



SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

D7.5 - SECOND SET



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF FUTURE RURAL POLICIES



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SECOND SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF FUTURE RURAL POLICIES

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Acronyms

AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
COP	Convention of the Parties. The 'Parties' are the governments which have signed the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC)
COVID-19	Coronavirus 19
DG Agri	Directorate General Agriculture and Rural Development
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EAGF	European Agricultural Guarantee Fund
EC	European Commission
EEA	European Environment Agency
EIP-Agri	European Innovation Partnership Agriculture
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
ERDF	European Rural Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESR	Effort Sharing Regulation
EU	European Union
GHGs	Greenhouse Gases
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
LTVRA	Long Term Vision for Rural Areas
LULUCF	Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry
MAP	Multi-Actor Platform
NRL	Nature Restoration Law
NRN	National Rural Networks
PO	Producer Organisation
RAP	Rural Action Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEAP	Social Economy Action Plan
SHERPA	Sustainable Hub to Engage into Rural Policies with Actors
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change



Executive Summary

This deliverable reports the second set of policy recommendations of the SHERPA project, developed from its Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs). It builds on the first set of recommendations for policy and actions which contributed to planning of the Long Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA; [European Commission, 2021a](#)) and its Rural Action Plan.

The second set of recommendations for future rural policies developed from the SHERPA process have been aligned to the four pillars and component building blocks of the Rural Action Plan.

The process of formulating and synthesising recommendations for future rural policies was based on a continuous dialogue between MAPs, the SHERPA partners in charge of drafting Position Papers, and the SHERPA Think Tank. The draft recommendations were reviewed and debated by panels drawn from European level interests and SHERPA MAPs at the [SHERPA Final Conference \(1st, 2nd June 2023\)](#). Their relative importance was then ranked by participants, and a follow-up poll of members of all SHERPA MAPs. The outcome of this process is a final set of headline recommendations, and their prioritisation, per pillar, which follow:

Stronger rural areas

1. **Establish and maintain Science-Society-Policy interfaces** aimed at fostering interactions, deliberation and decision-making. Such multi-actor platforms have shown to be effective hubs for the co-creation of solutions to tackle complex issues faced by rural areas.
2. **Empower rural citizens** through existing or new governance structures which draw upon approaches such as LEADER and CLLD. Those structures, paired with appropriate capacity building, will empower rural citizens to participate in citizen-led allocation of funds and to be directly implicated in opportunities such as Horizon Europe rural projects.
3. **Establish exchange programmes, e.g. Rural Erasmus**, which will enable the exchange of experiences between rural areas on Europe facing similar social problems (e.g. field trips, study tours), as well as to foster the exchange of good practices, in line with action 4 on education and training.

Connected rural areas

1. **Rural e-services** aimed at facilitating digital access to public services and systems (e.g. e-government and e-banking), centralising the online provision of basic services, and the use of “mobile offices” to enable residents to do administrative tasks directly from home.
2. **Cooperative approach for digitalisation** to encourage cooperation amongst societal groups (including policy-makers, businesses, civil society and research) to design strategies and exchange best practices (e.g. creation of spaces for the co-design of locally adapted strategies).
3. **Enhanced skills and digital competences** with improved access to technical assistance and needs-based services in key sectors at local level and targeted at particularly vulnerable groups.

Resilient rural areas –

1. **Develop citizen-led approaches to climate action** aimed at stimulating place-based, territorial actions (e.g. participatory budgeting from levies on largescale renewable energy developments);
2. **Promote** existing good practices and **virtuous examples** of actions (e.g. multi-media demonstrations of best practices of just transition);
3. **Develop a climate** community-oriented **communications** strategy, tailored to local contexts of life, work and responsibilities.



Prosperous rural areas

1. **Encouraging local food provision**, including actions to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives within local and sustainable value chains such as mandatory requirements of green public procurement, investments in local infrastructures, and support for marketing schemes that increase confidence in locally-produced food;
2. **Strengthening the social economy**, incentivising community empowerment and collaboration between municipalities to achieve an equitable green transition;
3. **Supporting young people in entrepreneurship**, namely actions to promote the development of, and access to, education, training and networks of advice, and mentoring systems for young people from across rural actor types tailored to local contexts of rural economy, needs, and responsibilities.

Beyond the headline actions proposed by SHERPA, MAP members proposed additional actions that could be included in the Rural Action Plan, foremost of which are:

- design CAP interventions aimed at supporting local foresight exercises to empower appropriate local governance structures to elaborate local strategies in the context of climate change and extreme climate events;
- ensure a holistic urban-rural approach to policies, which considers the interlinkages between the two whilst ensuring that the challenges of rural areas are properly addressed;
- capitalise on the social capital of rural areas, including that possessed by the elderly (e.g. through strengthening inter-generational dialogue) and new comers;
- ensure multi-functional land use planning that maximises the value of rural land taking into account its specificities, i.e. identifying areas which most suitable for production, tourism, forests or wetlands.

A public consultation for the next policy reform will begin in 2024, and the first legislative proposal of the European Commission for the next Multi-Financial Framework is scheduled to be published by 2025. Both steps are crucial milestones for future policies impacting rural areas and communities. Against this background, SHERPA explored options and recommendations for the post-2027 policy framework. Three approaches to future policy were prepared by the Think Tank from the MAP deliberations: Business as Usual, Rural Acceleration, and a New Model. These were presented to the [SHERPA Final Conference \(1st, 2nd June 2023\)](#) for debate and from which three final recommendations were developed which reflect a 'rural acceleration':

1. **Make use of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas as a structuring element for future policies;**
2. **Ensure sufficient funding for rural territories and communities through either a new fund or ringfencing of existing funds (for example Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy);**
3. **Through science-society-policy interfaces, ensure early participation of the society and science from rural territories in the preparation of the next policy reform.**



1. Introduction

Rural areas represent 83% of the EU territory (2018 data) and provide a home to 30.6% of the EU's population¹. They provide considerable natural resources, diverse ecosystems, and vibrant economic activities. However, they also face increasing challenges to their human, social and natural capital.

Many rural areas are facing depopulation and an aging population as young people migrate to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts caused by climate change, threatens the lives and livelihoods of rural residents². These changes, which are projected to increase over coming decades, affect economic activities such as the agriculture, forestry and aquaculture sectors which, together, employ an estimated 10% to 15% of the rural population (2018 data)³ and represent a significant proportion of the EU rural economy. Rural areas are also adversely impacted upon by inadequate digital and territorial connectivity, and limited access to basic services, such as education, healthcare, and cultural activities. Combined, these types of issues are rendering rural areas less attractive to new businesses, investors, and younger people.

Historically, the EU has relied on its two main structural policies to address rural needs: cohesion policy for developing a regional policy; and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) through a rural development pillar. These two policies have their specific dedicated funds: the Cohesion fund, the European Rural Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) for structural and investment funds, and the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) for the first pillar of the CAP. In turn, these funds have shaped EU policy interventions relating to rural areas since the 1980s. Despite the addition of objectives and measures in favour of strengthening cultural and communication institutions and infrastructures in the two most recent CAP reforms, interventions continue to be based on a 'agri-centric' vision of rural development with a stronger environmental aspect (Féret *et al.*, 2020; D3.2). However, the current European Commission promoted the revival of rural areas as a 'places of well-being, security, eco-living and new possibilities for social and economic renewal' (European Commission, 2021a). Since then, several new strategic policy instruments and support actions have been launched to revive rural areas across Europe.

This deliverable reports the second set of policy recommendations of the SHERPA project, developed from its Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs). The following sub-sections briefly describe the current EU policy framework for rural areas and SHERPA's multi-actor research process. Section 2 details its contributions to, and recommendations for, the future implementation of the main elements of the EU's Long-term Vision for Rural Areas. The deliverable concludes with a look to the future, identifying options for the development of rural policy post-2027.

¹ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/maps-data/rural-areas-numbers_en

² https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SHERPA_PositionPaper-LTVRA.pdf

³ <https://agridata.ec.europa.eu/extensions/DashboardIndicators/JobsGrowth.html>



1.1. The EU Policy Framework for Rural Areas

In June 2021, the European Commission published its Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (hereafter "LTVRA" or "Vision"), which highlights the specific needs of rural areas. It aims to encourage a wide-ranging European debate on the future and the roles these territories should play in European society. The Vision identifies ten goals grouped into four complementary areas of action ('pillars') to make EU's rural areas, **stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous** by 2040².

The overall aims of the actions within these four pillars are:

1. **Stronger:** to support empowerment of rural communities, access to services to facilitate social innovation, spatial planning and youth involvement;
2. **Connected:** to boost sustainable transport links and digitalisation with investments in infrastructure, technology development and skills enhancement activities;
3. **Resilient:** to increase environmental, climatic and social resilience through investments in storing carbon in peatland and wetlands, enhancing soil health and improving prospects for women and vulnerable groups;
4. **Prosperous:** to support the social economy, addressing needs of young people, promoting bioeconomy and supporting producer organisations and producer groups.

To help achieve these goals, the Vision also proposed a **Rural Action Plan** and a **Rural Pact**.

The **Rural Pact**⁴ was launched in 2021. Its main objectives are to bring different rural voices together to the political agenda and improve the sharing of experiences. It aims to strengthen the governance of rural areas by fostering cooperation among stakeholders at the European, national, regional, and local levels. It seeks to encourage support for the Vision by increasing the participation of the main actors involved in rural development decisions. To this end, interested parties were invited to contribute to the development of the Rural Pact, and commit to the 10 goals set out in the Vision. The proposal was endorsed at the Rural Pact conference on 16th June 2022⁵. By the autumn of 2022, 1,200 organisations and individuals had joined the Rural Pact community.

The **Rural Action Plan** is structured into four areas (pillars) of objectives and contains nine flagship initiatives and accompanying actions (building blocks). These actions have been set out by the European Commission with a view to actively help rural communities and businesses to reach their full potential by 2040. A strong emphasis is placed on innovation and digitalisation as well as improvements in public infrastructure. Flagships target topics such as climate change, the social dimension of rural areas, gender equality, demographic issues, and working conditions, in particular in the agriculture sector. The Plan seeks to the diversification of the economic activities of rural areas based on sustainable local economic strategies. The implementation of the EU Rural Action Plan is overseen by the European Commission and updated on a regular basis in close relationship with Member States and rural actors, with means of monitoring progress.

In December 2022, the European Commission launched the **Rural Observatory**⁶ which aims to improve data collection and dissemination related to EU rural areas. This is complemented by the Rural Revitalisation Platform⁷, established in June 2023, which aims to help rural communities to collaborate, and share information and good practices (Pagnon *et al.*, 2023; D3.1). A **rural proofing** mechanism is also proposed,

⁴ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-pact_en

⁵ European Commission (n.d). Rural Pact Community. Rural Vision Europa website. European Commission. 23rd February 2023. https://rural-vision.europa.eu/index_en

⁶ <https://observatory.rural-vision.europa.eu/?lng=en&ctx=RUROBS>

⁷ https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-revitalisation_en



as part of the better regulation guidelines and toolbox, to enable EU policies to be reviewed through a 'rural lens' to identify and acknowledge their potential impact on rural jobs, growth and sustainable development⁴.

Together with the LTVRA, the development of rural areas is a co-benefit of several high-level strategies and environmental and sectoral policy instruments ([Pagnon et al., 2023; D3.1](#)):

- The EU Farm to Fork Strategy, published in May 2020, sets out a roadmap to make food systems fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly. It has four main objectives: ensuring sustainable food production; stimulating sustainable food processing, wholesale, retail, hospitality, and food service; promoting sustainable food consumption; and reducing food loss and waste. It sets out the following non-binding targets for 2030:
 - Reducing nutrient losses by at least 50%, and use of mineral fertilizers by 20%;
 - Reducing the use and risk of chemical pesticides and use of more hazardous pesticides by 50%;
 - Reducing the sales of antimicrobials in animal farming and aquaculture by 50%;
 - Increasing the share of agricultural land under organic farming to least 25%;
 - Halving per capita food waste at retail and consumer levels by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal, SDG, Target 12.3).
- The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030⁸, establishes a set of ambitious targets with relevance for Europe's rural areas including:
 - Protecting 30% of EU land, and strict protection of one third of existing protected areas, including all remaining EU primary and old-growth forests;
 - Planting 3 billion trees by 2030;
 - Restoring at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers;
 - Legally binding EU nature restoration targets;
 - At least 10% of agricultural area under high-diversity landscape features;
 - Halting and reversing the decline of pollinators.

Additional objectives are defined by sectoral policies such as the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), the Energy Efficiency Directive, the Renewable Energy Directive, and the [Regulation on land, land use change and forestry \(LULUCF\)](#). These types of policies set targets which will have impacts on land use, resource management and economic activities in the affected sectors in rural areas. For example, The Regulation on Land requires Member States to set national targets for reducing their emissions, *inter alia* using the carbon removals potential offered by the land use and agricultural sector. Related, the European Commission is working on a new Carbon Certification Scheme to promote the uptake of innovative carbon removal technologies and sustainable carbon farming solutions⁹. Despite such policy instruments setting objectives and targets for rural areas, instruments which provide central funding for the implementation of actions is limited.

Of particular significance to implementation of the LTVRA are the Cohesion and Agriculture policies.

- The **Cohesion Policy framework** aims to support every EU region in the green and digital transition. It is delivered through four main funds: the European Regional Development Fund

⁸ Stemming from the Biodiversity 2030 Strategy, the European Commission published a proposal for a [Nature Restoration Law in June 2022](#), which includes legally binding targets related to protected areas, reversing the decline of pollinators and farmland birds, improving soil organic carbon, increasing landscape features, and protecting and restoring peatlands and wetlands. At the time of publication, the proposal is being negotiated in the EU Council and EU Parliament.

⁹ https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/sustainable-carbon-cycles/carbon-removal-certification_en#what-is-it-about



(ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund, a reinforced European Social Fund, called European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and the Just Transition Fund. With national co-funding, these will finance programmes in the EU regions and countries for the 2021-2027 period.

- Alongside cohesion policy, the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** is the main policy framework which directly supports rural areas. The current CAP for the 2023-2027 programming period sets nine specific objectives in total (one cross-cutting objective on knowledge and innovation, three on economic, three on social, and three that are environment and climate-related). Overall, the CAP for the period has a budget of €387 billion, of which 75% (€291.1 billion) is allocated to Pillar I, focused on supporting farm incomes, and 25% (€95.5 billion) to Pillar II, dedicated to rural development. At least 35% of Pillar II is required to be allocated to measures to support climate, biodiversity, environment and animal welfare. The CAP also pursues the goal of being fairer to farmers by improving the distribution of income support and address the income needs of small and medium-sized farms. For example, it made the complementary redistributive income support compulsory by dedicating to it at least 10% of national direct payment envelope 22. CAP Pillar II is co-financed by the EU budget through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and Member States. The EAFRD, which includes the LEADER programme, is no longer governed by the Common Provisions Regulation and therefore the rules governing cohesion policy.

The characteristics of rural areas are such that other areas of policy of relevance, at EU level, extend across a very broad range of remits, intersecting environment, society, energy, transport, democracy, skills and education. These are identified in the relevant SHERPA Discussion and Position Papers.

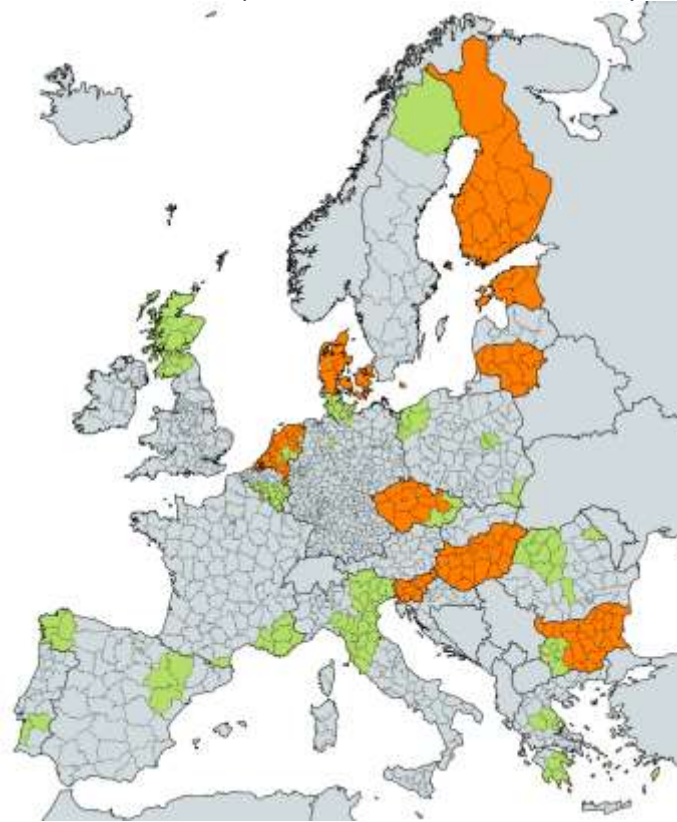
1.2. The SHERPA Process

The overall objective of SHERPA was to gather relevant knowledge that contributes to the formulation of recommendations for future policies relevant to EU rural areas. The infrastructure used to achieve that objective was the use of Science-Society-Policy interfaces in the form of Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs). These provided forums for two-way exchanges of ideas for co-learning and co-creation of knowledge with actors at European and local levels (Potters *et al.*, 2021).

