profiles of those who participate and those who do not participate in participatory or inclusive governance initiatives. Explore how this problem can be overcome and identify conditions that facilitate the emergence of participatory and inclusive governance.
2. Study financial incentives and tools that can encourage rural actors to become more involved in the governance of their localities. This research should identify effective mechanisms for incentivising participation and engagement.
3. Identify and address the problems occurring in rural areas that limit the involvement of the local community in rural policies. This research should explore communities' barriers and challenges and suggest solutions to increase participation.
4. Research the cultural barriers that hinder participation in the governance process. This research should identify the cultural factors contributing to a reactive rather than proactive attitude and explore strategies to overcome these barriers.
5. Explore the motivation and benefits of citizen involvement in the participatory process and examine how public authorities can effectively communicate these benefits. This research should assess the motivation and willingness of citizens to participate and contribute to successful governance initiatives voluntarily.
6. Investigate methods to increase the participation of young people in the governance of rural communities. This research should explore modern technologies and innovative approaches to engage young people effectively.
7. Identify the most appropriate regulatory framework to support the balanced participation of all stakeholders in the governance process. This research should explore the legal and policy mechanisms that facilitate inclusive participation.
8. Explore the process of designing e-government strategies from a top-down approach while ensuring bottom-up implementation. Analyse changes needed in strategic planning, structural characteristics of public administration, organisational culture, human resource management, and information system management to facilitate digital transformation and improve governance.

Knowledge transfer and capacity building

Enhancing knowledge transfer and capacity building for rural governance can strengthen its effectiveness. It is crucial to emphasise the role of education in fostering citizen empowerment and participation while addressing the challenge of improving communication and technological capabilities across stakeholders. The following recommendations seek to support future rural policies that can empower rural areas with the tools and insights needed for sustainable development. The recommendations build on the input received from 10 MAPs: the Spanish MAPs (Galicia, Aragón), the Polish MAPs (Zachodniopomorskie, Bieszczady, Zielone Sqsiedztwo), South-East Drenthe MAP in The Netherlands, MAP Alqueva in Portugal, and the Greek MAPs (South Aegean, Peloponnese and Central Greece).

1. Research the application of LEADER programmes in different territories and their impact on the generation of social capital. Explore how these programmes can effectively foster social connections, collaboration, and community development.
2. Investigate the conflicts among citizens' perspectives and identify the optimal level for decision-making in rural areas. This research should address the challenges and dynamics of decision-making processes to enhance governance effectiveness.
3. Explore strategies and interventions to strengthen social capital in rural areas by examining the role of community organisations, networks, and social interactions in building trust and collective action.
4. Study the importance of civic, social, and economic education in rural areas. Investigate how education programmes and initiatives can empower residents, enhance participation, and contribute to rural development.
5. Address the challenge of improving communication and information exchange between stakeholders and different spheres of governance. This research should identify strategies to bridge gaps in knowledge, facilitate information sharing, and enhance collaboration among stakeholders.
6. Define models that contribute to greater governance literacy and participative citizenship in practical ways. This research should focus on developing approaches and educational programmes that empower citizens to engage in governance processes actively.
7. Identify research gaps related to technology requirements in rural areas and address those needs through research initiatives. Focus on finding innovative solutions to bridge the gaps and improve technological capabilities in rural governance.

The future of research for rural communities/areas

These recommendations present a forward-looking perspective on the approaches and methods that future research should explore and consider when studying rural governance and rural communities. From interdisciplinary collaborations to localised analyses, inclusivity to scenario planning, these recommendations delineate a roadmap for researchers, policy-makers, and stakeholders alike to navigate the complex and evolving role of rural governance. Suggestions from 7 MAPs (Italian MAPs [Casentino, Montagna Toscana, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna], CBioLit MAP in Lithuania, Rura_PT in Portugal, Norbotten MAP in Sweden) were used for the formulation of the following recommendations:

