SHERPA — Rural Science-Society-Policy Interfaces

SHERPA Discussion Paper

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

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Table of Contents

Summary

Empowering regional and local institutions and actors in decision-making processes is essential to ensure that EU, national, regional, and local level policies are sufficiently cohesive to address specific rural challenges and meet the needs of rural inhabitants. Developing coherent rural policies requires Multi-Level Governance (MLG) structures (as in Hooghe & Marks, 2001) that build on regional and local knowledge and integrate this into policy-making. This requires holistic governance approaches to rural policy development based on open dialogue between institutions and stakeholders, and the inclusive participation of citizens, facilitated through the use of newly available (digital) tools.

SHERPA will gather evidence across Europe regarding governance and stakeholder engagement in rural policy-making processes, and highlight which future governance related measures and research is needed to improve the development and implementation of rural policies. SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) are invited to discuss the following key governance related questions:

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

The exercise will follow the standard SHERPA process: (i) preparation of discussion material based on the SHERPA Discussion Paper as well as regional- and national-specific research (ii) consultation with MAP members, (iii) summary of the discussions in a MAP Position Note, and (iv) synthesis of the regional and national MAP Position Notes for discussion at EU-level.

This SHERPA Discussion Paper provides a synthesis of EU policy aims and findings from research on the topic of governance in rural areas as identified in recent research projects.

1. Introduction

1.1. Governance in rural areas

"…to fully address the needs of rural areas and to fully realise their potential, we not only need strong actions and strong funding; we also need strong co-operation. We must forge stronger links of governance, bringing together EU institutions, bodies, and agencies, with national ministries, regional authorities and local communities."

EU Commissioner for Agriculture Janusz Wochiechowski at the Rural Pact Conference on 15 June 2022.

Keeping in mind these words of the EU Commissioner for Agriculture, the future development and growth of Europe's rural areas is dependent on establishing stronger multi-level collaborative governance structures through which institutions, stakeholders and citizens can identify common challenges and share the knowledge, ideas and good practices required to overcome them. International agencies such as UNDP, the World Bank, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and others define governance as the exercise of authority or power in order to manage a country's economic, political and administrative affairs. The 2009 Global Monitoring Report sees governance as 'power relationships,' 'formal and informal processes of formulating policies and allocating resources,' 'processes of decision-making' and 'mechanisms for holding governments accountable.' (Concept of Governance, 2016).

For the purpose of this paper, 'governance' is understood to be 'structures and processes that are designed to ensure accountability, transparency, responsiveness, rule of law, stability, equity and inclusiveness, empowerment, and broad-based participation. Governance also represents the norms, values and rules of the game through which public affairs are managed in a manner that is transparent, participatory, inclusive and responsive. [...] In a broad sense, governance is about the culture and institutional environment in which citizens and stakeholders interact among themselves and participate in public affairs.' (Concept of Governance, 2016).

Building the resilience of EU rural areas is essential to help rural actors build resilience and overcome socio-economic challenges presented by policy shocks such as the ongoing public health, energy, and cost of living crises (Giacometti & Teras 2019). Years of post-financial crash austerity have left many regional and local authorities ill-equipped to cope with these crises as they lack key capacities, resources, and infrastructure to solve growing rural issues (Norlen et al., 2022). In the more extreme scenarios this can lead to a 'Geography of EU discontent' (Dijkstra et al., 2018), hence the creation of a new Commission Vice President on Democracy and Demography (Von der Leyen 2019). Furthermore, rural actors argue that their limited role in multi-level governance (MLG) policy-making has resulted in EU and national level rural policies and strategies that do not effectively address rural challenges. Consequently, many of the issues rural areas face including outmigration, high unemployment and lower educations levels have been exacerbated by consecutive crises (ESPON 2021). Within this context, empowering rural areas in MLG policy-making processes is essential for enhancing synergies between EU, national and regional level policies, and ensuring that these policies are sufficiently informed by local rural knowledge and expertise.

In recent years, MLG has become widely adopted and has made significant contributions to understanding the nature of governance within the EU. It has highlighted the increasingly complicated relations between a multitude of actors different backgrounds and territorial levels, as well as the mechanisms and methods through which decisions are made in current politics (Coopenergy, 2015; Bache, 2021). In 2009, the Committee of the Regions defined MLG as the European Commission's goal to develop an inclusive decision-making process for the European level with at its core the recognition that developing and delivering on EU policies is most effective when there is all-round cooperation: "The Committee of the Regions considers multilevel governance to mean coordinated action by the European Union, the Member States and local and regional authorities, based on partnership and aimed at drawing up and implementing EU policies. It leads to

responsibility being shared between the different tiers of government concerned and is underpinned by all sources of democratic legitimacy and the representative nature of the different players involved." (Committee of the Regions 2009). In the simplest of terms, MLG means working together across different levels of government to deliver effective and coherent policies (Coopenergy, 2015).