The geographic distribution of the MAPs is shown in Figure 1. Each SHERPA MAP represented a local, regional, or national network bringing together key actors interested or operating in the context of rural areas. Twenty-one SHERPA MAPs were established in Phase 1 (January 2020 to October 2021), and 20 in Phase 2 (2022-2023), across 19 EU Member States, the United Kingdom (Scotland), and one MAP at EU level.



Figure 1. Geographic distribution of the 40 regional and national MAPs established by SHERPA (note, a further MAP had a remit at European level; areas in green represent national and regional MAPs established in Phase 1, and areas in red represent MAPs established in Phase 2).



Through the period of the project the MAPs worked on 10 topics of:

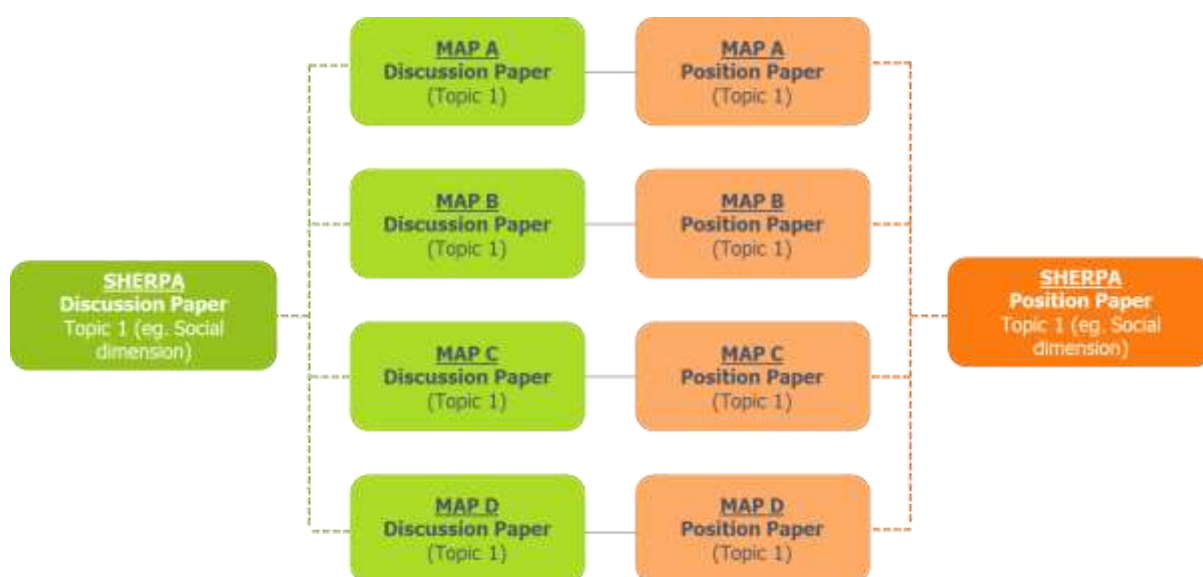
1. Biodiversity and landscape features (pilot)
2. Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (SHERPA)
3. Climate change and environmental sustainability
4. Change in production and diversification of the rural economy
5. Foresight exercise alternative rural futures: how to get there?
6. The social dimension of rural areas
7. Digitalisation in rural areas
8. Climate change and land-use
9. Towards sustainable and resilient value chains
10. Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes.

In Phase 1, a pilot was run to test the SHERPA process on a topic agreed with DG Agri of Rural Policies To Protect And Enhance Biodiversity Through Landscape Features. This was followed by all MAPs addressing their Long Term Vision for Rural Areas by 2040. This was selected to reflect the timing of the development of the EU LTVRAs. In preparation for Phase 2, the MAPs were invited to identify topics of potential interest. The SHERPA Think Tank, which comprises representatives from each Work Package, facilitators of four regional MAPs and the EU level MAP, selected a candidate set and used them to plan the three subsequent rounds of the SHERPA process.

For each topic, a SHERPA Discussion Paper, based on results of EU-funded research projects (e.g., H2020, and Framework Programmes 6 and 7) was produced and disseminated to the MAPs. The latter used these papers as an evidence basis to inform their deliberations from which they produced [Position Papers](#). These were synthesised to produce a SHERPA position paper on each topic into which the EU level MAP provided its recommendations. The set of position papers form the basis for the recommendations presented in this document, as outlined in the methodology section 2.2.1. SHERPA Discussion and Position papers are accessible on the [project website](#). The SHERPA recommendations for future research are provided in Miller *et al.* (2023a; [D7.4](#)).

The figure below provides a generic illustration of the SHERPA process through which recommendations for policy and research have been developed.

Figure 2. The SHERPA process for developing a project position paper and recommendations for policies and research agendas.



2. SHERPA Contribution to the LTVRA, Action Plan and Rural Pact

The SHERPA approach of co-constructing position papers on themes with contemporary policy relevance, coupled with its engagement strategy has led to contributions to the development and implementation of the LTVRA. The [first set of recommendations for development of future rural policies](#) (Miller *et al.*, 2022; [D7.3](#)) set out the early engagement and contributions to initiatives of the LTVRA team early drafts of which were shared with EC officers, and formed the basis of conversations over where recommendations could be most effective (e.g. in the EU level MAP).

The findings from the second phase of SHERPA have been brought together in this deliverable and the recommendations aligned with the building blocks in each of the four pillars of the Rural Action Plan (see Section 2.2). Based on the SHERPA experience, and particularly its multi-actor approach, key opportunities were identified for effectively exploiting the Rural Pact for the delivery of the LTVRA and concrete projects and measures (see Section 2.3).

2.1. SHERPA Contributions to the Development of the LTVRA

In July 2020, the European Commission published its Roadmap to the LTVRA ([European Commission, 2020](#)). In response, all 20 MAPs elaborated their visions for their rural areas during the first full MAP cycle (see Section 1.2) to enable a SHERPA contribution to the development of the European Commission’s Vision.



The MAPs collected and organised the views of their member stakeholders from which they developed visions and desired futures for 2040 for their rural areas. The MAPs focused on identifying local challenges, opportunities and create their vision for the development of their territory through to 2040. This provided the basis of the identification of enablers (Table 1), opportunities, research requirements, and recommendations for policy.

The preliminary materials and SHERPA position paper on long term visions for rural areas ([Chartier et al., 2021a](#)) was used to inform inputs to consultations by the European Commission on the LTVRA, such as the Roadmap. The high level message submitted from SHERPA stressed the difference of rural areas from urban areas, highlighting the importance of policy support to tackle demographic shifts, impacts of climate change, social and geographical inequalities, build a sustainable rural future, changing the perception of rural areas, with an example of investment of digitalisation of services, summarised in Box 1.

Box 1. Extract from the submission by SHERPA to consultation on the Roadmap LTVRA.

Discussions within the MAPs confirmed the significance of:

- **The predominant trend of demographic shift. Depopulation, especially in intermediate and remote areas, and population ageing, have been identified as the main demographic challenges currently faced by European rural areas;**
- **Climate change, through greater frequency of extreme meteorological phenomena such as higher temperatures (leading to drought and forest fires) and lower annual precipitation, which affects activities carried out in rural areas (e.g. agriculture, forestry and fishing);**
- **The evolution of the digitisation of services and the use of new technologies but noting that access to broadband remains uneven across territories.**

The SHERPA Position Paper on the Long-Term Vision for the Rural Area ([Chartier et al., 2021a](#)) presented the visions for rural areas for 2040 of the 20 regional and national MAPs and the EU-level MAP. It set out the enabling factors required to achieve those visions, the challenges to overcome and the opportunities to be taken. The overarching vision of the SHERPA MAPs was that *"In 2040, rural areas are attractive places for people to live and settle"*.

The visions of the individual MAPs have some common themes of basic services and infrastructure, climate, environment and sustainability, smart rurality and digitalisation, governance and participation, knowledge data, and images, rural economies, and social capital. For each of these themes the SHERPA MAPs identified the enablers necessary to achieve their visions (Table 1). Many of these enablers are universal in nature, whilst others are context-specific.

the MAPs identified 13 enablers for achieving the overarching vision. Of these, three enablers were most frequently identified: enhancing smart rurality and digitalisation, empowering local actors, and communities, and enhancing multi-level and territorial governance.

Table 1. Categories of enablers to achieve rural visions.

Overarching themes of visions	Enablers
Basic services and infrastructure	Improving accessibility of infrastructure and basic services
Climate, environment, and sustainability	Enhancing climate change and environmental services, policies and practices



	Land use planning improved
Smart rurality and digitalisation	Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation
Governance and participation	Empowering local actors and communities
	Enhancing multi-level and territorial governance
	Funding improved
Knowledge, data and images	Positive images and narratives
	Data and knowledge
Rural economies	Shift in production and diversification of the rural economy
	Bio- and circular economy boosted
Social capital	Enhancing and developing policies and tools for attractiveness, quality of life and wellbeing
	Young people at centre stage

The SHERPA vision of rural areas proposed that:

1. Rural areas of Europe are attractive in their own right and, as a consequence of the high quality of life available, many such areas are appealing places to live, work and visit;
2. Long-term visions of rural areas are characterised by opportunity, innovation, modernity, liveliness, resilience and equality, their sustainable and multi-functional environments;
3. There is a need for mechanisms that ensure that rural matters are addressed in a coordinated and coherent manner in all areas of policy;
4. Key enablers to achieve their vision are enhanced multi-level and territorial governance that empowers local actors and communities facilitated through flexible funding schemes that are relevant to the characteristics of different areas.

These key messages were conveyed in a series of contributions to engagement with the EC and wider stakeholders in the period during which the LTVRA was being developed, through the public consultations and to inform the analytical work (European Commission, 2021b). The Communication on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas up to 2040 was based on foresight exercises, background research and analysis of data relating to rural areas, and consultations with citizens and other rural actors. It recognises the challenges and concerns (e.g. shrinking and aging population, lack of connectivity, absence of diverse employment opportunities) of rural areas, and aims to address these by using the most promising opportunities in rural areas (e.g. the EU's green and digital transitions, lessons learnt from the COVID 19 pandemic, potential for economic growth). Broadly, the LTVRA themes and areas of action reflect the visions of the SHERPA MAPs of rural areas characterised by opportunity, innovation, modernity, liveliness, resilience, and equality, providing sustainable and multi-functional environments. Such consistency suggests that, collectively, the evidence garnered and communicated by the [SHERPA MAPs](#) was in line with the wider evidence gathered in developing the LTVRA.



2.2. SHERPA Recommendations for the Rural Action Plan

The **Rural Action Plan** aims to stimulate sustainable, cohesive, and integrated rural development in EU policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy and the Cohesion Policy, through which the Vision is realised. It comprises four pillars of Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous rural areas, each of which has specific building blocks of actions. It includes cross-cutting actions such rural proofing, guiding stakeholders on how to use EU funds, improving rural evidence and availability of data and statistics (including Open Science), and proposing a Rural Pact.

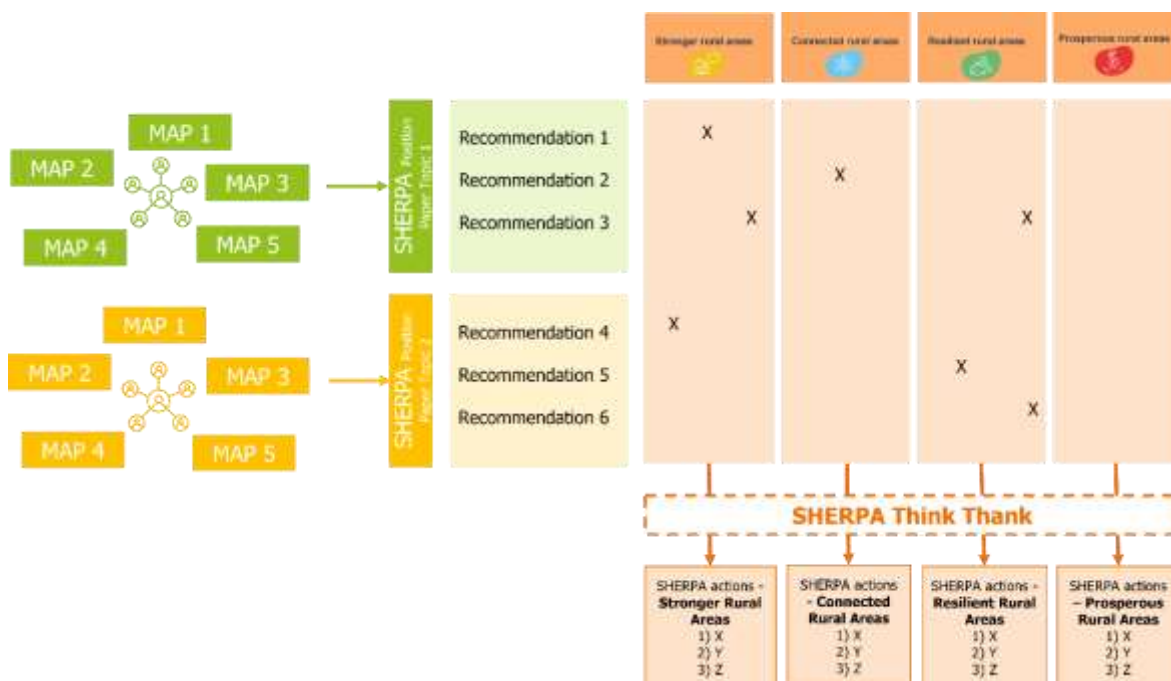
The following sections provides a summary of the methodology used, and policy recommendations aligned to the Pillars and building blocks of the Rural Action Plan.

2.2.1. Methodology

One of the main objectives of SHERPA was to provide recommendations for setting the direction of rural policy in the next programming period. The recommendations presented in this deliverable represent the culmination of the work performed throughout the entire duration of the project and directly stem from the recommendations provided by MAPs on each of the topics covered by SHERPA (see Section 1.2).

As bottom-up approaches lie at the heart of SHERPA approach, MAPs were central actors in the co-creation of the policy recommendations presented in the following sections. These sets of recommendations were synthesised by the SHERPA Think Tank and formulated within the framework of the pillars of the Rural Action Plan and their building blocks, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Methodology used to align recommendations from the SHERPA position papers for each Rural Action Plan pillar and specific building blocks.



The process of formulating and synthesising recommendations for future rural policies was based on a continuous dialogue between MAPs, the SHERPA partners in charge of drafting Position Papers, and finally the SHERPA Think Tank.

The principal steps followed to formulate the recommendations for future rural policies were as follows:

1. Each cycle of MAP deliberations were informed by the results of EU-funded research projects presented in the [SHERPA Discussion Papers](#). Outputs of the discussions of the MAPs, in their local context, were recommendations for policy, and for research (see Miller *et al.*, 2023a; [D7.4](#)) and reported in [MAP Position Papers](#).
2. For each topic, the recommendations of the MAPs were synthesised into draft Position Papers led by MAP facilitators and partner teams and then shared with the EU level MAP to inform their discussion. Feedback from the EU level MAP informed final editing of the SHERPA level Position Paper and final recommendations on each topic (Annex 1 for the headline messages from each Position Paper).
3. Using the ten SHERPA Position Papers, the SHERPA Think Tank performed a “mapping exercise” in which the recommendations from the position papers were screened and mapped against the building blocks of the four pillars of the LTVRA (see Figure 3). The output led to a preliminary final set of high level recommendations aligned to the pillars of the Rural Action Plan.
4. Refinement and prioritisation of recommendations were undertaken in two steps.
 - Panels at the [SHERPA Final Conference](#) discussed the recommendations and their significance, followed by participants ranking the recommendations according to importance.
 - MAP members were surveyed (summer 2023) to broaden the validation, rank the proposed actions, and elicit their views on the general architecture of the LTVRA Action Plan. In total, 149 MAP members from 32 MAPs (including the EU level MAP) replied to the survey. These comprised 64 (43%) replies from civil society representatives, 66 (44%) submitted from scientists, and 19 (13%) submitted by policymakers.
 - The output was a set of recommendations for policies aligned to each of the four pillars of the Rural Action Plan.

In addition to developing the recommendations within the framework of the Rural Action Plan, three approaches to the post-2027 programming period were brought to the forum of the [SHERPA Final Conference](#), for debate and consideration of options for any further recommendations. Those approaches were:

1. **“business as usual”** (i.e., continuation of the current delivery of both the CAP and Cohesion Policy);
2. **“rural acceleration”** (i.e., developing policies around the LTVRA building blocks and ring-fencing for four rural interventions);
3. **“a new model”** (i.e. merging funds in a unique European Rural and Agricultural Policy and shifting direct income support to farmers to develop rural infrastructure).

The following section outlines the key recommendations for future rural policies developed from the SHERPA process of relevance to the building blocks in each of the four pillars of the Rural Action Plan.

2.2.2. Stronger rural areas

The LTVRA pillar of **Stronger** rural areas aims to empower rural communities through community-led initiatives (e.g. LEADER), with access to services, facilitation of social innovation and involving young people as “leaders of change” ([European Network for Rural Development, 2022](#)). This pillar comprises building blocks which address issues of population decline, enhancing innovation, increasing community involvement, and providing high quality education and training.



This pillar resonates the long term vision for rural areas of SHERPA MAPs which recommended enablers of “enhanced multi-level and territorial governance that empowers local actors and communities, facilitated through flexible funding schemes relevant to the characteristics of different areas”, such as LEADER and CLLD ([Chartier et al., 2021a](#)).