1. Encourage interdisciplinary and intersectoral research projects that involve multiple stakeholders and perspectives. Foster collaboration between academia, civil society, and policy actors to generate comprehensive and holistic insights into rural issues.
2. Utilise research to support policies in adopting a proactive approach by developing scenarios and perspective studies. Explore potential future scenarios for rural territories.
3. Support and expand existing networks and initiatives in the investigated areas. Avoid overlap and resource wastage by investing in the continuity of initiatives beyond EU projects. Foster collaboration and knowledge exchange within established networks.
4. Utilise the university as a facilitator of synergies by implementing action-research and participatory approaches. Investigate the social impact of these actions and explore how they can create personal interactions, new relationships, and access to information for stakeholders. Foster aggregation and collaboration through university-led initiatives.
5. Conduct in-depth analysis and case studies to address specific barriers and challenges in rural areas. Move beyond simple and generalised indicators provided by statistical datasets. Through detailed research, identify specific barriers and explore effective strategies to overcome them.
6. Focus research efforts on specific topics at the regional and local levels. Tailor research projects to address rural areas' unique needs, challenges, and practices. This localised approach can provide context-specific insights and practical recommendations.
7. Promote inclusive research teams that include academic, civil society, and policy sector representatives. Address the challenge of reaching marginalised groups and those negatively affected by policy processes. Utilise innovative approaches such as social media, mobile technology, and community-based participatory research. Build trust and establish relationships with marginalised communities through collaboration with community leaders, advocates, and trusted intermediaries.



5. Contribution from the SHERPA EU MAP

The EU-level MAP met in May 2023 to discuss how to strengthen rural areas' influence in multilevel governance processes, informed by the results of the Position Notes of the SHERPA national and regional MAPs. Members of the EU-level MAP reflected on the recommendations developed by the MAPs relating to rural policies and discussed how these recommendations on governance of rural areas could be supported at the EU level, and research gaps and needs to be addressed by EU programming. The reflections of the meeting are summarised below.

5.1 Complexity of governance structures

Responsibilities and authority for the governance of rural areas vary between countries. Public, private, and voluntary sectors all have **some form of a role**, but in different types of arrangements (e.g. regulatory, legislative, partnership or collaboration, formal or informal) comprising participants who may be elected, appointed or volunteering. When a single organisation is involved (e.g. local authority, public agency) that may could involve multiple departments with their own remits and interrelationships all adding to the complexity of developing strategies, policies, making decisions and taking actions. The complexity of governance structures with remits for territories, services or functions in rural areas can be a **barrier** when trying to tackle a specific problem. Greater understanding is required of the structures, authorities (e.g. national, regional, local, private, and voluntary sectors), and frameworks currently in place in rural governance, and the subjects of their appointed or assumed responsibilities (e.g. land and/or natural resources, water, transport, services, and energy).

Each country, and in some cases regions, have their own approaches to providing frameworks of authority, responsibility, and actions. In general, simplification and improvements in governance structures in and for rural areas would be beneficial. **Multilevel governance is a much-discussed process** to simplify and strengthen decision-making structures in rural areas, but there is limited evidence of it being successfully implemented. The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) is an example of an EU level strategy but which requires actions to be taken by Member States at national and regional level. For example, Local Action Groups (LAGs) consider national and regional strategies for rural areas, or in specific domains (digital, climate, etc.), when developing their strategies. However, there is no obligation for national or regional authorities, or other governance structures of the private or third sector, to take these locally developed strategies into their planning or actions.

Such a shift towards **great community-led governance structures** could offer the potential to bringing together people in a local community in ways that enable them to take responsibility for specific aspects of community or place-based activities. However, it was noted that governance structures which are based upon a form of community ownership may be viewed as the ultimate aim rather than a focus on the outcomes sought. Otherwise, a risk is that the failure of such an approach may leave no obvious alternative option to follow.

The opportunities offered by **digital tools and online infrastructure** (even though these are still not easily accessible to the rural population) should be used to engage and/or empower rural inhabitants in relation to governance in rural areas. Through the mobilisation of such tools, the EU institutions could make a difference in the upscaling of projects, and in closing gaps between rural citizens and relevant authorities by improving means of communication. An aim of the use of digital tools and online resources should be to enhance capacities of citizens in matters relating to governance, and mutual levels of trust of all stakeholder groups.

5.2 Citizen participation in governance

The complexity of governance structures in rural areas can adversely impact the trust placed in them by rural inhabitants. To strengthen the basis of trust of all stakeholder groups in governance structures, there is a need for rural inhabitants (citizens, businesses, and other stakeholder groups) to be more responsive to, and involved in, tackling challenges facing rural areas.