The EU have attempted to strengthen the position of regional and local level actors in MLG processes by advocating the need for more active subsidiarity and place-based policy-making approaches as a prerequisite for overcoming geographies of discontent and growing support for populist parties in rural areas (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). Place-based policy-making approaches have been particularly evident in EU regional and agricultural policies where the EU has helped facilitate the development of rural networks and increase stakeholder engagement in policy formulation. The role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) has become important in regard to LEADER and Community-led local development (CLLD) programmes and the development of implementation of rural development plans and smart specialisation strategies (Moodie et al., 2021). Despite these developments, however, the role of regional and local level actors remains constrained in MLG processes due the dominance of EU and national levels actors (Bache, 1999) and a lack of capacity of resources within public authorities to effectively facilitate coordinate at the regional and local levels (Bailey & Propis, 2001). Indeed despite its 30 years' experience significant challenges remain in terms of governance and added value considering the resources invested (European court of Auditors, 2022).
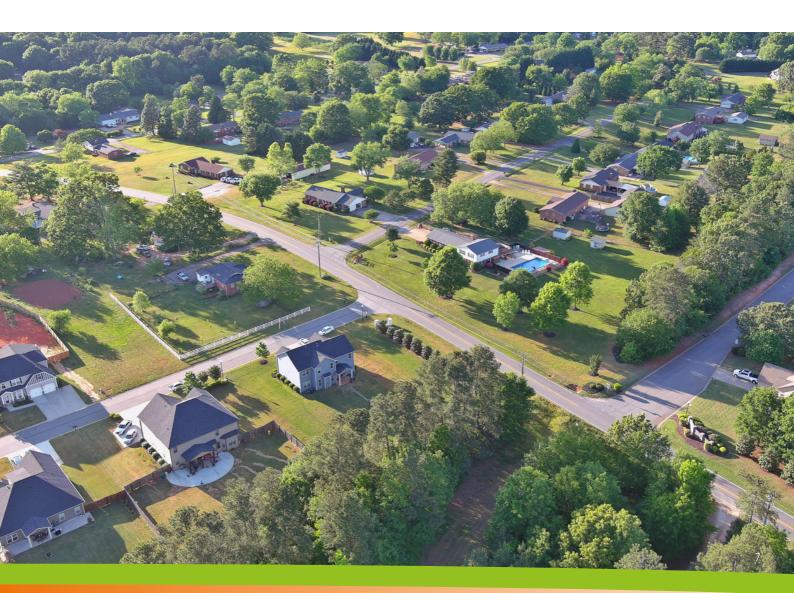
The pandemic has created significant opportunities for the revitalisation of rural areas. Counter urbanisation trends emerged during the crisis with people taking advantage of remote work opportunities to move out of cities or buy second homes in rural areas (Norlen et al., 2022). Digitalisation and stronger mobility links between urban and rural areas can support the continuation of this trend, along with efforts to make rural areas more attractive areas to live (European Commission, 2021a). The crisis has also accelerated the growth of sustainable rural green businesses, products and tourism (ESPON, 2022). In addition, industries and businesses in rural areas across Europe will have a central role in the delivery and implementation of green transitions and the shift to carbon neutral technologies. Green transitions will require holistic policy-making and stakeholder engagement processes built around collaborative rural network governance and cross-sectoral integration (Moodie et al., 2021). Furthermore, advances in digital technologies, which were given further momentum during the pandemic, present new opportunities for enhancing rural stakeholder and citizen engagement in MLG processes. The direct digital involvement of rural citizens at the formulation stage of EU regional and agricultural policy programmes can enhance input legitimacy and ensure that policies address rural challenges and meet the needs of rural citizens (Moodie et al., 2021).