Table 2 summarises the characteristics of the visions of SHERPA MAPs that align with the Stronger rural areas pillar, and the enablers (e.g. processes or acts that facilitate the development towards a desired goal), opportunities and research topics relevant for each building block (Chartier et al., 2021a). The SHERPA recommendations are those stemming from the Position Papers on [“Social dimension of rural areas”](#), [“Long-term vision of rural areas”](#), [“Climate change and environmental sustainability”](#), [“Climate Change and land use”](#), [Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#), and informed by the Position Paper of [“Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes”](#).



Table 2. Summary of conclusions of SHEPRA MAPs which align with the Rural Action Plan Stronger Rural Areas pillar.

EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers (E), Opportunities (O), Research (R)	SHERPA Recommendations
Stronger Rural Areas			
Flagship action: Set-up a rural revitalisation platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local cooperation improved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowering local actors and communities (E) Funding improved (E) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by rural communities (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create safe spaces for co-creating solutions by science, society and policy Lever characteristics of rural areas to make them attractive to young people and rebalance their demographic profile Social and financial infrastructure for building capacity for cooperation
Flagship: Research and Innovation for rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of scientific data and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data and knowledge (E) Observation, monitoring and reporting (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide financial, technical and moral support for community led innovation and green jobs Increase understanding and de-risk investment in natural capital with an aim of providing income streams for rural communities
Enhance networking of LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local cooperation improved Bottom-up approaches and inclusive governance Place-based development through smart specialisation of local potentials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation (E) Empowering local actors and communities (E) Governance and participation (cooperation, empowerment, and partnership) (O) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by rural communities (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enable citizen-led allocation of funds (e.g. participatory budgeting) within existing, or new, governance structures tailored to local circumstances Better define social objectives for LEADER at EU level, with a simpler CLLD methodology and more flexibility for adapting to local circumstances Prioritise result-oriented programmes and projects on intangible assets Transfer results and good practices from successful projects Build citizen capacity to bid to EU Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe and European Social Fund
Support rural youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better possibilities for education and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people at centre stage (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote community-led provision of cultural and sports activities, and services (e.g. caregiver



EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers (E), Opportunities (O), Research (R)	SHERPA Recommendations
Stronger Rural Areas			<p>services, neighbourhood clubs), ensuring inclusion of the elderly, newcomers and migrants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a training and learning environment in which actors receive professional development credit (as trainers and trainees) • Establish training and education channels that facilitate sharing and exchange good practices and lessons learnt • Ensure that upskilling and reskilling are lifelong learning opportunities
Optimising land use planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture is thriving, modern, and based on sustainable practices such as organic farming • Local food production and consumption supported by short supply chains • Environmental conservation, climate adaptation and biodiversity improved • Circular economy and environmentally sustainable, fossil-free economic growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land use planning improved (E) • Enhancing climate change and environmental services, policies, and practices (E) • Planning coherent, equitable, multi-functional land uses (R) • Relationships between changes in consumer behaviours towards foods and diets and characteristics of rural areas (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial land use plans and frameworks which are coherent and applicable, across all sectors and scales, and tailored to national, regional and local levels of governance • Spatial frameworks should direct investments in mitigation and adaptation for maximum returns, recognizing the changes in types and magnitude of benefits through time • Policies relating to climate change and land use should recognise the types of trade-offs required and over what timescales, the identification of which actors who may experience negative impacts, and what new opportunities and transition pathways might mitigate these impacts • Revise legislation at relevant national and regional levels to remove barriers to land uses new or emerging in those areas • Recommendations for research are provided in Miller <i>et al.</i> (2023a; D7.4)



A flagship of the pillar is to set up a *rural revitalisation platform* an aim of which is to address challenges of rural areas related to population loss, ageing and lack of economic opportunities. This action has commenced with the launch¹⁰ of the platform on 29th June 2023, defined as a “one-stop shop for rural communities, rural project holders and local authorities alike to collaborate, share information, inspiring practices and tools”¹¹.

Depopulation, especially in intermediate and remote areas, and population ageing were identified as the main demographic challenges currently faced across European rural areas (e.g. [Bulgarian National MAP](#); [Galicia Spain MAP](#); [Černič Istenič, 2023](#); [SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)). Changing demographic profiles of rural areas places strains on the provision of public services, (e.g. health and social care for the elderly; childcare for young families), and a loss of economic weight of rural areas ([Bieszczady Poland MAP](#)). Such pressures can be a trigger for reconfigurations of governance, and riggers to social innovations by which the provision of some services is community-led, such as on-farm provision of child-care which is also empowering women farmers (Gramm *et al.*, 2020; [Chartier *et al.*, 2021a](#)). This aligns with the enablers identified by the MAPs and presented in Table 2, which link rural revitalisation with the empowerment of local actors and communities, and the creation of conditions that facilitate the generation of wealth by rural communities.

"Youth have abandoned rural areas and we need to bring them back to foster innovation"

Mihaela Mihailova, Bulgaria MAP

To address those challenges and rebalance their demographic profile in rural areas, SHERPA proposes the leveraging of the characteristics and strengths of rural areas to make them attractive to young people, women and minority groups ([Chartier *et al.*, 2021a](#); [Vilcu *et al.*, 2023](#); [SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)).

Rural revitalisation will be aided by the flagship *Creating a stronger innovation ecosystem for rural areas* which aims to create an enabling environment for innovation to happen. It should contribute to advancing knowledge and create an innovation-friendly environment in rural areas where innovators want to work and live¹². This arrangement is reflected in the visions of the SHERPA MAPs, which acknowledge the need for improved pathways to optimize impacts from research, including the co-construction of solutions to challenges faced by rural areas. Importantly, these pathways should tailor research outputs towards the needs of rural areas (e.g., relating to natural and human resources, and [social](#), technical and product innovation).

"Multi-actor approaches offer a practical example of how to make rural areas stronger and that further economic support should be given to citizen-led initiatives."

Alexia Rouby, EU level MAP

The importance of bringing together actors with different perspectives and responsibilities (e.g. in the public and private sectors), as envisaged in this flagship, is an important part of stimulating innovation in rural areas. SHERPA recommends supporting and encouraging initiatives that promote innovation, collaboration, and building knowledge and experience, and the use of multi-actor approaches as elements in innovation ecosystems, reiterated by members of the EU MAP ([Vilcu *et al.*, 2023](#); [SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)).

¹⁰ https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-revitalisation_en

¹¹ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/stronger_en#flagship-revitalising-rural-areas-most-affected-by-population-loss

¹² https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/stronger_en#flagship-creating-a-stronger-innovation-ecosystem-for-rural-areas



SHERPA reported that the co-design of innovations (process, social, services) and cross-linking of findings advocated by this flagship, can stimulate new jobs which link to building blocks in other pillars of the Rural Action Plan. For example, the development of innovation hubs can be linked to investment in natural capital, consistent with the green transition (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)), as recommended under Stronger Rural Areas. This includes means of monitoring and reporting of responses of environmental characteristics such as outcomes of nature-based solutions, as observed by several MAPs (e.g. [Galicia Spain MAP](#); [Provence Alpes Côte D'Azur Region France MAP](#); [UK MAPs](#)).

SHERPA reiterates the importance of community-led innovation initiatives and the need to provide sufficient financial, technical, and moral support to such initiatives, which in turn will stimulate the creation of green-jobs. Both the LTVRA and the SHERPA vision, consider the natural capital of rural areas as a flywheel for stronger and more resilient rural areas. Investments in research and innovation can lead to an increased understanding and de-risking of investment in natural capital thus providing new income streams for rural communities (Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). Similarly, regional value chains, based on the use of raw materials to create value-added networks, can be a means of mobilising innovation and improve the economic efficiency of production (Bognar and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)).

The flagship of **Creating a stronger innovation ecosystem for rural areas** is closely linked with that of **Enhanced networking for LEADER and Smart villages**. LEADER is a 'bottom up' approach in which different types of rural actors (e.g. farmers, rural businesses, civil society, public authorities and individuals) come together to form Local Action Groups (LAGs) which prepare their own local development strategies and manage their own budgets. The LEADER approach deepens ties within local communities, encourages innovations across sectors, and facilitates knowledge sharing amongst LAGs at national and at EU-wide levels. It has been adopted by the European Regional Development Fund¹³ (ERFD), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund¹⁴ (EMFF) as part of wider Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

SHERPA MAPs identified benefits which accrue through collaboration between public, private and third sectors with a shared sense of common good (e.g. [UK MAPs](#)) and partnership approaches such those of LAGs. They examples of governance structures which empower local actors and communities, and create structures that enable collaboration (e.g. [Denmark MAP](#)). Examples of other existing and new governance structures are intermunicipal associations, public and private partnerships (e.g. [Greenport-Gelderland, Netherlands MAP](#)), Regional Land Use Partnerships ([UK MAPs](#)) and Economic and Social Councils.

SHERPA MAPs identified the need for longer-term forms of cooperation that benefit the development of social, environmental, and financial capital rather than project-driven rural development. This support should be coordinated with structural funds and business promotion funds and integrated with approaches such as LEADER approach and the work of LAGs.

SHERPA recommends the strengthening of the LEADER and CLLD approach, extending it to other policy areas (e.g. climate change, biodiversity), and that improvements are made which foster inclusive decision-making and stakeholder collaboration and increasing their roles in rural development (e.g. [SVARUN MAP, Slovenia](#); [Vilcu *et al.*, 2023, SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)). Such strengthening should be accompanied by a simpler and more flexible methodology in which the social dimension is clearly embedded objectives at EU level whilst the methodology should be agile enough for adapting to local circumstances. The structures which govern those collaborations and partnerships should

¹³ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/rural-development_en#capsupport

¹⁴ Examples of CLLD initiatives funded under the EMFF are grouped under the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET). Through FARNET, Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), managing authorities, citizens and experts from across the EU work together on sustainable development of fisheries and coastal areas. For examples see https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet2/on-the-ground/good-practice_en.html



link across levels to ensure understanding of needs and aspirations is transferred between local, national and EU levels ([Vilcu et al., 2023, SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)).

SHERPA also recommends that citizens have a direct role in bidding for funding initiatives in the EU Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, and European Social Fund, with citizen-led allocation of funds (e.g. through participatory budgeting; UK MAPs). This would enhance citizen involvement in the LEADER approach.

Support for youth is a building block of **Stronger** rural areas which is closely linked to the building block of *Encouraging education, training and employment opportunities* under the **Prosperous** rural areas pillar. These building blocks are fully aligned with the EU Youth Strategy 2019–27 ([European Commission, 2018](#))¹⁵, that sees young people as active players in democracy and society. A specific goal of the strategy is 'Moving Rural Youth Forward', i.e. creating conditions which enable young people to fulfil their potential in rural areas and ensuring equality for young people in urban as well as rural settings. SHERPA MAPs identified putting 'young people centre stage' as an enabler in achieving aims of pillars Stronger, Resilient and Prosperous, reiterating the catalytic role of "youths as leaders of change" as expressed in the LTVRA.

SHERPA MAPs recognised the importance of providing high-quality education and training, jobs, personal development and career pathways to young people in rural areas ([European Network for Rural Development, 2022](#)), and their important role in formulating visions and identifying opportunities for rural areas ([Provence Alpes Côte D'Azur Region MAP, France](#)) (see also recommendations for research, Miller et al., 2023; D7.4).

The building block of *Support for Youth* links to the adoption by the European Union of [inclusion measures](#). Over the longer term, support for education and training for all age groups will build the capabilities for a skilled population in rural areas (e.g. [Denmark MAP](#)), and make rural areas more appealing for professionals to move to rural areas with career prospects for all the family (e.g. [Bulgaria MAP](#); UK MAPs; [Chartier et al., 2021a](#)). Evidence of demand is of the interest and engagement of young farmers with issues associated with the transition to sustainable value chains ([Central Greece MAP](#)).

SHERPA MAPs advocate adult education programmes, with the aim of better exploiting the social capital of the elderly in rural areas (e.g. [Svarun Slovenia MAP](#)). Incentives should be provided for the continuous training and education of rural actors (e.g. businesses, public officials, teachers, healthcare operators) (Italian MAPs; Bogнар and Schwarz, 2023; [Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)).

The SHERPA vision for rural areas ([Chartier et al., 2021a](#)) is one in which experiences and best practices are exchanged (e.g. between neighbouring communities, regions, countries), and where upskilling and reskilling are considered as lifelong learning opportunities. Such knowledge exchange could also provide sources of inspiration for areas which are less well served (Bogнар and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)). The training and learning environments provided for all ages, should be designed such that both trainers and trainees receive professional credits for learning and mentoring processes with a view to enhancing professional development of rural actors.

As expressed in the LTVRA (European Commission, 2021a) in relation to **Stronger** rural areas, 'ensuring rural areas are attractive places to live and work is key'. SHERPA MAPs recommend promoting community-led provision of cultural and sports activities, and services (e.g. caregiver services, neighbourhood clubs). Such initiatives should ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups such as elderly, newcomers, and migrants, which is coherent with a dedicated action on migrants inclusion under the block of **Resilient** rural areas

"Younger and future generations think differently about work, the environment, community, etc., they no longer see these from the perspective of traditional industrial society"

Suomi Finland MAP

¹⁵ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en



(Vilcu *et al.*, 2023; [SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)). As the provision of such services is not explicit in the Rural Action Plan for the entire population, SHERPA recommends that they should be included alongside those for *Social resilience and women in rural areas* in either the **Stronger** or **Resilient** rural areas pillars.

The significance of current and future land uses to rural areas is reflected in its referencing under three of the pillars of the LTVRA of Stronger, Resilient and Prosperous (European Commission, 2021a), two in relation to planning and zoning and one recognising trade-offs between sustainability of agriculture and other uses of land. As a building block in the Rural Action Plan, *Optimising land use planning* is represented under Stronger rural areas. In 2023 the European Commission is carrying out a study on competition for land use and sustainable farming which will provide a sound and comprehensive analysis of the main impacts of sectoral developments on land use in the EU's rural areas. This study will identify recommendations to foster the optimal development of land use planning to promote sustainable farming and other economic activities.

Achieving positive outcomes of climate adaptation and mitigation schemes requires sustainable land-use strategies that include land-use zoning, spatial planning, integrated landscape planning, regulations, incentives, and voluntary or persuasive instruments in line with the propositions of the IPCC (2022). However, land use actions for tackling climate change will necessarily involve trade-offs. SHERPA recommends that policies recognise the types of trade-offs required and over what timescales such as to incorporate periods of land use transitions within, and to understand which actors may experience negative impacts and what new opportunities and transition pathways might mitigate these impacts (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

SHERPA recommends that spatial land use plans and frameworks are coherent and applicable across sectors and scales, and tailored to national, regional and local levels of governance. Such spatial planning frameworks should ensure that actions are taken in places where the greatest impacts on mitigating climate change can be realised (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). For example, these would be where energy resource is significant, construction of renewable energy does not release more carbon than it could offset, planting woodland does not release more carbon than it can sequester and agricultural production systems do not increase demand on transporting water. Such actions must ensure benefits (economic, social, environmental) remain higher than their respective cost. (See also Section 2.2.4, **Resilient** rural areas).

The SHERPA Position Paper on Climate Change and Land Use (Miller *et al.*, 2023b) contains further specific recommendations on the topics of renewable energy, land management and systems, peatland restoration, woodland expansion and water management, and related issues of skills and re- or upskilling, observation and measurement, stakeholder attitudes, and legislation and regulation. The topics covered intersect with all of the pillars of the Rural Action Plan, reflecting the significance of land uses to the future of rural areas.

Three headline recommendations for achieving **Stronger** rural areas:

1. **Establish and maintain Science-Society-Policy interfaces** aimed at fostering interactions, deliberation and decision-making. Such multi-actor platforms have shown to be effective hubs for the co-creation of solutions to tackle complex issues faced by rural areas.
2. **Empower rural citizens** through existing or new governance structures which draw upon approaches such as LEADER and CLLD. Those structures, paired with appropriate capacity building, will empower rural citizens to participate in citizen-led allocation of funds and to be directly implicated in opportunities such as Horizon Europe rural projects.
3. **Establish exchange programmes, e.g. Rural Erasmus**, which will enable the exchange of experiences between rural areas on Europe facing similar social problems (e.g. field trips, study tours), as well as to foster the exchange of good practices, in line with action 4 on education and training.



Box 2. Ranking by MAP members of draft recommendations relating to a Stronger rural areas

Polling of MAP members

The recommendation of “Empowering rural citizens” was ranked first by approximately half of the participants (76 out of 149, 51%). “Establishing Science-Society-Policy interfaces” was the first choice of 32% of participants, and “Rural Erasmus” was selected as first choice by 17% of participants.

“Empowering rural citizens” was ranked highest by representatives from science and society ranked compared to those from policy who ranked the establishment of Science-Society-Policy interfaces highest.

2.2.3. Connected rural areas

The Rural Action Plan’s Connected pillar focuses on increasing the connectivity of rural areas. Building blocks seek to improve sustainable transport links and digitalisation through investments in infrastructure, technology development and activities that boost digital skills of the rural population¹⁶.

For achieving the aims of the LTVRA of connected rural areas, they require to be well-connected internally, between rural and urban areas, and to markets and links in supply chains further afield. Such connectivity requires to be physical, digital, and social. Table 3 summarises the characteristics of the visions of SHERPA MAPs that align with the Connected Rural Areas Pillar, and the enablers, opportunities, and research topics identified relevant to each building block (Miller *et al.*, 2023a)¹⁷. The SHERPA recommendations are those stemming from the Position Papers on [Digitalisation in rural areas](#), [Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#), [Social dimension of rural areas](#), and [Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#).



¹⁶ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/connected_en

¹⁷ The actions ‘Highlight urban-rural linkages in the new EU Urban Mobility Framework’ and ‘Improve accessibility of rural areas through the Drone Strategy 2.0’ mainly involve the development or adaptation of EU-level policy instruments.