One approach is to provide means of credible and understandable **citizen participation and involvement in the governance of rural areas**. There was unanimous agreement amongst the EU MAP members of the importance of this for successful and representative governance in rural areas, although they also agreed that its proper execution is difficult to undertake. It was emphasised that, from the outset, citizen participation processes should **have a clear purpose**: determine for what specific aspects of governance citizen participation is needed, when in the decision-making process it is needed, what could be used as incentives for citizens to participate, and in what form the follow-up would take.

Existing governance structures with responsibilities of relevance for organising and actively implementing citizen participation, in the public, private and third sectors, have to **have authority and means of following-up with actions**. Constraints which are encountered include limited staff and technical resources, or a lack of authority to design and allocate responsibilities to new forms of participation. For example, legal structures may be required, the provision of which may require national level legislation.

It was emphasised that responsible authorities require financial resources to enable the execution of citizen participation. It should be clear from the outset **how the contributions from citizens will be used** in developing future steps (i.e. the process must be transparent). The authorities leading the initiative need to make clear how they will deal with biases amongst rural stakeholder groups (e.g. Local Action Groups (LAG), non-profit organisations), notably those which are familiar with the processes used or their equivalents to ensure they do not dominate the discourse and overshadow new voices.

An example of citizen participation in governance structures which was shared with the MAP is that of local-place planning as executed in Scotland[3]. This is a methodology that bring together local stakeholders from a community to closely analyse their local area from multiple dimensions (i.e. economic, social, recreational, etc.) with a view to identifying needs and what is required for them to be realised.



[3] <https://www.ourplace.scot/home/local-place-plans>

However, such a process can be costly (e.g. needing professional facilitation, locally-based institutions, local development officers) and may be too focused on the short-term if there are no plans for continued follow-up. **Good practices on how to implement and finance citizen participation** in relation to successful forms of governance should be identified and shared. The aim would be to produce examples of positive outcomes of how citizens can be engaged, including how they achieved their outcomes, and when and why the processes used were really productive.

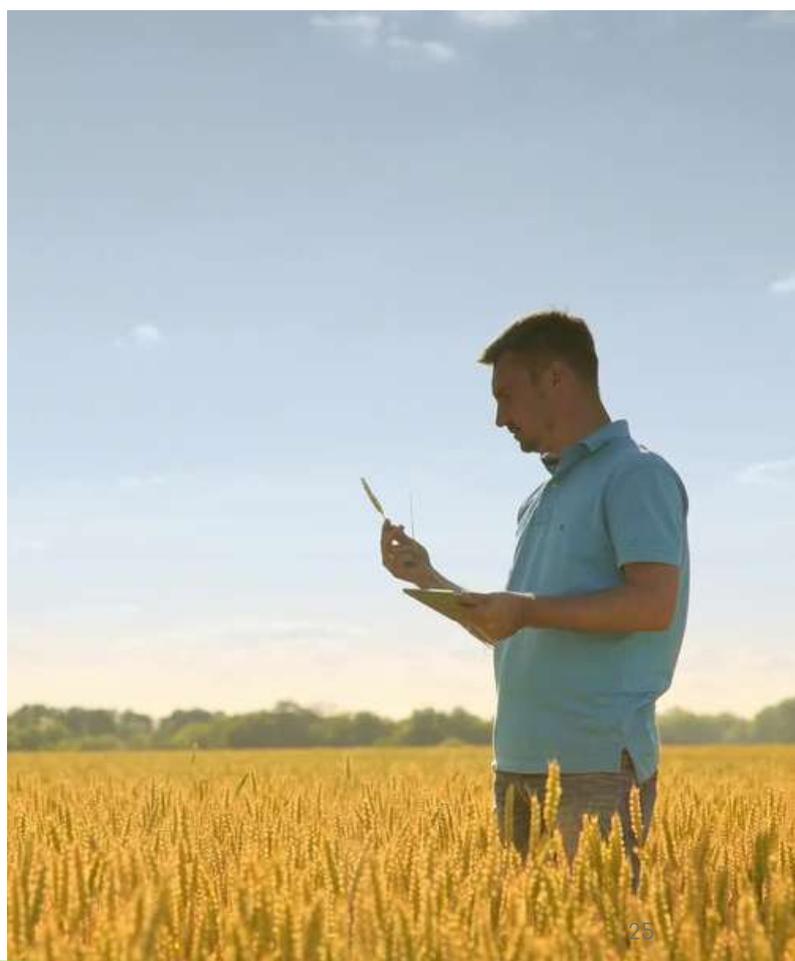
5.3 Involvement of all rural citizens in governance

Before considering how to implement citizen participation in governance processes in rural areas, a more contentious aspect requires to be addressed: **for whom is participation intended?** The demography of rural areas is continuously changing, and as the profiles of rural populations evolve, newcomers to areas (e.g. from urban areas, including secondary residents) are becoming a more prominent part of rural communities. The nature of the involvement of such newcomers in the governance processes of rural areas can be a sensitive topic. They are not always aware of, or are sensitive to, the needs, traditions, values, and historical contexts of local communities, which can mean they do not understand the intricacies which require to be considered when involved in governance structures relevant to rural areas.