Rural governance and stakeholder/citizen engagement are central cross-cutting themes running through the latest policy documents related to the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and EU Rural Action Plan, as well as the Rural Pact (European Commission, 2022). A term linked heavily to rural governance that has become a prominent concept within rural development and that is mentioned in the LTVRA is 'rural proofing'. Rural areas are seen to be at-risk regarding disparities and unbalanced impacts of policies on EU level as well as other levels of governance, and so the concept of rural proofing was developed: ensuring that 'thinking rural' becomes part of the policy design at all governance levels, potential negative impacts are addressed and positive aspects of a policy are fostered (Gaugitsch et al., 2022). In the EC Communication on the LTVRA, Member States were invited to consider implementing rural proofing at all levels of governance, alongside the commitment of the European Commission to integrate rural proofing as part of the Better Regulation Agenda, and initial guidance has been produced on how to put into practice (ENRD, 2022). Indeed, Task 34 of the 2021 Better Regulation Toolbox (European Commission, 2021) formally incorporates rural proofing as part of the impact assessment and regulatory fitness (REFIT) processes of the European Commission for the first time.

The nature of rural governance structures is context dependent and influenced largely by the economic, social, and political history of a specific rural area, which tends to be a mix of locally driven governance processes and influences from regulatory decisions taken by higher government levels (i.e., local, regional, national, international). Weigelt and Muller (2019) argue that good rural governance is driven by three principles: recognising the human rights of rural inhabitants, the empowerment of rural citizens, and the accountability of elected politicians and public authorities to the rural citizens. Four key governance related sub-themes emerge within the LTVRA and its EU Rural Action Plan as well as the Rural Pact, which are the focus of in-depth discussion in the remainder of this SHERPA Position Paper. These core governance sub-themes are as follows:

1. Place-based policy making
2. Enhancing rural-urban interconnections and interdependencies
3. Participatory and inclusive rural governance
4. Collaborative rural network governance

In the following sections, each sub-theme is discussed in more detail, examining how the sub-theme has been addressed within both academic literature and policy documentation.

1.2. Governance in rural areas within SHERPA

Governance in rural areas is not only a prominent topic within the EU and its policies, but it is also a key cross-cutting theme that is central within many of the MAP Position Papers covering different policy topics[1]. The main messages shared by the MAPs on governance in rural areas so far in the SHERPA project can be summarised as follows:

- Rural governance structures are fragmented and characterised by a lack of coordination and integration between different governance levels and sectors.
- There is a need to generate more inclusive and transparent place-based and participative rural governance structures, where citizens are incentivised to participate to a greater degree in public policy-making.
- Future rural governance processes need to encourage interregional and intermunicipal collaboration through the identification of shared geographical, social, cultural, and historical characteristics to help overcome administrative boundaries.
- There is a need to overcome a narrow sectoral focus at the policy level to encourage the development of rural strategies based on a consensus of place-based knowledge and interests. increase interaction and interconnectedness between urban and rural areas through the development of joint policy strategies.
- Local knowledge, expertise, and data are important prerequisites for developing and implementing place-based and participative policies.
- At EU, national, and regional/local levels, the authority in charge for rural development should be geographically proximate to rural areas and, therefore, able to capture the specificities and needs of the territory.
- The main opportunities for the development of rural governance lay in bottom-up initiatives driven by local leaders (locally led) that encourage social innovation and social responsibility through the creation of multi-sectoral partnerships and innovation ecosystems.
- Effective rural governance processes require increased collaboration between public, private and third sectors, and engaging grassroot organisation to be involved in the community by implementing actions through EU and nationally funded projects.
- New holistic governance and policy-making tools must be developed and implemented at local and regional levels to support social, green and smart transitions in rural territories that respond to current and future development trends and policy challenges.

Governance has been an important cross-cutting theme within MAP discussions and has been highlighted as a key aspect for sustainable development and growth in rural areas. The continued importance placed on this topic by the SHERPA MAPs, as well as the EU institutions, is why SHERPA decided to focus on the topic of governance in rural areas during its final MAP Cycle. This will allow the MAPs to go in-depth on this important topic and have the opportunity to promote learning by sharing their opinions and recommendations on governance best practices.

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[1] The Long-Term Vision for Rural areas, climate change and environmental sustainability, change in production and diversification of rural economies, and the SHERPA foresight exercise.