Table 3. Summary of conclusions of SHEPRA MAPs which align with the Rural Action Plan Connected Rural Areas pillar.

EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers I, Opportunities (O), Research (R)	SHERPA Recommendations
Connected Rural Areas			
Flagship: Develop rural mobility through (1) support to rural municipalities in identifying best practices (2) Multimodal digital mobility services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved infrastructure, sustainable, innovative mobility models, and access to services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation (E) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by rural communities (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design national strategies to support remote working and develop multi-service centres to bring together public, private and third sector services Launch trials of operational and funding models of multi-service centres to promote location-independent, community-based remote working Set up “mobile offices” to enable residents in rural areas to receive communications and guidance on actions required, and to undertake administrative tasks, from home
Flagship: Rural Digital Futures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitalisation and digital technologies highly integrated in the rural economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation (E) Funding improved (E) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by all communities (R) Supporting the sustainability of digitalisation (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate public and private investment in digital infrastructure in rural areas Facilitate digital access to public services and systems (e.g. e-government, e-banking), and centralise online provision of basic services Invest adequate resources in ensuring basic digital competences in rural areas, with particular attention to low-skilled and vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants and refugees, elderly, hard-to-reach) Enable digitalisation of public procurement by connecting supply platforms, aiming to improve negotiating positions of supply groups in value chains
Support the roll-out of broadband in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitalisation and digital technologies highly integrated in the rural economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic coordination of infrastructure and regionally-tailored public funding to extend geographical coverage and uptake of broadband
Continue promoting the digitalisation of the agricultural sector through capacity building (including in digital skills), research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitalisation and digital technologies highly integrated in the rural economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing smart ruralities and digitalisation (E) Supporting the sustainability of digitalisation (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage technology transfer in agriculture (e.g. peer-to-peer learning) Support digital solutions and technologies across agricultural activities



EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers I, Opportunities (O), Research (R)	SHERPA Recommendations
Connected Rural Areas and innovation, and demonstration including in the fields of Internet of Things, robotics and automation, big data management and use			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden roles of agricultural advisory services in which advisors can act as initiators of land use change and climate change adaptation • Promote cooperation between farms and along value chains, with solutions inclusive of all sizes of farms and businesses
Highlight urban-rural linkages in the new EU Urban Mobility Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better urban-rural connections and a revalorisation of the role of rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing service provision and well-being through improved linkages between rural and urban areas and better delivery of cross-border services (O) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No recommendations have been produced by MAPs on this action</i>
Improve accessibility of rural areas through the Drone Strategy 2.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reference by SHERPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-driving machinery and the use of drones (O; Netherlands MAP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No recommendations have been produced by the MAPs on this action</i>



The Flagship for *Developing sustainable multimodal mobility and digital mobility services*, emphasizes the need to improve existing transport connections as a key priority for rural areas. Complementarily, the European Commission is preparing a new initiative to support the development of digital multimodal mobility services which would facilitate access to information, payment and booking of all mobility offers available on a territory.

SHERPA MAPs reported that, in many rural areas, improving the infrastructure of public transport is critical to their ongoing viability (e.g. marine transport, [South Aegean Greece MAP](#)) and the difficulties which have to be overcome ([Belgium MAP](#); Černič Istenič, 2023, [SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)). They advocated the benefits of the use of a systems perspective on mobility when developing sustainable transport strategies. For example, such an approach could provide insight to the use of renewable energy in different aspects of transport (e.g. wind energy for generating hydrogen, in turn used as fuel for buses, farm equipment, and private cars), including supply chains of energy types, transport equipment and its maintenance, and re-use or recycling. Improved infrastructure that enables the uptake and operation of electric vehicles for domestic use also provides opportunities for testing and operationalising autonomous vehicles for commercial uses, particularly for long distance road transport between nodes in supply chains.

Improved connectivity within and of rural areas underpins achieving aims of improved food and environmental security, shortening supply chains, and co-benefits of promoting territorial foods and healthy diets (e.g. [Provence Alpes Côte D'Azur Region France MAP](#); [Emilia-Romagna Italy MAP](#); [Lithuania MAP](#); [Rural Transylvania Romania MAP](#)). It contributes to reducing GHGs through sustainable transport (bicycle, electric vehicles; [South Aegean Greece MAP](#); [Denmark MAP](#)) and the development of transport and inter-modality ([Suomi Finland MAP](#)).

The SHERPA MAPs recommended measures to increase mobility need to focus on the supply side and manage demand by creating enabling conditions for remote working and establishing multi-service centres in local areas which could significantly reduce needs for travel within rural areas. Those recommendations include the development of national strategies for supporting remote working and multi-service centres as focal points for public, private and third sector services. Such strategies would identify what interventions are most needed, where they could be most beneficial, and the development of different models for multi-service centres. These would be complemented by piloting of operational models of multi-service centres to promote location-independent, community-based remote working. An example model is of setting-up "mobile offices" to enable residents in rural areas to receive communications and guidance on actions required, and to undertake administrative tasks, from home (Arcuri, 2023; [SHERPA Digitalisation in rural areas](#)).

The pillar's Flagship on *Rural Digital Futures* aims to improve the digital connectivity of rural areas mainly through private-sector investments and complementary funding from national and EU funds. It has a focus on expanding digital infrastructures and technologies into rural areas, and aims to foster better digital skills and entrepreneurship through the use of European social and agricultural funds and other European programmes.

These priorities are reiterated in the conclusions of the SHERPA MAPs. They highlight that high quality, robust, digital infrastructure is needed as a basic right, as with other utilities such as water, waste, energy as per its inclusion as one of the 20 principles of the [European Pillars of Social Rights](#) (Arcuri, 2023; [SHERPA Digitalisation in rural areas](#)). These are essential to creating favourable conditions for business

development, and more flexible working arrangements (e.g. tele-working; multi-local working) ([Schleswig-Holstein Germany MAP](#); [Rural Transylvania Romania MAP](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic triggered, or

"In 2040, rural areas will seize the opportunity of digitalisation as a wide array of tools to answer residents and businesses' needs."

Tuscany Italy MAP



accelerated, the rate of digitalisation in rural areas, with from the MAPs pointing to examples of new ways of working (e.g. [SVARUN Slovenia MAP](#)), the provision of digital services (e.g. health care; [River Dee Catchment](#) and [Rural Scotland](#) MAPs, UK), and on-line wholesale and retail operations. To have the greatest impacts, SHERPA recommends that the technical developments of digitalisation are accompanied by enhancing human capital in the use of data and tools (e.g. development of digital literacy solutions adjusted to territorial circumstances; [Rural Centro Portugal MAP](#)). SHERPA encourages the enhancing of human capital by building upon technical opportunities being deployed for facilitating citizen science and roles of citizens in environmental observation, which would also be in line with the expectations of open data and open science (e.g. [EU Open Science Policy](#)) (Miller *et al.*, 2022a, [SHERPA Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)).

SHERPA highlights the need for actions to facilitate public-private partnerships as important drivers of digital infrastructure in rural areas (Arcuri, 2023; [SHERPA Digitalisation in rural areas](#)). The Rural Action Plan foresees support for the *roll-out of broadband in rural areas* as a separate intervention for improving digital connectivity. SHERPA MAPs note that extending the geographical coverage and the uptake of broadband will require strategic coordination of infrastructure and regionally-tailored public funding. This should be aided by the new European Commission support of the network of broadband competency offices setup at national and regional levels¹⁸.

Coordinated investment in digital infrastructure and broadband roll-out are prerequisites for improving digital access to public services and systems (e.g., e-learning, e-health, e-government, e-banking), and centralising the online provision of basic services, both actions recommended by SHERPA to increase digital connectivity (e.g. [Suomi Finland MAP](#); Arcuri, 2023; [SHERPA Digitalisation in rural areas](#)). Funding for infrastructures, and fostering basic digital competences in rural areas, with particular attention to low-skilled and vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants and refugees, elderly, hard-to-reach), are crucial for making investments in digitalisation effective. SHERPA also proposes enabling digitalisation of public procurement by connecting supply platforms for the purpose of improving negotiating positions of supply groups in value chains.

A further building block of the Rural Action Plan is the *digitalisation of the agricultural sector*. The European Commission fund training, advice, innovation, and investments through inter alia the CAP, Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme¹⁹. SHERPA MAPs highlighted the importance and success of peer-to-peer learning in the agriculture sector (e.g. [H2020 PLAID](#)). SHERPA recommends the further support for such approaches in support of the digitalisation of agricultural practices and farming systems (e.g. [AKIS Hungary MAP](#)) and of sustainable rural development more widely ([Rural Transylvania Romania MAP](#); [Chartier et al., 2021a](#); Miller *et al.*, 2022a, [Climate change and environmental sustainability](#)).

The [Tuscany Italy MAP](#) envisages that in 2040 "rural areas will seize the opportunity of digitalisation as a wide array of tools to answer residents and businesses' needs, following the framework of the Smart Villages." SHERPA recommends the design of means of promoting the uptake of digital solutions and technologies across agricultural activities by: i) encouraging technology transfer in agriculture e.g. through peer-to-peer learning; ii) encouraging cooperation between farms and along value chains, with solutions covering all sizes of farms and businesses; and iii) broadening the roles of agricultural advisory services in which advisors can act as initiators of land use change and climate change adaptation (e.g. Bognar and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#); Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

¹⁸ Broadband Competence Offices (BCOs) are set up across Europe to inform citizens, businesses and public authorities about the opportunities to develop and deploy broadband in their regions.

¹⁹ See https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/connected_en#further-promoting-the-digitalisation-of-the-agricultural-sector for an overview of ongoing initiatives and research projects.



Three headline actions are proposed to achieve **Connected** rural areas:

1. **Rural e-services** aimed at facilitating digital access to public services and systems (e.g. e-government and e-banking), centralising the online provision of basic services, and the use of “mobile offices” to enable residents to do administrative tasks directly from home.
2. **Cooperative approach for digitalisation** to encourage cooperation amongst societal groups (including policy-makers, businesses, civil society and research) to design strategies and exchange best practices (e.g. creation of spaces for the co-design of locally adapted strategies).
3. **Enhanced skills and digital competences** with improved access to technical assistance and needs-based services in key sectors at local level and targeted at particularly vulnerable groups.

Box 3. Ranking by MAP members of draft recommendations relating to a Connected rural areas

Polling of MAP members

The recommendation of “Enhanced skills and digital competencies” was ranked first by almost half of the participants (70 out of 149, 47%). A “cooperative approach for digitalisation” was the first choice of 30% of participants (45 out of 149), and “rural e-services” was selected as first choice by 23% of participants (34 out of 149).

“Enhanced skills and digital competencies” was ranked highest by representatives from science and policy compared to those from civil society who rank each of the three headline actions equally.

2.2.4. Resilient rural areas

The Rural Action Plan pillar **Resilient** Rural Areas aims to increase the environmental, climatic, and social resilience of rural areas. These areas are at the forefront of exposure to biophysical and socio-economic pressures, and are anticipated to adopt the transitions required to respond to policies relating to climate change, biodiversity and human rights. Building blocks under this pillar focus on energy transition, carbon storage in peatland and wetlands, enhancing soil health and improving prospects for women and vulnerable groups.

Table 4 summarises the characteristics of the visions of SHERPA MAPs that align with the Resilient Rural Areas pillar, and the enablers, opportunities, and research topics identified relevant to each building block (Miller *et al.*, 2023; D7.4), and recommendations for specific interventions. The SHERPA response to this Pillar draw on the Position Papers on “[Climate change and environmental sustainability](#)”, “[Climate change and land use](#)”, “[Long Term Vision for Rural Areas](#)”, and “[Social dimension of rural areas](#)”.



Table 4. Summary of conclusions of SHEPRA MAPs which align with the Rural Action Plan Resilient Rural Areas pillar.

EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers I, Opportunities (O), ResearI(R)	Recommendations
Resilient Rural Areas			
Flagship: Support rural municipalities in energy transition and fighting climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Circular economy and environmentally sustainable, fossil-free economic growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bio- and circular economy boIed (E) Funding Iroved (E) Planning coherent, equitable, multi-functional land uses (R) Empowerment as part of processes of social innovation to enhancing societal well-being (O; River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland MAPs, UK) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create governance structures which focus on place-based, territorial and citizen-led approaches and priorities for tackling climate change Develop a community-oriented communications strategy, tailoring messages to explain impacts of climate change where people live / work Ensure clarity of governance of plans for net zero GHG emissions, and consistency between overlapping geographic areas, and across sectors Create favourable conditions for local cooperatives, social entrepreneurs, or NGOs to take responsibility for delivery of public goods
Flagship: Climate action in peatland through carbon farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental conservation, climate adaptation and biodiversity improved Increased use of scientific data and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FuIng improved (E) Enhancing climate change and environmental services, policI and practices (E)Iata and knowledge (E) Planning coherent, equitable, multi-functional land uses (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote peatland restoration actions as hubs for natural capital innovation, investment and economic activities Align strategies for education and training to increase capabilities at local levels, including SMEs and micro-businesses and community initiatives Support communities of practice of 'peat citizens' Develop coherent principles of spatial planning of peatland restoration and carbon rich soils to place degraded peatlands on pathways to recovery Examine the legal and regulatory issues associated with funding investment in natural capital (e.g. crowdfunding, social enterprises)
Flagship: Proposed EU Mission on soil health and food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local food production and consumption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift in production and diversification of the rural economy (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support mechanisms that explain and demonstrate the benefits of soil health to



EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers I, Opportunities (O), ResearI(R)	Recommendations
Resilient Rural Areas			
	supported by short supply chains		<p>encourage uptake and implementation (e.g. in 100 Living Labs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures in National CAP Strategies should incentivize and reward practices that reduce GHG emissions and increase carbon sinks on farms Prepare soil monitoring framework for measurement (e.g. digital sensors), automated reporting and communications of environmental characteristics (e.g. soil temperature and moisture, GHG emissions) Natural capital (e.g. soil carbon) should be incorporated into payments under the CAP, providing resources for communities and businesses
Flagship: Social resilience and Women in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-being and high quality of life Rural areas as attractive places to live for all generations, for men and women (e.g. Aragón MAP, Spain) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the role of rural women by helping them overcome traditional gender roles (O) Funding improved (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate rural development funds to infrastructure that supports diverse household circumstances, and demonstrates how working cultures can empower and stimulate women-led initiatives Reserve a line of funding for women-led or all-women social innovations, with access to dedicated support Design tailored means of personal development of women, promoting communities with intercultural values and integration of human diversity
Analyse spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A stable and sustainable demographic structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reference by SHERPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action underway in the LTVRA action plan
Prepare a study on the working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reference by SHERPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing for seasonal labour (O; Netherlands MAP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action already underway in the LTVRA action plan



EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers I, Opportunities (O), ResearI(R)	Recommendations
Resilient Rural Areas			
Address the inclusion and integration of people with a migrant background in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration of “new rural residents” from cities and other countries Migrants will populate rural areas and will be fully integrated into society (Tuscany MAP, Italy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful integration of immigrants in marginalised rural areas (O; River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland MAPs, UK) Recognition of connected socio-cultural diversity (E; Tuscany MAP, Italy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The SHERPA vision for rural areas is of communities in which migrants are fully integrated into a society of everyone Means of education and learning should enable inputs by young people, reflecting their different cultural and geographic contexts Services should be tailored to the needs of all citizens, young, old, men and women, residents and newcomers/migrants
Ensure equal opportunities to children in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better possibilities for education and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people at centre stage (E) 	
Address the needs of people with disabilities in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural areas characterised by opportunity, innovation, modernity, liveliness, resilience and equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowerment as part of processes of social innovation to enhancing societal well-being (O; River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland MAPs, UK) 	



The Flagship to *support rural municipalities in energy transition and fighting climate change*, will complement and create synergies with other initiatives, such as a working group on rural areas within the Covenant of Mayors²⁰ to disseminate best practices and help rural municipalities access EU funding to support the green transition as well as addressing rural areas in the new European Bauhaus²¹.

The SHERPA MAPs identified climate change as a major challenge facing rural areas. The economic losses due to climate change, by EU Member State, for the period 2010 to 2020 are estimated at €145 Billion, with a peak in 2017 of €27.9 Billion attributed to heatwaves that had consequences of creating conditions for drought and wildfires (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). The frequency of extreme weather events is increasing, with rural areas projected to experience higher temperatures leading to droughts and wildfires (e.g. [Galicia Spain MAP](#)), and precipitation and snowmelt leading to flood events (e.g. [River Dee Catchment](#) and [Rural Scotland MAPs](#), UK). These impacts are threatening communities, infrastructure (UK MAPs), and economic sectors such as forestry (e.g. [Alqueva Portugal MAP](#)) and agriculture (e.g. [Greenport Gelderland Netherlands MAP](#)) and supply their chains (e.g. [Emilia Romagna Italy MAP](#)), and threaten the provision of key ecosystem services (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)). Policies for mitigating climate change are directing changes in land use towards renewable energy generation, woodland expansion, management of natural capital through restoring peatlands and carbon-rich soils, and changes in agricultural and land systems, collectively contributing to visions for rural areas of a well-being economy (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

Transitioning to renewable energy sources is a critical element in the green transition and for meeting policy commitments to reducing GHG emissions (Miller *et al.*, 2022c; [SHERPA Discussion Paper Climate Change and Land Use](#)). Pathways to their development and deployment involve complex interplays between biophysical resources, technologies, and business and social attitudes (Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). However, land uses and landscapes require protection from adverse impacts of renewable energy (e.g. growing crops for biofuels; impacts of wind turbines on landscapes), and the benefits can be exported from rural to urban areas without due recompense (e.g. [Aragón Spain MAP](#)) or creating or accentuating inequalities. Nonetheless, the outcomes of renewable energy development can include significant social and economic benefits of empowering rural communities and providing them with new sources of income (e.g. through social innovations), and enabling land managers to modify business models to greater multi-functionality (e.g. [Zielone Sąsiedztwo MAP](#)) that help them transition towards net zero and diversify their sources of income (e.g. [AKIS MAP; Hungary; River Dee Catchment](#) and [Rural Scotland UK MAPs](#); Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#); [Chartier et al., 2021a](#)).