Another further consideration is the eligibility of rural citizens to engage and influence governance affecting rural areas: **when do people have a right to be part of governance processes?** Proper representation of all facets of the rural population is important for citizen participation, which includes young people living in rural areas who are not of an eligible voting age. Such groups play an important role in rural demographic trends and should be able to make their voices heard but may be restricted in their influence of the governance of rural areas. Greater attention should be paid to how such groups can become involved in governance processes.

5.4 Suggestions for future rural research at EU level

Research is required to provide evidence that supports the empowerment of rural areas in their processes of governance. The governance structures and systems vary between Member States (and their regions), and comparisons between which would be beneficial to each other. Relevant topics for inclusion in EU research programmes would be an analysis of national governance frameworks to identify practices that are more or less conducive to rural involvement from countries within and out with the EU, from which to learn lessons and for use in inspiring authorities in the public, private and voluntary sectors. The research should include how and what is most effective in the creation of space for bottom-up approaches and horizontal cooperation across municipalities and governance structures. Related, forms of governance frameworks and structures should be analysed to determine if they are more appropriate for distinctive types of communities (e.g. islands, mountainous areas, etc.).



Furthermore, research outputs should be designed to be taken up by rural stakeholders in a concrete manner. Such research should focus on operationalising and piloting new governance models, upscaling and improving existing governance systems, identifying social innovation for stakeholder empowerment, and showcasing the importance of citizen engagement.

Means should be used to ensure that the benefits of participation in research are evident to rural stakeholders to encourage their contributions and stimulate demand for the findings and their uptake. As such, future research should study if (and how) rural stakeholders feel represented when it comes to governance in their rural area, and to what extent they feel heard and listened to. One aspect would be to investigate the extent to which different forms of media influence the governance of rural areas, the relative influence of urban centred media organisations compared to media local to rural areas, and to what extent the local authorities influence the development of policies that would affect their territory.

Certain governance practices and/or processes which work well in one Member State may not work as well in other Member States. This would reflect differences in political structures, cultural values, and history. Research into political and socio-economic contexts and structures of governance should include non-EU Member States (e.g. Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) to gather examples of issues to be or being addressed from beyond the EU borders, such as the local-place planning and new Regional Land Use Partnerships in Scotland.

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 MAPs, representing diverse regions across the EU, encountered similar challenges in rural governance, encompassing the inclusion of marginalised groups, complex decision-making processes, climate and environmental factors, regional disparities, and limited participation and representation of rural interests. Acknowledging these commonalities holds significance in shaping future policies and research agendas for rural areas. Furthermore, the critical requirements for advancing rural governance involve enhancing vertical coordination, empowering citizens through accessible participation tools, and fostering stakeholder collaboration. Addressing challenges related to bureaucracy, policy coherence, and trust in decision-making processes is imperative while leveraging the strengths of well-coordinated multi-level governance systems, active networks, and engagement of local actors. The existing actions and interventions identified in MAPs encompass a range of governance practices, reflecting endeavours to establish effective and inclusive governance systems in rural contexts. Recommendations for future rural policies centre around promoting participatory and inclusive governance, implementing place-based and multi-level approaches, and fostering collaborative governance. These recommendations underscore the significance of transparent frameworks, capacity building, civic education, trust-building, empowerment of marginalised groups, cooperation with civic organisations, coordinated policies, transparency, long-term funding and stakeholder participation. Future rural research should prioritise topics such as assessing good governance, exploring different governance models, evaluating policy impacts on multi-level governance, improving stakeholder engagement, and studying the effectiveness of participatory and inclusive governance initiatives.

Additionally, research areas encompass knowledge transfer, conflicts in decision-making, social capital, and civic education. Encouraging interdisciplinary research, supporting networks, and leveraging universities as facilitators of collaboration are further vital aspects. The conclusions mentioned above emphasise the need to address common challenges, fulfil key requirements, implement effective actions, and conduct pertinent research to enhance rural governance and ensure sustainable development in rural areas.