SHERPA recommends that this flagship should provide enablers to encourage and facilitate the energy transition, such as resources or knowledge of approaches for raising funds (e.g. crowdfunding; impact investment), and improved means of sharing knowledge and good practices, accessible at local levels, for achieving energy savings and increasing the generation of renewable energy in rural areas (e.g. [VENUS Czechia MAP](#)).

As well as onshore renewables, rural areas are at the intersection of tackling climate change through marine renewable energy systems along coasts, inshore or offshore (e.g. offshore wind, tidal, wave, hybrid) which provides communities further opportunities to be involved in the energy transition. The skills and experience of rural citizens who work in coastal and marine environments are being used in offshore renewables which is one aspect of transitions from fossil to renewable energy sources (e.g. [UK MAPs](#)). This is making them one element of the transition to renewable sources of energy, and away from fossil fuels, have to be just (Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

²⁰ <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/home>

²¹ https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/about/about-initiative_en



To achieve this energy transition, SHERPA recommends the creation of governance structures which focus on place-based, territorial and citizen-led approaches and priorities for tackling climate change, and cover policy areas of employment, skills, social and distributional aspects of the green transition, as envisaged in the EU Green Deal ([European Commission, 2019](#)). This should be aided by a community-oriented communications strategy, with tailored messages explaining the impacts of climate change where people live or work as further background information to stimulate that the rural population taking ownership of energy transitions. It should also be accompanied by indicators that inform the process of achieving regional, national and European goals in carbon neutrality ([e.g. VENUS Czechia MAP](#)) the Flagship to address *climate change in peatland areas through carbon farming* aims at building up carbon sinks by investing in rewetting wetlands and peatlands. An outcome sought is to upscale carbon removal solutions that capture CO₂ from the atmosphere and store it for the long term.

"Rural areas can be part of the solutions for tackling climate change through investment in natural capital such as stewardship of carbon rich soils, peatland, afforestation.

River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland UK MAPs

Globally, peatlands contain approximately 25% of the carbon locked in soils. Restoring degraded peatlands is one of the most effective approaches to sequestering carbon over the long term, whilst also providing co-benefits of reversing the loss of biodiversity, reducing flood risk and pollution, enhancing cultural services such as landscape character and sense of place in rural areas (UK MAPs; Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

The European Commission (2021c) estimate that the restoration of peatlands and wetlands could achieve an additional net GHG mitigation benefits of between 7.8 and 22.8 million tCO₂eq/year through to 2030, and between 26.7 and 62.9 MtCO₂eq/year to 2050. If all EU peatlands were fully restored, the estimated mitigation potential is approximately 185 MtCO₂eq/year (Andres *et al.*, 2022). However, restoration is only one step in the overall process over which natural systems takes time to recover and achieve restored status. A timescale of 50 years may be required for the restoration of peat drained to 1m depth (Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). During the period of land being under restoration management, management practices are required which are consistent with achieving the goal of restoration, such as monitoring water levels, presence and growth of vegetation, modifying interventions as appropriate (UK MAPs).

Strategies are being developed that link the delivery of public goods with equipping businesses and citizens with the provision of new skills (e.g. shaping ditches, monitoring of water levels using digital sensors), and stimulating new micro-businesses (e.g. in use of drones to measure and monitor restoration sites), and community-led initiatives ([South Region France MAP](#); [UK MAPs](#)).

SHERPA recommends the promotion of peatland restoration actions as hubs for natural capital innovation, investment, and economic activities (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). This requires the alignment of strategies for education and training to increase capabilities at local levels, including SMEs and micro-businesses and community-led initiatives of peatland restoration. This would also contribute to the flagships of *Creating a stronger innovation ecosystem for rural areas* under **Stronger** rural areas, and *Supporting entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas* under **Prosperous** rural areas.

A closely related flagship to that of carbon farming is an "[EU Mission: A soil deal for Europe](#)". This is aimed at addressing pressures on soils in rural areas, urban settings and fostering urban-rural linkages. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** They are threatened by consequences of climate change (e.g. increased flooding), and human uses of land (e.g. soil sealing through urbanisation, agricultural intensification, irrigation), land management practices which reduce below ground biodiversity, and in sites which increase carbon emissions



(e.g. carbon rich soils) (Miller *et al.*, 2022a, [SHERPA Discussion Paper Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)). The consequences are that 60% to 70% considered to be unhealthy (Veerman *et al.*, 2021).

The importance of soil is reflected in international, EU and national legislation and policies. The Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework sets a target (Target 11) of restoring, maintaining and enhancing nature's contributions to people, including ecosystem functions and services, including soil health through nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based approaches for the benefit of all people and nature ([Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022](#)). The [European Union 8th Environment Action Programme](#) sets out objectives which include protecting, preserving and restoring biodiversity, and enhancing natural capital (air, water, soil, natural or semi-natural vegetation and forests, freshwater, wetland and marine ecosystems). Further actions are envisaged in the proposal for a Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience (Soil Monitoring Law) ([European Commission, 2023](#)).

The SHERPA MAPs recognised significance of soils in tackling climate change, reversing the loss of biodiversity, and tackling human health and well-being. Considering the impact of agricultural activities on soil, SHERPA recommends that the national CAP Strategies or their equivalents should address how levels of soil organic carbon can be increased, and carbon losses be reduced by incentivising and rewarding practices that reduce GHG emissions and increase carbon sinks on farms through eco-schemes or environmental and climate commitments (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

As education is a key step to action by policy, practice and citizens, SHERPA recommends extending support mechanisms to explaining and demonstrating the benefits of soil health to encourage uptake and implementation of land management practices that protect and enhance soil quality (Miller *et al.*, 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). This would be in line with the initiative under the Soil Mission of putting in place 100 living labs²² to co-create and showcase knowledge relating to soil health.

In turn, SHERPA also recommends the preparation of a soil monitoring framework, in line with the proposed of the Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience ([European Commission, 2023](#)), and foreseen in the European Soil Strategy 2030 ([European Commission, 2021d](#)). This could include roles for citizen science (e.g. collection of samples under strict protocols, monitoring and reporting soil loss using digital tools) which would expand the role of soil education and citizen engagement foreseen in the proposed Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience.

The management of carbon in soils and restoration and conservation of peatlands offers new opportunities for social and technical innovations which enhance environmental resilience (e.g. triggering the emergence of micro-businesses and social innovations by local communities; [South Region France MAP](#); [UK MAPs](#)). As such, these two flagships are examples of actions which have multiple benefits across pillars of the Rural Action Plan.

The flagship focusing on the *social resilience and women in rural areas* is based on actions aimed at improving women entrepreneurship, participation in decision-making, and investment in services and infrastructure that enables a work-life balance. SHERPA MAPs identified structural issues of imbalances such as the lack of initiatives to reconcile work and employment which hinders the integration of women and older people in rural areas, including their employment and roles (e.g. decision-making) (e.g. [Galicia Spain MAP](#); [Černič Istenič, 2023](#), [SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)).

SHERPA recommends the adoption of measures that encourage a work-life balance, noting the challenge posed in specific sectors (e.g. agriculture). It forms one of the characteristics of the visions of rural areas, namely, that public services which facilitate a work-life balance and gender equality (e.g. [Galicia Spain MAP](#)) contribute to their attractiveness as places to live and work, characterised by their human and societal well-being and high quality of life (e.g. [Bulgaria MAP](#); [AKIS Hungary MAP](#); [Chartier *et al.*, 2021a](#)). SHERPA MAPs

²²https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/soil-health-and-food_en



recommended supporting women entrepreneurship (e.g. [South Aegean Greece MAP](#)), and ensuring the inclusion of women and vulnerable groups within European policies such as the EU Green Deal and the future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (EU MAP) ([Černič Istenič, 2023](#), [SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)).

SHERPA recommends the allocation of rural development funds to infrastructure that supports diverse household settings, and demonstrates how working cultures can empower and stimulate women-led initiatives. Dedicated funding should be earmarked for women-led or all-women social innovations, to support rural women to overcome their association with traditional roles. This support can be strengthened by devising means tailored to women's personal development, promoting communities with intercultural values and integration of human diversity (e.g. [Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP](#); [Černič Istenič, 2023](#), [SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)).

The building block of *Analysing spatial mobility and demographically declining areas in Europe* focuses on research needs to increase the knowledge base for actions targeting depopulation in rural areas, and thus in alignment with a flagship under the pillar of Stronger Rural Areas, i.e. the rural revitalisation platform. In shrinking areas, governance is continually adapting to new contexts. Declining rural populations can mean a reducing pool of citizens from which to appoint or invite volunteers to take responsibilities on governance structures (e.g. fewer young people), and a lack of representation of newly emerging groups within rural areas (e.g. migrants). Gaps in knowledge require to be addressed. SHERPA recommendations for future research (Miller *et al.*, 2023a; [D7.4](#)) include understanding spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe and what is required for a stable demographic structure.

The building block of *Assessing the working conditions of farm workers* aims at expanding the evidence base driving rural policies. Under this action, a study on working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers is being prepared. This will "examine how Member States enforce effectively legislation on working conditions and establish a baseline for the future assessment of the new social conditionality mechanism included in the CAP 2023-2027"²³. It could allow the development of investment in housing for seasonal labour, as recognised by MAPs ([Netherlands MAP](#)) as a fundamental to accruing the social resilience of rural areas. No specific SHERPA recommendations for policy were made for this building block.

Three building blocks focus on vulnerable inhabitants of rural areas: *Supporting the inclusion of migrants in rural areas*, *Ensuring equal opportunities for rural children*, and *Addressing the needs of people with disabilities*. The SHERPA vision for rural areas is of communities in which migrants are fully integrated into a "society of everyone". Fostering the social resilience of territories requires understanding and recognition of their socio-cultural contexts, and respecting and celebrating the cultural and territorial diversity of each other, and providing equal opportunities and a high quality of life to all ([Chartier et al., 2021a](#)). This creates conditions conducive to the integration of new rural residents from cities and other countries and the opportunity space for new ideas, business models and cultural identities to flourish (e.g. [Lithuania MAP](#)). Social resilience also benefits from understanding of minorities and those with special needs (e.g. [Estonia MAP](#)).

"We very often overlook the inclusion and participation of vulnerable segments of rural communities. Empowerment of such communities is key."

Tom Jones, EU MAP

However, the social (non)inclusion of immigrants is recognised as a pressing problem or challenge in rural areas (e.g. noted by [Aragon Spain MAP](#); [Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP](#)) but not exclusive to any one area of Europe. The H2020 project [IMAJINE](#) explains the nexus between inequality and migration, linking migration between sending and receiving countries to inequalities in wages, opportunities and lifestyles.

²³ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/resilient_en#assessing-the-working-conditions-of-farm-workers



SHERPA MAPs recognise the mutual lack of knowledge of incoming and receiving cultures and customs, and the low level of engagement between population groups which, combined, indicates poor integration of migrants and rural communities, and of the pressures associated with migration (e.g. the integration of new residents and seasonal workers; [SVARUN Slovenia MAP](#)). SHERPA recommends that services are tailored to take account of the needs of all citizens, young, old, men, women, residents and newcomers and migrants.

MAPs highlighted examples of successful initiatives tailored to children and young people in rural communities, such as the promotion of social, school and community integration of migrant children and young people ([Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP](#)), and the provision of educational services to children under three years old living in rural areas ([Galicia Spain MAP](#)²⁴). Such initiatives contribute to building social capital in rural areas, and to putting “young people at centre stage”, the latter being an important enabler for resilient rural areas. SHERPA recommends that means of education and learning should enable inputs by young people, reflecting their different cultural and geographic contexts.

Three headline recommendations for achieving **Resilient** rural areas:

1. **Develop citizen-led approaches to climate action** aimed at stimulating place-based, territorial actions (e.g. participatory budgeting from levies on largescale renewable energy developments);
2. **Promote** existing good practices and **virtuous examples** of actions (e.g. multi-media demonstrations of best practices of just transition);
3. **Develop a climate** community-oriented **communications** strategy, tailored to local contexts of life, work and responsibilities.

These recommendations align with building blocks of the **Stronger** Rural Areas pillar of the Rural Action Plan.

Box 4. Ranking by MAP members of draft recommendations relating to Resilient rural areas

Polling of MAP members

The recommendation of “a citizen-led approach for tackling climate change” was ranked first by just over half of the participants (80 out of 149, 54%). “Promoting existing virtuous actions” was the first choice of 25% of participants, and “Developing a climate community-oriented strategy” was selected as first choice by 21% of participants.

2.2.5. Prosperous rural areas

The Rural Action Plan pillar of **Prosperous** Rural Areas proposes building blocks that support the social economy, addressing needs of young people, promoting a bioeconomy and supporting producer organisations and producer groups. Its flagships and building blocks propose enabling access to digital and hybrid education and training for communities for acquiring new skills and to support the development of an entrepreneurial culture in rural areas.



²⁴ ASOCIACIÓN ANTONIO GANDOY: This entity provides educational services to children under three years old living in rural areas, with private and public financing. It is a continuation of a previous experience, Preescolar na Casa, founded in 1977. <http://antoniogandoyeducacion.blogspot.com/p/preescolar-na-casa-un-programa-pioneiro.html>



Prosperous rural areas by 2040 are a key outcome in the visions of SHERPA MAPs. Achieving this aim requires synergistic improvements in the resilience, connectivity, and strength of rural areas, as per the other pillars of the Rural Action Plan. It draws on the confidence and capabilities that can emerge from enablers such as the empowerment of local actors, increased human and social capital, new information with which to plan and act, coherent plans for the uses of natural resources (e.g. land, water), and equalities of opportunity and social protection. These enablers can be used to achieve climate neutral or positive outcomes (e.g. UK MAPs; Miller *et al.*, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

Table 5 summarises the characteristics of the visions of SHERPA MAPs that align with the Prosperous rural areas pillar, and the enablers, opportunities, and research topics identified relevant to each building block (Miller *et al.*, 2023a; [D7.4](#)).

The SHERPA recommendations are those stemming from the Position Papers on "[Sustainable and resilient value chains](#)", "[Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#)", [Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#), [Climate Change and Land Use](#), and [Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)

As a horizontal enabler, SHEPRA recommends a place-based approach for creating conditions conducive to encouraging the prosperity of rural areas, tailored to capitalising on their strengths, addressing weaknesses and the targeting of appropriate forms of support (Miller *et al.*, 2023b; [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)). Such place-based approaches can create cohesion between common themes that cross different sectors (e.g. [Suomi Finland MAP](#); [Tuscany Italy MAP](#)).

The social economy is a key component of the vision for Prosperous Rural Areas, providing a lever to address the decline of public services in rural areas while putting the benefit on society and the environment first."

Alexia Rouby, EU MAP, SHERPA Final Conference



Table 5. Summary of conclusions of SHEPRA MAPs which align with the Rural Action Plan Prosperous Rural Areas pillar.

EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers (E), Opportunities (O), Research (R)	Recommendations
Prosperous Rural Areas			
<p>Flagship: Entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place-based development through smart specialisation of local potentials Social and business environments encouraging development of human capital, identifying entrepreneurs and people with motivation and social drive, and is active in succession planning (River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland MAPs, UK) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting economic diversification, entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity (O) Empowering local actors and communities (E) Funding improved (E) Shift in production and diversification of the rural economy (E) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by rural communities (R) Well-being economies of rural areas (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding mechanisms to upskill all workforce sectors in line with commitments to training and lifelong learning in line with the European Pillar of Human Rights Mentoring and advice for micro- and small and medium sized enterprises through early and subsequent stages of innovation Investment of public funds in human and social infrastructure such as co-working spaces Reduce and simplify administrative burden on business and civil society bodies Stimulate product, service and social innovation (e.g. public/private procurement) Enable access to accredited, networks for advice, training and facilities Tax-relief for incentivising entrepreneurial initiatives within local value chains
<p>Continue encouraging Member States to increase education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas under the reinforced Youth Guarantee and the European Education Area</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better possibilities for education and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people at centre stage (E) Creating conditions and facilitating the generation of wealth by rural communities (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a strategy for life-long and life-wide education and training for gaining knowledge and skills, and increase capabilities of all people involved in transitions, particularly younger generations (e.g. SMEs, micro-businesses, communities, citizens, public agencies) Broaden roles of agricultural advisory services in which advisors work with young people to act as initiators of entrepreneurship and land use change Create voluntary mentoring systems for young people from across actor types; one-to-one access for sharing experiences; coordinated by recognised bodies (e.g. farmers unions; NGOs)



EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers (E), Opportunities (O), Research (R)	Recommendations
Prosperous Rural Areas			
<p>Promote the development of a sustainable bioeconomy, including in the framework of the EU Forest Strategy and in the carbon-farming initiative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental conservation, climate adaptation and biodiversity improved • Circular economy and environmentally sustainable, fossil-free economic growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land use planning improved (E) • Bio- and circular economy boosted (E) • Enhancing climate change and environmental services, policies and practices (E) • Planning coherent, equitable, multi-functional land uses (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop common, integrated and long-term strategies and policies to support transitions to a bio-based economy and green innovation • Share knowledge and develop business activities around the sustainable use of natural resources • Test new business models (e.g. sharing economy, platform economy) • Develop sustainable tourism as part of rural entrepreneurship
<p>Highlight the role of Producer Organisations (POs) in rural development and strengthen producers group of geographical indications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local food production and consumption supported by short supply chains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in production and diversification of the rural economy (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in local infrastructure for collaborative value chain initiatives • Fund measures to create and maintain networks that facilitate cooperation, particularly building short supply chains and local markets (e.g. cooperatives) • Design labelling and marketing schemes that increase consumer recognition and confidence in locally-produced foods • Create conditions conducive for strengthening sustainable supply (e.g. mandatory requirements of green public procurement at national and local levels) • Provide technical assistance to de-risk implementation of quality schemes



The Prosperous Rural Areas pillar proposes a building block on *Entrepreneurship and social economy in rural areas*. This would focus on businesses, organisations and different legal entities “that share the objective of systematically putting people first, producing a positive impact on local communities and pursuing a social cause”.²⁵

Several instruments and initiatives of relevance are already available, such as the Social Economy Action Plan²⁶ (SEAP), adopted in December 2021. This includes specific actions for rural areas such as enhancing networking between rural businesses through the Enterprise Europe Network²⁷.

SHERPA recommendations aligning with this flagship action to support social and business environments which encourage the development of human capital, identification of entrepreneurs and people with motivation and social drive, and actions for succession planning ([River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland UK MAPs](#)). An example of MAP initiatives in this context is the [Romanian social economy enterprise “CREDO”](#) which targets the inhabitants of rural areas from Argeş county and provides access to professional training programmes, educational initiatives (including informal education), job opportunities and financing for entrepreneurial initiatives ([Bognar and Schwarz, 2023](#); [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)).

SHERPA recommends the provision of appropriate information and incentives for the development of cooperatives and social entrepreneurship in rural areas, such as tax benefits for incentivising entrepreneurial initiatives within local value chains. This should be accompanied by financial instruments for supporting service provision in villages, building on a combination of public and private funding ([Martino et al., 2022](#); [SHERPA Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#)). In particular, SHERPA recommendations are for investment of public funds in human and social infrastructures, which will contribute to:

- Reducing and simplifying administrative burdens on business and civil society bodies;
- Stimulating product, service and social innovation (e.g., public/private procurement);
- Enabling access to accredited, networks for advice, training, and facilities.

SHERPA MAPs identified young people as key to driving innovation and a social economy and a flywheel for prosperous rural areas. To this end, encouraging, facilitating and supporting innovation amongst new generations is core to the SHERPA vision of the prosperity of rural areas (e.g. [Aragón Spain MAP](#); [Suomi Finland MAP](#); [Provence Alpes Côte D´Azur Region France MAP](#)).

"Social economy in rural areas can foster those transformative changes necessary to address the multiple challenges that people and planet face such as climate change"

Katherine Irvine, EU MAP, SHERPA Final Conference

²⁵ https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu_en

²⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0778>

²⁷ <https://een.ec.europa.eu/>



SHERPA recommendations recognise the fundamental role of training and lifelong learning which will allow upskilling (including soft skills) across all workforce sectors in line with commitments of the [European Pillar of Human Rights](#). SHERPA recommends the provision of mentoring, advice and training programmes for micro- and small and medium sized enterprises to avoid bottlenecks during the early and subsequent stages of innovation, thus including in field of social entrepreneurship ([Martino et al., 2022](#); [SHERPA Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#)). Such programmes should be complemented by appropriate infrastructures and facilities such as co-working spaces and or hubs ([Vilcu et al., 2023, SHERPA Empowering rural areas in multi-level governance processes](#)).

"Youth entrepreneurship is a long-term investment in promoting innovation and modernization of the rural economy reflecting their continuous influx of new ideas and economic dynamism"

Csaba Balint, AKIS Hungary MAP

The building block of *Education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural areas* aims at stimulating Member States in providing opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas under the reinforced Youth Guarantee²⁸ and the European Education Area²⁹. Youth unemployment and inactivity, and limited access to inclusive high-quality education and training, are significant issues in rural areas, in which young people are unable to find secure employment and therefore seek opportunities elsewhere ([Bieszczady Poland MAP](#); [Černič Istenič, 2023, SHERPA Social dimension of rural areas](#)). In turn, this can lead to regional inequalities and to progressive depopulation of rural areas. In the Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on "A Bridge to Jobs initiative"³⁰ the European Commission recommends Member States map the barriers faced by young people living in rural and remote areas and to exploit the potential of complementing national funding efforts with other Union funding sources that could contribute to implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee, including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

SHERPA recommend the development of a strategy for life-long and life-wide education and training for gaining knowledge and skills, and increase capabilities of all people involved in transitions, particularly younger generations (e.g., SMEs, micro-businesses, communities, citizens, public agencies) (Miller et al., 2022a, [SHERPA Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)). This recommendation aligns with the commitments of the Youth Guarantee.

The role of young people is also considered as key to fostering a transition towards more sustainable agricultural activities, thus linking with the pillars of **Resilient** and **Connected** rural areas its component building blocks. SHERPA recommends broadening the scope of agricultural advisory services in which advisors would closely work with young people, to encourage the latter to act as initiators of entrepreneurship. SHERPA also recommends the creation voluntary mentoring systems for young people from across actor types, coordinated by recognised bodies (e.g., farmers unions; NGOs) and the provision of one-to-one access for sharing experiences. This would operate at the interface between youth education and entrepreneurship, thus linking with the flagship action on entrepreneurship in rural areas (Miller et al., 2023b, [SHERPA Climate Change and Land Use](#)).

The sustainable use of natural resources is fundamental to the prosperity of rural areas, and has a dedicated building block under this pillar which focuses on *promoting the development of a sustainable bioeconomy in rural area*. According to the EU definition, the bioeconomy "comprises those parts of the economy that use renewable biological resources from land and sea – such as crops, forests, fish, animals and micro-organisms

²⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>

²⁹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/working-groups>

³⁰ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2020.372.01.0001.01.ENG



– to produce food, materials and energy³¹. Bioeconomies provide an opportunity to generate value in rural areas and to circulate such value locally within the rural economy.

SHERPA MAPs identified opportunities relating to the bioeconomy and the sustainable use of resources. Opportunities arise from new sectors of employment, notably in the emerging circular and bio-economies, promoting shorter supply chains that are local and fair, and supporting economic diversification, entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity. For example, new or repurposed products can be designed that use renewable resources, and supply chains developed that retain value within local rural areas; [Lithuania MAP](#)). The benefits of extensive supplies of agricultural bioproducts offer new opportunities for small family farms ([Rural Transylvania Romania MAP](#)), as well as larger agri-businesses ([Miller et al., 2022b; D7.3](#)).

The environmental features of rural areas make such types of territories favourable to the development of ecological, traditional, and local production and/or agro-tourism. The growing interest in society for more sustainable lifestyles offers new opportunities for income diversification. Such activities are increasingly important sources of income in diversified rural economies such as food agri-, food and cultural tourism (e.g. [Schleswig-Holstein Germany MAP](#); [Emilia-Romagna Italy MAP](#)), experiential tourism ([Tuscany Italy MAP](#)), and provides new economic opportunities (e.g. finance based on natural capital; [UK MAPs](#)). Work on-the-ground in research and innovation, applied to bioeconomy and resource management, provides important opportunities for catalysing sustainable rural development. SHERPA MAPs recommend taking advantage of opportunities, in particular developing sustainable tourism as part of rural entrepreneurship.

Evidence from SHERPA MAPs suggests that education, training and knowledge play an important role in the transition to bio-based economies in rural areas. SHERPA recommends that the acceleration of bioeconomy development and the sustainable management of resources should be facilitated by cooperation and partnership between business, science and government actors. To this end, new forms of private-public partnerships are needed, especially when it comes to the development of new circular business structures and processes ([Martino et al., 2022](#); [SHERPA Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#)).

SHERPA recommends developing common, integrated and long-term strategies and policies to support transitions to a bio-based economy and green innovation and to test new business models (e.g. sharing economy, platform economy) ([Martino et al., 2022](#); [SHERPA Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#)). Support for social enterprises and social innovation should form part of place-based development of a bioeconomy of disadvantaged peripheral areas which are not sufficiently competitive to generate endogenous growth. This would align with the Flagship action on *Supporting entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas*.

The benefit of the building block of *the role of Producer Organisations (POs) in rural development and to strengthen producer group of geographical indications (GIs)* is supported by the SHERPA MAP observations of the importance of producer cooperatives and organisations in developing relations and the levels of trust which help drive horizontal cooperation (e.g. Tuscany Italy MAP, [Nienburg Germany MAP](#); Bognar and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)). This is also reflected in the European Commission Regulation (EU) 1308/2013³² (the CMO Regulation), Producers Organisations (POs) “can play useful roles in concentrating supply, in improving the marketing, planning and adjusting of production to demand, optimising production costs and stabilising producer prices, carrying out research, promoting best practices and providing technical assistance, managing by-products and risk management tools available to their members, thereby contributing to strengthening position of producers in the food chain”.

³¹ https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/greening-rural-economy/bioeconomy/rural-bioeconomy-portal_en.html

³² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0671:0854:EN:PDF>



"Local infrastructure dedicated to cooperation of value chains is often lacking." "Cooperation and risk sharing should form important element of strategies in agriculture."

Gerald Schwarz, Thünen Institute Ricardo Reis, Southwest Alentejo Portugal MAP

The roles of producer organisations are recognised in the vision of SHERPA to how to achieve prosperous rural areas. POs contribute to delivering a vision of local food production and consumption supported by short supply chains (e.g. [South Aegean Greece MAP](#)), and building links between producers and local inhabitants and consumers (e.g. [Greenport Gelderland Netherlands MAP](#)). SHERPA recommends the design and implementation of labelling and marketing schemes that increase consumer recognition and confidence in locally-produced foods, and to provide technical assistance to de-risk implementation of quality schemes (Bognar and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)).

Cooperation between producers and through value chains, and approaches to sharing risks, is often lacking. SHERPA recommends funding measures to create and maintain networks that facilitate cooperation, particularly building short supply chains and local markets (e.g., cooperatives) and investing in local infrastructure for collaborative value chain initiatives. SHERPA also recommends creating conditions conducive to strengthening sustainable supply (e.g. mandatory requirements of green public procurement at national and local levels) (Bognar and Schwarz, 2023; [SHERPA Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)).

Three headline recommendations for achieving **Prosperous** rural areas are:

1. **Encouraging local food provision**, including actions to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives within local and sustainable value chains such as mandatory requirements of green public procurement, investments in local infrastructures, and support for marketing schemes that increase confidence in locally-produced food;
2. **Strengthening the social economy**, incentivising community empowerment and collaboration between municipalities to achieve an equitable green transition;
3. **Supporting young people in entrepreneurship**, namely actions to promote the development of, and access to, education, training and networks of advice, and mentoring systems for young people from across rural actor types tailored to local contexts of rural economy, needs, and responsibilities.

Box 5. Ranking by MAP members of draft recommendations relating to a Prosperous rural areas

Polling of MAP members

The recommendation of "developing local food provision" was ranked first by just over half of the participants (81 out of 149, 54%). "Strengthening a social economy" was the first choice of 31% of participants, and "Supporting young people in entrepreneurship" was selected as first choice by 28% of participants.

"Developing local food provision" was ranked highest by representatives from science and society, compared to those from policy who ranked "Strengthening the social economy" highest.



2.2.6. Cross-cutting actions

The four Pillars the Rural Action Plan are accompanied by cross-cutting actions. Table 6 summarises the characteristics of the visions of SHERPA MAPs that align with the cross-cutting actions with recommendations which come from across the set of position papers.



Table 6. Summary of conclusions of SHEPRA MAPs which align with the Rural Action Plan cross-cutting actions.

EU Rural Action Plan	Characteristics of Visions	Enablers (E), Opportunities (O), Research Agenda (R)	Recommendations
Implementation of Rural Action Plan and Governance			
Apply rural proofing notably to the Commission's major legislative proposals which affect rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reference by SHERPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing policies through a 'rural lens' (E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure mechanisms of governance that tackle inequalities and exclusion from citizen observations (e.g. due to constraints of finance, attitudes, understanding benefits)
Set-up a Rural Observatory to bring together all data collected by the Commission on rural areas, including official statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of scientific data and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data and knowledge (E) Observation, monitoring and reporting (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploit European Open Data and Science Policy to support citizen science and business models that promote monitoring of environmental characteristics using digital tools
Enhance availability of statistics on rural areas through: (1) making available new detailed data collected in the framework of 2021 round of population and housing censuses in the EU disseminated via the 2021 Census Statistical Atlas (2) further increasing availability and quality of official statistics on rural areas by modernising the legal framework for demographic statistics (3) developing Pan-European geospatial datasets (4) mainstreaming degree of urbanisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of scientific data and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data and knowledge (E) Observation, monitoring and reporting (R) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide user-friendly guidance on rights of data providers, IPR and ethical considerations, recognising needs for quality control and cybersecurity, and protection of providers and those whose land is subject to observations Improvements in quality and spatial and temporal resolution of data series
Work on the definition of functional rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of scientific data and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data and knowledge (E) 	
Propose a Rural Pact to national, regional and local authorities committing to address the specific needs of rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No reference by SHERPA MAPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance and participation (cooperation, empowerment and partnership) (O) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SHERPA level recommendation to consider the potential value of such a pact at lower levels of governance.



A cross-cutting action proposed is of “*rural proofing*” new and existing legislation. The European Commission define rural proofing as “reviewing policies through a rural lens, to make these policies fit for purpose for those who live and work in rural areas”³³. In practice, it considers the actual and potential impacts and implications of policies on rural areas, whether positive or negative, direct and indirect, in terms of jobs, development prospects, social well-being, equal opportunities for all and the environmental quality. There is a commitment to establish a rural proofing mechanism to assess the impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas through tools included in the “[Better Regulation toolbox](#)”. The LTVRA calls for Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at national, regional and local levels. The ENRD launched a new Thematic Group on Rural Proofing³⁴ which is designed to share experiences and develop recommendations to guide the design and implementation of such rural proofing mechanisms.

The EU proposal to rural proof major policies that could affect rural areas is echoed by the recommendations of the SHERPA Position Paper on [Long-term vision on rural areas](#) (Chartier *et al.*, 2021a), which identified the lack of a ‘rural lens’ for viewing policies and the need for rural proofing to ensure that “specific realities of rural areas are taken into account as well as in the planning of targeted support.” Chartier *et al.* (2021a) report the view of the MAPs regarding the challenges and opportunities identified for the future of rural areas, covering a range of thematic domains, many of which are not tackled by traditional rural policies. Several such domains are within the responsibilities of government departments or public agencies which do not view their policies through a specifically ‘rural lens’.

Several cross-cutting actions relate to data and statistics of rural areas, such as the establishment of a Rural Observatory, improved rural statistics, and a definition of functional rural areas. SHERPA recommends that the design and operation of the Rural Observatory³⁵ should complement other sources of data, such as the [EU Copernicus Earth Observation Programme](#), and not complicate the ‘data and information landscapes’ of Europe. This would be in line with aims of open science and open data, and provide a focus on the provision of data that informs understanding and planning of rural areas (e.g. [Provence Alpes Côte D’Azur Region France MAP](#)) and support innovation in the creation of new online services (e.g. [Aragon Spain MAP](#); [River Dee Catchment and Rural Scotland UK MAPs](#)). As such it can contribute to the democratisation of data which in turn could improve empowerment of citizens and communities through citizen science, and could provide scope for areas being ‘digital laboratories’ (e.g. [Provence Alpes Côte D’Azur Region France MAP](#)).

"Attractiveness is further enhanced when there is a positive narrative of rural areas in the public debate and as there is a widespread recognition of the valuable contributions rural areas have for the present and future economy, prosperity, and welfare of the Danish society."

Denmark MAP

SHERPA recommends that the remit of the observatory enable the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative data. For example, citizens or actors in rural areas should be encouraged and supported to contribute narratives about living or working in rural areas, challenges faced, and successes achieved offers the potential for developing rich insights and positive images of rural areas (Chartier *et al.*, 2021a).

The new European Commission publication “[Statistics explained](#)” chapter in the Eurostat publication “Rural Europe”³⁶ (published 17th January 2023) reflects an aim of the collection and provision of statistical data for rural areas. Amongst the recently commissioned Horizon Europe projects two are working on improving rural data and evidence. These are [GRANULAR](#), Giving Rural Actors Novel data and re-Useable tools to Lead public Action in Rural areas, and RUSTIK, [Rural Sustainability Transitions through Integration of Knowledge](#) for

³³ https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/cross-cutting/rural-proofing_en

³⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/rural-proofing_en.html

³⁵ <https://observatory.rural-vision.europa.eu/>

³⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Rural_Europe&stable=1



improved policy processes. A related area of work undertaken by the Joint Research Centre is building a definition of functional rural areas and publishing information through the [Urban Data Platform Plus](#) to make it easier to compare data between countries with very different sizes of municipalities and enabling new types of analysis, such as access to services. In relation to these actions on the derivation and availability of data and statistics, SHERPA recommends (e.g. Miller *et al.*, 2022a, [SHERPA Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)):

- Exploiting European Open Data and Science Policy to support citizen science and business models that promote the monitoring of environmental characteristics using digital tools;
- Ensuring mechanisms of governance that tackle inequalities and exclusion from citizen observations (e.g. due to constraints of finance, attitudes, understanding benefits);
- Providing user-friendly guidance on rights of data providers, IPR and ethical considerations, recognising needs for quality control and cyber-security, and the protection of providers and those whose land is subject to observations;
- Improving the quality and spatial and temporal resolution of data series.