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List of MAP Fiches

- [MAP Fiche Wallonia, Belgium. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Sofia, Bulgaria. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Rural Mapping, Bulgaria. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Climate Friendly Village \(CFV\), Czech Republic. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche VENUS, Czech Republic. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Denmark. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Estonia. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Germany \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Greece \(South Aegean, Central Greece, Peloponnese\). \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Galician rural interfaces, Spain. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Innovation in rural development in Aragón, Spain. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Suomi, Finland. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Region PACA Sud, France. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Hungary \(AKIS, Land-use, Rural Prosperity\). \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Emilia Romagna, Italy. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Casentino and Tuscany, Italy. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Montagna Toscana, Italy. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Circular Bioeconomy \(CBioLit\), Lithuania. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Greenport, the Netherlands. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Climate Proof Ruralities, the Netherlands. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche South-East Drenthe, the Netherlands. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Zachodniopomorskie, Poland. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Bieszczady, Poland. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Zielone Sasieztwo, Poland. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Rural PT, Portugal. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche South West \(SW\), Portugal. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Alqueva, Portugal. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Romania \(Rural Transylvania, Iasi, Arges\). \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche SVARU, Slovenia. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche Norbotten, Sweden. \(2023\).](#)
- [MAP Fiche United Kingdom \(Rural Scotland, Dee Catchment\). \(2023\).](#)

Annex 1. Examples of interventions and actions

Type of intervention	MAPs
Urban-rural collaboration/partnerships	<p>MAP Rura_PT (Portugal) - Cerfundao is a producer's association whose role consists of helping farmers reduce transaction costs and in the processing and commercialisation of their products, thereby creating stronger rural-urban links in the food supply chains.</p> <p>MAP Rura_PT (Portugal)- RURBAN Link project aims to develop an urban/rural food system that optimises the flow of products from production to processing, distribution, and consumption and the consequent optimisation of the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and food waste.</p>
Horizontal coordination	<p>MAP Aragón (Spain) - Commissioner for dealing with depopulation: advisory position created in 2018 to work holistically to reverse the exodus from the countryside to the Aragonese cities.</p> <p>MAP Suomi (Finland) - Working groups under the Rural Policy Council.</p> <p>MAP Alqueva (Portugal) - The Regional Coordination and Development Commission of Alentejo promotes thematic forums that enhance coordination and dialogue across different stakeholders. For instance, the Circular Economy Forum was created to promote and disseminate circular principles in the region and bring together stakeholders from academia, government, civil society and business.</p>

<p>Vertical coordination</p>	<p>MAP Estonia - Engagement of different levels for strategic planning e.g. CAP.</p> <p>MAP Aragón (Spain) - Law on sustainable development of rural areas & Programa de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible.</p> <p>MAP Aragón (Spain) - Sectoral Conference for demographic challenge cooperation body created in 2020 between the Spanish government and the Autonomous Regions to coordinate and cooperate in policies aimed at tackling demographic challenges, etc</p> <p>MAP Aragón (Spain) - Counties Cooperation Council is a body created in 2002 seeking to reinforce the relationship and coordination between different administrations, mainly between the local administrations and the Aragonese Government.</p>
<p>Intermunicipal and interregional collaboration</p>	<p>MAP Suomi (Finland) - Network of small municipalities of the Association of Municipalities offers an advocacy, discussion and development forum for small municipalities (less than 10,000 inhabitants) and rural affairs.</p> <p>Hungarian MAPs - Association of Climate-Friendly Municipalities is an association with a thematic focus. The association enables knowledge sharing and collaboration with the general public as well as with higher levels of government. Since 2018 the Association has also been involved in the National Council for Sustainable Development[4].</p>
<p>Data and information</p>	<p>MAP Emilia Romagna (Italy) - Information flows to farmers including weekly irrigation bulletin, live information through SMS and website.</p> <p>MAP Montagna Toscana (Italy) - The Land Bank of Tuscany Region is an inventory of public and private lands that are made available through rentals or other forms of contracts to promote the use of abandoned lands by fostering young entrepreneurship, the safeguard of biodiversity, landscape and forestry heritage, etc.</p>
<p>Knowledge and experience-sharing mechanisms to bridge the divide between science, policy and practice</p>	<p>Hungarian MAPs - Best Practices Programme in Hungary LÖGY aims to identify local governmental best and innovative practices and share them to other municipalities in the country.</p>