A key enabler identified by SHERPA is of enhanced multi-level and territorial governance that empowers local actors and communities, facilitated through flexible funding schemes relevant to the characteristics of different areas. The likely effectiveness of this enabler will require positive approaches to cooperation and shared responsibilities for the sustainable use of resources as expressed by SHERPA MAPs (e.g. [Galicia Spain MAP](#); [Rural Centro Region Portugal MAP](#); [SVARUN Slovenia MAP](#)). Steps towards such empowerment may emerge from the processes of engagement within the activities of the Rural Pact which then inform the involvement of national, regional and local authorities³⁷. As with the LTVRA, SHERPA observes the potential value of such a pact at lower levels of governance.

Polling of MAP members

The significant majority of participants in the survey of MAP members agreed or strongly agreed (84%) that the four pillars of the LTVRA is an appropriate structure to articulate future rural policies.

Beyond the headline actions proposed by SHERPA, MAP members proposed additional actions that could be included in the Rural Action Plan, foremost of which are to:

- **design CAP interventions aimed at supporting local foresight exercises to empower appropriate local governance structures to elaborate local strategies in the context of climate change and extreme climate events;**
- **ensure a holistic urban-rural approach to policies, which considers the interlinkages between the two whilst ensuring that the challenges of rural areas are properly addressed;**
- **capitalise on the social capital of rural areas, including that possessed by the elderly (e.g. through strengthening inter-generational dialogue) and new comers;**
- **ensure multi-functional land use planning that maximises the value of rural land taking into account its specificities, i.e. identifying areas which most suitable for production, tourism, forests or wetlands.**

³⁷ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-07/rural-pact-proposal_en.pdf



2.3. SHERPA Contribution to the Rural Pact

Since the inception of the Rural Pact and its community, SHERPA has followed its development and taken opportunities to contribute. At its outset, feedback was provided to the survey on the first proposal for the shape the Rural Pact indicating overall agreement with its objectives, membership and governance. Feedback recommended that membership should be enlarged and explicitly include academic/research organisations, as this type of stakeholder brings in a unique perspective, as informed by the experiences of SHERPA of its science, society, policy interfaces. Subsequently, research organisations have been included as eligible stakeholders.

SHERPA committed to the aims of the Rural Pact through raising its profile through the network of Multi-Actor Platforms (41 science-society-policy interfaces across Europe involving approximately 400 people from 21 countries). It also participated in the Rural Pact Conference in June 2022, in Brussels, and the Rural Pact Conference in May 2023, in Stockholm.

In turn, the Rural Pact Support Office contributed to the [SHERPA Final Conference](#), in Brussels, June 2023, explaining the role and status of the Pact in a plenary presentation.

3. Towards a New Policy Framework Post-2027

The LTVRA (European Commission, 2021a) provides a new framework for rural development, serving as a roadmap for rural areas towards 2040. To achieve that vision, mechanisms are required to ensure that rural matters are addressed in a coordinated and coherent manner in all areas of policy.

Due to its nature as a strategic instrument, the implementation of the LTVRA relies entirely on sectoral policy measures and their funding instruments, most notably the Cohesion Policy and CAP (in particular Specific Objectives 7 on "Generation Renewal" and Specific Objective 8 on "Vibrant rural areas" with the LEADER ring-fencing of at least 5% EAFRD budget). Together, these instruments amount to approximately €1.2 billion between 2021 and 2027, in addition to the €806.9 billion from the [NextGenerationEU](#).

Evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plans by SHERPA ([Féret et al., 2023](#)) showed that approximately 10% of the total CAP budget is allocated to measures for rural areas. It was concluded that the LEADER ring-fencing has only 12 countries which are allocating less than 6% - the minimum share required by the CAP Strategic Plan Regulation - of their EAFRD budget to LEADER. However, only nine countries explicitly refer to the LTVRA in their CAP Strategic Plans, suggesting that the Vision came too late in the process of developing their policies to influence their design³⁸. Annual amendments of the plans are foreseen by the CAP Strategic Plan Regulation³⁹ but these are expected to be limited and are unlikely to include a significant uptake of new rural development measures or a redirection of funds towards rural areas. Whilst Member States are asked to consider new policies that have been adopted since the approval of the CAP Strategic Plan in early 2023 when revising the plans, amendments are not mandatory.

As detailed in Section 0, and covered in [Pagnon et al. \(2023\)](#), several strategic, sectoral and environmental policies define objectives and targets for rural areas and have the potential to implement relevant actions through their measures. Many of these policies have already been adopted or are undergoing revisions suggesting that, as for the CAP Strategic Plan, the LTVRA will have come too late to inform these processes.

³⁸ For a more detailed and up-to-date analysis see Münch *et al.* (2023).

³⁹ REGULATION (EU) 2021/2115 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R2115>.



The concept of 'Rural proofing' was only introduced to the regulation guidelines and toolbox, the procedures to be followed when reviewing or developing new legislation, in November 2021⁴⁰.

A public consultation for the next policy reform will begin in 2024, and the first legislative proposal of the European Commission for the next Multi-Financial Framework is scheduled to be published by 2025. Both steps are crucial milestones for future policies impacting rural areas and communities. Against this background, SHERPA explored options and recommendations for the post 2027 policy framework. Three approaches to future policy were prepared by the Think Tank from the MAP deliberations: Business as Usual, Rural Acceleration, and a New Model (Figure 6).



Figure 4 Three approaches to future policy presented at the SHERPA Final Conference (*source: [Willard, M. CAP post-2027: An integrated rural and agricultural policy](#))

These were presented to the [SHERPA Final Conference](#) for debate from which three final recommendations were developed which reflect a 'rural acceleration'. These were:

1. **Make use of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas as a structuring element for future policies.** Rural objectives and actions from the LVTRA need to be more effectively integrated into other policies. To enable more effective delivery of rural development objectives, the LVTRA (or a future iteration of the vision) should be formally added to the list of EU level strategies and legislation to which the CAP should contribute (similar to the environmental legislation identified in Annex XIII of the CAP Strategic Plan Regulation). In addition, rural objectives and measures should be integrated into those policies where these links have not been explicitly established, e.g., the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities.
2. **Ensure sufficient funding for rural territories and communities through either a new dedicated fund or ringfencing of existing funds (for example Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy).** The next policy reform is the occasion to create a dedicated rural policy and funding instrument. In the absence of such novelty, a minimum of existing funds (CAP of Cohesion Policy) should be ring-fenced for rural development. Analysis of the CAP Strategic Plans demonstrated the effectiveness of such ringfencing as a mechanism for ensuring the planning and financing of measures for rural development.
3. **Through science-society-policy interfaces, ensure early participation of the society and science from rural territories in the preparation of the next policy reform.** Overall, a key outcome sought from the recommendations for policy is the empowerment of regional and local institutions and actors in decision-making processes. SHERPA MAPs argued this is essential to ensure

⁴⁰https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/cross-cutting/rural-proofing_en#:~:text=Rural%20proofing%20means%20reviewing%20policies,and%20work%20in%20rural%20areas.

that EU, national, regional, and local level policies are cohesive for addressing rural challenges and meet the needs of rural inhabitants.

Such empowerment requires the design and use of suitable multi-level governance structures which are characterised by open dialogue between institutions and stakeholders, and the inclusive participation of citizens, facilitated by newly available tools. Such approaches are envisaged in the LTVRA and its delivery mechanisms clustered under the pillars of Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous.



4. Conclusions

With the publication of the LTVRA, the debate around rural development has gained new momentum. Geopolitics, and social and biophysical changes are placing increased pressures on rural areas of Europe. These include conflict in Ukraine, migration from the Middle East and North Africa, and recurring heat waves, floods and wildfires which have characterised the European summer months in recent years. These pressures have refocused attention on energy, food and environmental security, and triggered debates over priorities over the short and long term, and the types of trade-offs required. The natural and human resources of rural areas have a considerable contribution to make to tackling all aspects of these securities, and are at the forefront of territorial security.

A key outcome sought from the recommendations for policy is the empowerment of regional and local institutions and actors in decision-making processes. This is argued as being essential to ensure that EU, national, regional, and local level policies are cohesive for addressing rural challenges and meet the needs of rural inhabitants.

Such empowerment requires the design and use of suitable multi-level governance structures which are characterised by open dialogue between institutions and stakeholders, and the inclusive participation of citizens, facilitated by newly available tools. Such approaches are envisaged in the LTVRA and its delivery mechanisms clustered under the pillars of Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous.

The final set of headline recommendations, and their prioritisation, per pillar are:

Stronger rural areas

1. **Establish and maintain Science-Society-Policy interfaces** aimed at fostering interactions, deliberation and decision-making. Such multi-actor platforms have shown to be effective hubs for the co-creation of solutions to tackle complex issues faced by rural areas.
2. **Empower rural citizens** through existing or new governance structures which draw upon approaches such as LEADER and CLLD. Those structures, paired with appropriate capacity building, will empower rural citizens to participate in citizen-led allocation of funds and to be directly implicated in opportunities such as Horizon Europe rural projects.
3. **Establish exchange programmes, e.g. Rural Erasmus**, which will enable the exchange of experiences between rural areas on Europe facing similar social problems (e.g. field trips, study tours), as well as to foster the exchange of good practices, in line with action 4 on education and training.

Connected rural areas

1. **Rural e-services** aimed at facilitating digital access to public services and systems (e.g. e-government and e-banking), centralising the online provision of basic services, and the use of "mobile offices" to enable residents to do administrative tasks directly from home.
2. **Cooperative approach for digitalisation** to encourage cooperation amongst societal groups (including policy-makers, businesses, civil society and research) to design strategies and exchange best practices (e.g. creation of spaces for the co-design of locally adapted strategies).
3. **Enhanced skills and digital competences** with improved access to technical assistance and needs-based services in key sectors at local level and targeted at particularly vulnerable groups.

Resilient rural areas

Develop citizen-led approaches to climate action aimed at stimulating place-based, territorial actions (e.g. participatory budgeting from levies on largescale renewable energy developments);



1. **Promote** existing good practices and **virtuous examples** of actions (e.g. multi-media demonstrations of best practices of just transition);
2. **Develop a climate** community-oriented **communications** strategy, tailored to local contexts of life, work and responsibilities.

Prosperous rural areas

1. **Encouraging local food provision**, including actions to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives within local and sustainable value chains such as mandatory requirements of green public procurement, investments in local infrastructures, and support for marketing schemes that increase confidence in locally-produced food;
2. **Strengthening the social economy**, incentivising community empowerment and collaboration between municipalities to achieve an equitable green transition;
3. **Supporting young people in entrepreneurship**, namely actions to promote the development of, and access to, education, training and networks of advice, and mentoring systems for young people from across rural actor types tailored to local contexts of rural economy, needs, and responsibilities.

Beyond the headline actions proposed by SHERPA, MAP members proposed additional actions that could be included in the Rural Action Plan, foremost of which are:

- design CAP interventions aimed at supporting local foresight exercises to empower appropriate local governance structures to elaborate local strategies in the context of climate change and extreme climate events;
- ensure a holistic urban-rural approach to policies, which considers the interlinkages between the two whilst ensuring that the challenges of rural areas are properly addressed;
- capitalise on the social capital of rural areas, including that possessed by the elderly (e.g. through strengthening inter-generational dialogue) and new comers;
- ensure multi-functional land use planning that maximises the value of rural land taking into account its specificities, i.e. identifying areas which most suitable for production, tourism, forests or wetlands.

Successful implementation of the LTVRA will be crucial for rural development in the next policy reform post-2027. Having such a shared vision for Europe for defining rural objectives and priorities, and equivalents for regions and nations, is essential for the design of local interventions and for directing funding. In turn these are elements that fit within the framework of pillars of the Rural Action Plan.

The SHERPA process of science-society-policy interfaces has produced recommendations for policies and actions with the objective of realising the aspirations and visions of rural areas of the MAPs and the LTVRA.

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7. Annex - SHERPA Position and Discussion Papers

7.1. Rural Policies To Protect and Enhance Biodiversity Through Landscape Features

[SHERPA Position Paper: Rural Policies to Protect and Enhance Biodiversity Through Landscape Features](#)

Headline messages

Landscape features as part of agricultural ecosystems provide essential habitats that contribute to biodiversity potential, as well as economic (agronomic services, opportunities for value-added marketing), health and cultural benefits. The value of landscape features, e.g. buffer strips, hedges, terrace walls and ponds, is acknowledged in the [Biodiversity strategy](#) where a target of at least 10% of agricultural area as high-diversity landscape features is set, in light of providing habitats for wild animals, plants, pollinators and natural pest regulators. Member States will have the obligation to translate this 10% EU target to local level, especially through the CAP instruments and CAP Strategic Plans, in line with the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#), and through the implementation of the [Habitats](#) and [Birds Directives](#).

The Biodiversity strategy also highlights that greater biodiversity may help to support higher agricultural production. However, eligibility rules for Common Agricultural Policy basic payments, along with an insufficient understanding of the positive impacts landscape features can have on production, it leaves farmers with an incentive to remove them. As a result, optimal balance between economic and biodiversity outcomes may not be achieved.

There are knowledge gaps, especially about the interaction of landscape features in agricultural systems in High Nature Value and naturally constrained areas. There are also information failures, whereby existing knowledge – especially of how better management of landscape features can improve economic performance – is insufficiently available to farmers. The development of more suitable policy interventions is also impeded by insufficient monitoring of both the existence of landscape features and the impact on them of current measures.

The opportunity should be taken to bring together existing, dispersed monitoring systems, supplemented with new high-quality information from earth observation platforms (satellite and drone) or innovative techniques (e.g. DNA-based monitoring tools), with interpretation and analysis that makes use of artificial intelligence, to provide high-level indicators of long-term impacts. More scientific research into the economic benefits of landscape features for farmers is needed. Policy needs to ensure that farmers' attention is sufficiently drawn to these benefits, and that public funding is sufficient to incentivise the cost-effective provision of public goods.

See also the [SHERPA Discussion: Paper Rural policies to Protect and Enhance Biodiversity Through the Preservation, Creation and Management of Landscape Features](#).



7.2. Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

[SHERPA Position Paper: Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#)

Headline messages

In September 2019, the new European Commission (2019 – 2024) announced the preparation of a Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, to be coordinated by the Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, with the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Janusz Wojciechowski, and the Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira. The aim is to stimulate a debate on the future of rural areas and the roles they have to play in European society.

This SHERPA Position Paper aims at contributing to the debate on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas by presenting the key issues identified by the 20 regional and national SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs), and by the EU-level MAP. The MAPs identified their desired visions for 2040, the enabling factors to achieve those visions, the challenges to overcome and the opportunities to be seized. They were informed by public data relating to the environmental, social and economic characteristics of rural areas, and scientific papers and reports from past and ongoing research.

The MAPs concluded that rural areas of Europe are attractive in their own right and, as a consequence of the high quality of life available, many such areas are appealing places to live, work and visit. They made a strong call for mechanisms to ensure that rural matters are addressed in a coordinated and coherent manner in all areas of policy. Their long-term vision is of rural areas that are characterised by opportunity, innovation, modernity, liveliness, resilience and equality, their sustainable and multi-functional environments. Key enablers to achieving their vision are enhanced multi-level and territorial governance that empowers local actors and communities, facilitated through flexible funding schemes relevant to the characteristics of different areas. T

he EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas is encouraged to reflect these characteristics, setting out the principles and instruments for achieving the vision overall, and its realisation at different territorial levels, respecting the diversity of rural Europe (biophysically and socio-economically), and following the principles of equality, innovation, and environmental sustainability.

The participating communities of science, society and policy contributed complementary knowledge and insights to the debates about the visions for rural areas by 2040, with perspectives from 17 countries, and at an EU level.

See also the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#).

7.3. Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability

[SHERPA Position Paper: Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)

Headline messages

Tackling climate change and striving for environmental sustainability cross almost all aspects of the lives of citizens, and over multiple generations as individuals take on different responsibilities through their life course. The transitions required to achieve net zero Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions by 2050 requires all citizens to be agents of change.

Understanding 'how' to get to net zero GHG emissions is a key requirement in planning the just transition to climate neutrality. Reducing GHG emissions will require further incentives and measures to maximize carbon sequestration through investment in natural capital, and transitions to the production and use of energy from renewable sources. The significant interventions being planned or implemented such as woodland expansion,



peatland restoration, transitions to agro-ecological farming systems, and transitions to renewable energy, all of which place rural areas at the forefront of achieving aims of carbon neutrality.

Interventions require to be coherent across geographic levels and through time, and designed and implemented in partnerships between sectors, and across policy, society, business and research. This will require motivating and facilitating active participation of stakeholders to develop shared visions for planning approaches to tackle climate change. These approaches need to consider the roles of stakeholders in different land systems, with sensitivity shown to positions of different sectors relative to each other.

The long term timescales to realising the outcomes of interventions but shorter and immediate timescales of activity on the ground necessitate a diversity of actions across sectors and communities, within a coherent set of policies (e.g. planning, land use), and a systems perspective to understand the impacts and dependencies of actions in one dimension on another. However, the natural and human resources differ across Europe's rural areas and therefore there are different starting points for transitions, prospective trajectories of change, and likely endpoints on GHG emissions by 2050. Those differences should be accounted for in the types and levels of support, incentives and rewards for mitigating and adapting to climate change, and the pathways and timescales of transitions to climate neutrality.

Activities around COP26 showed how effectively young people provide visions for the future. In line with the EU Youth Strategy, a shared aim should be the creation of an international community of climate conscious citizens. To achieve this aim will require multiple, complimentary, approaches that educate, teach and demonstrate why, what and how climate change can be tackled. However, the design of measures that incentivise action or change, and overcome barriers to such action requires knowing and understanding public attitudes towards climate change and environmental sustainability.

A comprehensive strategy is required for developing human capital with training for teachers at primary, secondary and higher education levels, and Continuing Professional Development and life-long learning linked to the use of Open Science and Open Data. Such a strategy should complement: i) ongoing improvements in providing data on changes in climate relevant to decision making; ii) authoritative assessments of the impacts of climate changes, accessible by relevant groups; iii) development of tailor-made regional mitigation and adaptation measures; iv) assessment of relative costs and benefits of measures and solutions; and, v) communications which motivate actions and develop a sense of shared effort and benefits.

Mitigating the causes and impacts of climate change, and adapting to new climatic regimes requires a reconsideration of existing arrangements of governance, responsibilities and decision-making. This may necessitate change at institutional and personal levels, and changes in regulatory positions.

Achieving the aim of climate neutrality will require strong leadership, as stressed by the South Aegean Greece MAP (Kriezi et al., 2022): "strong political will and commitment is of utmost importance to change the conditions (and habits) that contribute to climate change". 7 Strong leadership is also r

[See also the Discussion Paper: Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability](#)

7.4. Change in Production and Diversification of the Rural Economy

[SHERPA Position Paper: Change in Production and Diversification of the Rural Economy](#)

Headline messages

Green and digital transitions will form part of a much-needed transformational change of European rural areas, and the necessary and significant adjustments require changes in the production and diversification of the rural economy. These adjustments offer new development opportunities in and for rural areas, which will contribute to the continued improvement of the resilience of rural communities and the post-COVID19 pandemic recovery of rural areas.



This SHERPA Position Paper aims to contribute to the debate by presenting opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for production changes and the diversification of the rural economy as identified by eight regional and national SHERPA Multi Actor Platforms (MAPs), and by the EU-level MAP. The MAPs identified these elements by collecting and organising the views of MAP members (representing science, society, and policy communities) through various MAP meetings and additional communication.

Overall, the eight MAPs identified a variety of opportunities and challenges related to the process of changing the production and diversifying the rural economy, and each developed recommendations on what could be done to contribute to this process. For instance, changing business models (especially in agricultural businesses) through the adoption of new business solutions and innovative approaches is viewed as a key driver, facilitating change in production and diversification of the rural economy. Additionally, digitalisation processes and the enhancement of related infrastructure (including broadband) were identified as a possibility to help overcome the divide between urban and rural areas. In addition, the idea of ensuring basic services (housing, education, health, etc.) in rural areas to improve the quality of life in rural areas was suggested in order to attract businesses and people to move to rural areas, supported by the adoption of an integrated and cross-sectoral strategy, with actions tailored to the specific needs of the rural areas. Other ideas to facilitate the change in production and diversification of the rural economy include:

- Community empowerment based on mutual trust to achieve an equitable green transition;
- Improving access to funding for businesses in rural areas;
- Ensuring and improving the sustainable management of resources, also in the utilisation of renewable energy;
- Implementation of flexible practices to anticipate skills needs, through the development of diverse training and employment services in specific areas;
- Improvement of key areas and sectors, such as smart rurality, bioeconomy, food chains.
- The knowledge and insights contributed by the MAPs are synthesised in this SHERPA Position Paper, and will inform future discussions on changes in production and diversification of the rural economy.

See also the [Discussion Paper: Change in Production and Diversification of the Rural Economy](#).

7.5. Foresight Exercise. Alternative Rural Futures: How to Get There?

[SHERPA Position Paper: Foresight Exercise. Alternative Rural Futures: How to Get There?](#)

Headline messages

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

Despite variations found in the assessment of the current scenario, all MAPs indicated to aim for a future scenario in which rural population is growing and networked approaches to multilevel governance prevail. This description fits best with the scenario 'Rural Renewal', which is the scenario all five MAPs indicated that best fit with the vision for the future of their rural areas. The Portuguese MAP also considered the scenario



'Rural Connection' to be an attractive scenario for the local rural context, thus embracing the opportunity offered by the digitalisation of the economic sectors and the network of communication and transport.

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

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

See also the [Discussion Paper: Foresight Exercise Alternative Rural Futures: How to Get There?](#)

7.6. Social Dimension of Rural Areas

[SHERPA Position Paper: Social Dimension of Rural Areas](#)

Headline messages

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

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

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

See also the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Social Dimension of Rural Areas](#).

7.7. Digitalisation in Rural Areas

[SHERPA Position Paper: Digitalisation in Rural Areas](#)

Headline messages

The EU is placing a lot of emphasis on digitalisation via the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, primarily through the second area of action, connected rural areas, where digitalisation is inherent to digital



infrastructures and their relevance when dealing with the possibilities to use services. One of the flagship initiatives in this area is 'Rural Digital Futures', with a set of actions including: digital connectivity, digital technology, people, and measuring progress.

Such prominent role assigned to digitalisation is confirmed by the Rural Action Plan, and the Digital Compass for the [EU's Digital Decade](#). This Communication confirms that rural areas are active players for attaining the [EU Green Deal](#), the [Farm to Fork strategy](#) and [the protection of biodiversity](#). To reach a level of efficiency capable of improving significantly the quality of life in rural and remote areas, actions are needed. What needs to be primarily eradicated is the digital divide, which causes the phenomenon that has been indicated as '[digital poverty](#)'.

The set of MAPs addressing the topic of 'Digitalisation in rural areas', as per [Brunori et al. \(2022\)](#), represent a subset of the SHERPA MAPs and of the complex rural geography of Europe. All of them, though, highlighted a range of national, regional, and local policies and bottom-up initiatives showing how a prominent and cross-cutting topic digitalisation is across EU countries and levels of governance. The present paper acknowledges and highlights the following:

- Even though considerable efforts are being made to achieve digitalisation goals across EU countries, several questions as to how digitalisation may operate as a tool and a catalyst for change in rural areas remain unanswered. These issues will require further investigation;
- There is the need to address (the risk of) digital exclusion and further exacerbation of the digital divide, paying specific attention to low-skilled and vulnerable groups;
- Public support is essential for ensuring that adequate infrastructures and services are made available to rural inhabitants. To do this, more flexible funding schemes are needed, to adjust to specific local needs and contexts, with a long-term perspective (beyond electoral cycles);
- Coordination and cooperation among different societal groups, policy-makers, businesses, and research are decisive for designing locally adapted strategies, and exchanges between best local practices should be encouraged;
- The availability of, and access to, data is of the essence for genuine development processes and informed decision-making but require coordination among publicly owned databases. Privacy and security issues potentially arising from it are to be carefully considered;
- Many types of policies indirectly affect digitalisation processes in rural areas beyond the specific initiatives which receive more attention in digital strategies: an in-depth assessment of hindering and enabling factors across different sectoral strategies could work as a sort of 'digital rural proofing'.

See the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Digitalisation in Rural Areas](#).

7.8. Climate Change and Land Use

[SHERPA Position Paper: Climate Change and Land Use](#)

Headline messages

Over the last 3 years, macro-level challenges of COVID-19, conflict in Ukraine and the cost of living crises can be expected to have taken time of legislatures and public authorities, and research and policy thinking, and reprioritised the allocation of funds and other resources. This reflects the inevitable influences on pathways to net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions which need to be handled and overcome. However, limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C by reducing GHG emissions to net zero by 2050 must remain the ambition. However, the IPCC (2023) highlight the prospects of an overshoot of the target of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, and the need to strengthen policies to avoid global warming reaching 3.2°C by 2100.



Climate change is leading to the transformations in uses of land in Europe, at variable rates and types of change. Policies for mitigating climate change are directing changes in land use towards renewable energy generation, woodland expansion, management of natural capital through restoring peatlands and carbon rich soils, and changes in agricultural and land systems, collectively contributing to visions for rural areas of a wellbeing economy. However, spatial planning and suitable governance structures are required to ensure these mitigation actions require to be in places where the greatest impacts on mitigating climate change can be realised (e.g. where energy resource is significant; construction of renewable energy does not release more carbon than it could offset; planting woodland does not release more carbon than it can sequester; agricultural production systems do not increase demand on transporting water). However, such actions must ensure benefits (economic, social, environmental) remain higher than their respective costs.

Rural areas are also at the intersection of many of the frontiers of tackling climate change through marine renewable energy systems along coasts, inshore or offshore (e.g. offshore wind, tidal, wave, hybrid). These sources have the prospects of contributing most to the proportion of renewable energy in Europe. They provide both potential for economic development on islands and in remote rural areas (e.g. test facilities, Orkney, UK; support services), with opportunities for development of skills. However, as with other marine developments (oil and gas extraction; fishing) consideration of potential impacts on marine habitats and seascapes should be kept under continued monitoring and regulations contemporaneous (Denmark MAP; [UK MAPs](#)).

Climate change effects in rural areas have been direct through creating conditions leading to damage to environmental assets and property (e.g. wildfires, storms), inhibiting production (e.g. restricting crop growth due to droughts), and disrupting communications (e.g. flooding). After periods of disruption in the short term such effects may not lead to changes in land use over the long term (e.g. away from moorland, forestry or arable uses). However, they are leading to innovations in planning and decisions by business and land managers as they adapt land systems (e.g. to agroecology), management practices (e.g. intercropping, on farm manure production), and crop types (e.g. breeding drought resistant varieties), and individuals and communities taking actions in their properties or place.

Product, technological and social innovations have been creating opportunities for rural areas to diversify and accelerate the uses of land to mitigate and adapt to climate change. However, systems thinking is required in the design both of policy and research agendas, reflecting the interdependencies and trade-offs between climate change and land use, and to understand and tackle the main barriers that prevent a change of farming practices (Emilia Romagna Italy MAP). "A systemic approach is necessary because of the interdependence between the sectors" (South Region France MAP). For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions through changes in food systems requires influencing consumer preferences and purchasing habits to change human diets (e.g. increase plant-based food, reduce red meat production), changing means of food processing, transport and fuel (e.g. hydrogen, biomethane, electricity for fuelling agricultural vehicles), management of land and water, and control of inputs.

In designing and realising opportunities for rural land use to tackle climate change, greater effort should be made to the creation of value locally. The definition of local may be imprecise, but the principle should be one in which an action contributes to creating more successful places, taking account of people, location and resources that combine to address the needs and realising the full potential of communities, and in which resources are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them.

Barriers to the uptake of transformations in the use of land required to tackle climate change vary across Europe and should be addressed. They include political leadership (e.g. tackling climate change not being a priority at local or regional levels), regulatory issues (e.g. access to land), institutional frameworks (e.g. legal bases for formalising community authority for handling funds, ownership or equity in business ventures), business systems (e.g. locked into unsustainable contracts or practices), attitudes and perceptions of current and new land managers (e.g. on the uptake of new technologies), human capital (e.g. skills, knowledge of how to access information), and social capital (e.g. community organisation).



A challenge for all sectors is having no simple and clear vision of what is meant by success in tackling climate change. The messages are largely ones of reducing the negative impacts (e.g. temperatures lower than they will be; adverse consequences of lack of, or insufficient, action). In 2021/22 the estimated GHG emissions from EU Member States rose slightly, reflecting some of the recovery in economic activities after the tightest COVID-19 restrictions in 2019 and 2020. Perceptible reductions in the rate of GHG emissions will be slow to emerge, and seasonal variations in weather will complicate messaging to all types of audiences.

The lack of a coherent communications strategy across levels of governance is diluting messages and weakening their impacts. Barriers to changing human behaviours can be created by disquiet or frustration over the slow lead time for actions to be undertaken (e.g. conversion of land uses to woodlands; onshore wind energy), and for actions to translate into clear evidence of success or benefits. The means of monitoring such changes should be enhanced, and their relevance to individuals, place, regions, to made communicated more clearly for ease of understanding by citizens, businesses and political representatives.

The evolution of new forms of governance (e.g. land use partnerships) provides examples of how priorities can be formed with means of action on the ground. Their nature and rate of emergence of structures and approaches will vary across jurisdictions, but current examples illustrate how to broaden how climate change can be tackled, with greater participation and consultation. A key requirement for empowering such structures is the authority to direct financial resources (e.g. participatory budgeting), source of funding of which could include: the EU Innovation Fund or EU Cohesion Fund in 2028-34 multi-annual funding framework, and levy on infrastructure projects (e.g. largescale renewable energy or Carbon Capture and Storage developments).

In addition to the consequences of climate change on society and the environment, a risk is emerging of increasing gaps between and within regions, communities and businesses in their capability to take actions and opportunities. Increases in disparities will test the effectiveness of the mechanisms of the EU and national governments in supporting Just Transitions (e.g. [InvestEU Advisory Hub](#)).

Lessons need to be learnt of the strengths and weaknesses of different mechanisms as they are tried within local social, economic and environmental contexts. While recognising that no one approach will be ideal in all circumstances, successes should be scaled out. This will require means of enabling innovation flows across Europe, as per EIP-Agri, an AKIS or national science-society-policy interface, with translation between contexts with appropriate forms of advice and support for implementation for policy, business and civil society.

See also the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Climate Change and Land Use](#).

7.9. Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains

[SHERPA Position Paper: Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#)

Headline messages

Sustainable and resilient value chains are necessary for sustainable growth in rural areas, for food security, and for the sustainable use of resources. The use of new forms of business models and cooperation can empower producers in rural areas while facilitating social and environmental co-benefits.

The EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) up to 2040 highlights the 'active' role rural areas will play in transitions towards sustainable value chains and achieving the objectives of the EGD, Farm to Fork Strategy, and Circular Economy Action Plan. Under the LTVRA, the European Commission emphasizes how the preservation of natural resources, the restoration of landscapes, including cultural ones, the greening of farming activities and shortening supply chains will make rural areas more resilient to climate change, natural hazards and economic crises: 'As providers of services that protect ecosystems and solutions for carbon neutrality, rural areas have an increasingly important role to play in climate change mitigation and the



sustainable circular economy. Rural areas should build on sustainable farming, forestry, agri-food economic activities and a diversified range of greener economic activities promoting carbon-farming and local, community-based high-quality production’.

The set of MAPs addressing the topic of Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains in Rural Areas, as per [Bognar & Schwarz \(2022\)](#) have highlighted a range of national, regional, and local policies and initiatives, emphasising various needs and challenges in the transition towards SVCs.

The MAPs concur that large-scale and long-term investments will be needed to facilitate the transition towards SVCs, including investments in infrastructure, development of legal frameworks, formal and informal training for rural producers. Despite efforts, there are still limited opportunities for horizontal and vertical coordination in many rural areas, particularly in the Eastern European MAPs. Improved representation of producers’ interests in the agri-food chain is needed as well as in relation with political decision makers. Local contexts need to be accounted for and incorporated into policy designs. In particular, EU level tools for implementing strategies need to be adaptable to local levels.

Based on the guiding questions given, the MAPs’ position papers highlighted the following:

Needs in relation to sustainable and resilient value chains include: the development of an infrastructure to create and sustain alternative supply chains; legislation and legal rules to clarify how sustainable value chains should operate; strategies to communicate with consumers; both formal and informal training programmes for rural producers; improvement of the capacities of rural producers to withstand to exposures to hazards; and better cooperation and vertical integration to include all value chain actors from producers to consumers, as well as AKIS actors and public administrations.

Policy interventions already in place and actions of local actors have taken in addressing needs include: 1) territorial level governance; 2) cooperation of local producers; 3) reconnecting producers and consumers; 4) rural community initiatives; 5) training and education; and 6) infrastructure development.

Recommended policy interventions by MAPs include 1) facilitating education and training by providing incentives, actively engaging academia, expanding agricultural education units, and developing curriculum that reflects the real needs of farmers; 2) providing financial support through more flexible funding criteria, incentivising collaboration between municipalities, and providing substantial aid for practices that are environmentally-friendly; 3) increasing the resilience of producers through research and development programmes, and long term funding for transitioning practices; 4) decreasing bureaucratic burdens through simplified regulations and taxation systems, and streamlining administrative procedures; and 5) communicating sustainability by promoting alternative value chains beyond geographic regions they are located in, creating local labels that are easily recognisable, and reduce risks for participating in quality schemes.

Research projects needed include: collaborative research projects to foster adoption of new technologies, social innovations and collaborative approaches in piloting new initiatives in sustainable value chains; understanding how principles and processes of sustainable and resilient value chains can be scaled up to global food systems, improve the understanding of the presence, influence and interaction of structural, economic, regulatory, cultural and other relevant factors that hinder or facilitate the emergence of producer empowerment in traditional value chains; identify and analyse efficient mechanisms for promoting local products; and improve the understanding of the behaviour, motivations, values and preferences of rural and urban actors and communities to strengthen cooperation and solidarity

See also the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains](#).



7.10. Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-level Governance Processes

[SHERPA Position Paper: Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-level Governance Processes](#)

Headline 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.

See also the [SHERPA Discussion Paper: Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-level Governance Processes](#).





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