[4] <https://klimaborat.hu/>

<p>Stakeholder engagement in rural policies and decisions</p>	<p>MAP Venus (Czech Republic) – Personal meeting with rural actors, collection of needs and identification of problem.</p> <p>MAP Denmark – Sønderborg Model is a partnership model focusing on reducing CO2 emissions and creating a more sustainable city and region.</p> <p>MAP Denmark - Better Energy in Tønder Municipality is a strategy for transitioning to renewable energies in a sustainable and inclusive manner.</p> <p>MAP Suomi Finland - Harvaturva is a network of authorities, NGOs and experts interested in the safety and security of sparsely populated areas.[5]</p> <p>MAP Suomi Finland - Rural association cooperation network 'Eläköön maaseutu' includes researchers, advisors, developers, trustees, communicators and many other experts. They organise events, raising awareness and advocacy activities, etc[6].</p> <p>MAP Tuscany (Italy) – Participatory process to collect ideas and structure the work for the Regional Centre for Training and Competences on Traditional Agri-food products.</p> <p>MAP Montagna Toscana (Italy) - 'Custodi della montagna' is a form of economic incentive dedicated to SMEs (existing or to-be) willing to start a business or to re-organise a pre-existing economic activity in a disadvantaged mountain area. The initiative aims at fighting depopulation and revitalising mountain areas both from a social and an economic perspective. Companies can also sign a 'community pact' with the municipality, offering extra economic benefits, in exchange for the maintenance and protection of forests and biodiversity. (this is a form of making rural areas attractive!).</p> <p>MAP Iasi (Romania) - Food for Iași Living Lab (FILL) is an innovative collaborative hub with the purpose to connect actors and operators of the urban food system of Iași city in order to identify the most important problems of the system and find innovative solutions to solve these problems. (it is a city though!).</p> <p>MAP Rural Transylvania (Romania) - AgroTransilvania Cluster is an association established in 2013 at the initiative of the Cluj County Council that brings together relevant actors of the agri-food chain in this county, together with local public.</p>
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[5] https://api.hankeikkuna.fi/asiakirjat/65c82a89-def1-4352-97c0-a54640e99e3a/3607e189-bbaf-49e6-abaf-ac4bd8c6d6d9/RAPORTTI_20210517111608.pdf

[6] <https://www.mtk.fi/-/elakoonmaaseutu>

<p>New technologies to involve citizens and other actors</p>	<p>MAP Denmark – Citizen Lab is a digital platform for citizen participation.</p> <p>MAP Aragón (Spain) – Open Aragon is the open data portal of the Aragón Region Government, offering public consultations and participatory processes.</p> <p>MAP Aragón (Spain) – EAgora is an online platform used by several local governments to facilitate citizen engagement processes.</p> <p>MAP Suomi (Finland) – Otakantaa platform to collect citizens' opinions on current projects.</p> <p>MAP Zachodniopomorskie (Poland) - Science for the Environment Foundation (NGO): Koszalin - A model of cooperation with the local community.</p>
<p>Participation of underrepresented groups</p>	<p>MAP Aragón (Spain) - El Programa de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible incluirá medidas destinadas a satisfacer necesidades y demandas sociales de grupos de población que requieran una atención prioritaria, en particular, las mujeres, los jóvenes, los mayores y las personas con discapacidad.</p> <p>MAP Bieszczady (Poland) - The Youth Council of the Municipality is a body consultative body representing young people for the Municipality of Ustrzyki Dolne. The Council consists of 15 councillors, the term of office lasts 3 years.</p> <p>MAP Bieszczady (Poland) - "Between Us Women" is the name of a development workshop organised in December 2022 in Ustrzyki Górne (Lutowiska municipality) aimed exclusively at women aiming at supporting, empowering, networking and also inspiring women to take further action in their local communities.</p> <p>MAP Bieszczady (Poland) - KGW "Babiniec - Czarna i Przyjaciele" is an example of a rural housewives' circle that is active, gets involved in the municipality's activities, involves local people in its activities and forms a strong partnership with the local government, the municipal cluster centre and other housewife's circles.</p>
<p>Capacity gaps</p>	<p>MAP CBioLit (Lithuania) - Druskininkai LAG Priority: Building and empowering smart communities.</p>



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