2. The EU policy context

In recent years, EU rural policy-making has been developed against a backdrop of growing citizen discontent manifested in declining trust in EU and national policymakers and growing support for right-wing populist parties (Dijkstra et al, 2018). As Rodriquez-Pose notes (2018), so called 'geographies of discontent' have largely manifest themselves in rural areas characterised by older, working-class, male voters on low incomes with lower employment rates or with a less-educated workforce. Within these regions, many citizens feel like they have been left behind by the decline of traditional industries and the transition to a knowledge-based economy. Place-based governance and policy-making approaches have been advocated as a potential solution for overcoming "geographies of discontent" (Moodie et al., 2021). Indeed, empowering rural institutions, stakeholders and citizens in multi-level governance processes is essential for raising awareness and ensuring that EU, national and regional/local policy are sufficiently integrated and based on local knowledge and expertise to help meet rural challenges and needs.

Terminology surrounding EU rural policy-making has become closely linked with connotations of depopulation and demographic decline. The [ESPON Escape](#) project highlighted that "there is a danger that rural population policies become synonymous with negative attitudes to "lagging", "challenged" or "declining" regions." The project recommended that the lexicon surrounding rural policy needs to be "disassociated from perceptions of failure, so that interventions can be built around positive notions of rural "transition", "transformation" or "restructuring" – terminology that promotes positive images of rural life around which economically sustainable pathways, ecological performance and resilient development can be combined." (Copus et al., 2020).

Rural governance across the Member States of the European Union has taken different shapes and forms, and has developed and changed over time. Experience with rural development policies in Europe has shown that the models of governance in EU countries are highly differentiated in the matter of the degree of decentralisation, relations between and among the national, regional, and local levels involved, horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms between/among the various institutional levels, and the presence of new forms of agreements for cooperation between institutional and socio-economic actors (Mantino, 2009).

The EU's governance approach towards rural development has also changed throughout the years. From 2000 onwards there was a focus on decentralisation and bringing support measures closer to the needs and priorities expressed by local communities through the introduction of bottom-up and participatory approaches, such as LEADER, rural networking, and social innovation. EU's rural development also started focusing on simplifying EU funding, the creation of National Strategy Plans, and the horizontal coordination of rural development, national policies and cohesion policies (Mantino, 2009).

Since 2014, there has been a notable emphasis on inclusive and participatory MLG processes in rural areas. The most recent EU initiative in regard to governance for rural areas is the publication of the EC Communication on the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas, which underlines the importance of both MLG and place-based governance, and introduces the Rural Pact as a new instrument to put this Vision into practice.

2.1. The Cohesion Policy and Partnership principle

The Cohesion Policy is the EU's main policy to promote and support overall harmonious development within the EU. Although not specific to rural areas, over 25% of EU Cohesion Policy investments between 2014 and 2020 helped keep rural areas strong. Key funding priorities of the Cohesion Fund for this time in rural areas were 'Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency', 'Promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key

network infrastructures' and 'Enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises'. The Cohesion Policy will continue to invest in rural areas in the future, and a new cross-cutting policy objective dedicated to sustainable, place-based territorial and local development will be central in this: a new Policy Objective 5 'Europe closer to citizens' has been set out in the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for the period 2021-2027. The Cohesion Policy also Fundamental for the implementation of Cohesion Policy is the partnership principle. It implies close cooperation between the Commission, the authorities at national, regional and local level in the Member States and other governmental and non-governmental organisations and bodies during the different stages of the implementation cycle of the funding that is part of the Cohesion Policy. The principle is put into action by Partnership Agreements and a new forum for partners to put the principle into action, ensuring that all levels of society are involved in the implementation of the funding of the Cohesion Policy (Holstein and Böhme, 2021).

2.2. LEADER: EU's Bottom-up and participatory approach

It has been made clear that rural development needs a policy approach characterised by innovation, community participation, cooperation, networks, and MLG. Bottom-up and participatory approaches have been fundamental to fostering rural development and balanced territorial development. Co-creation for Policy Processes started to become embedded in, among others, rural policy-making as a tool for institutions to facilitate collaboration between multiple stakeholders with a view to solving problems and stimulating action (Matti et al., 2022). The main examples of the EU in regard to established participatory approaches is LEADER and the resulting rural networking.

LEADER is a local development method of the EU which has been used for over 30 years and is implemented by around 2 800 Local Action Groups (LAGs), covering 61 % of the rural population in the EU (ENRD, 2021). LEADER is centred around a community-led and integrated approach, mobilising local actors in a specific territory to design and deliver a Local Development Strategy (LDS). Public authorities, private enterprises, and community groups work together in partnership to animate and support projects and activities designed to meet local development needs, promoting innovative solutions and multi-sectoral actions, networking, and cooperation. LEADER at local level is led by LAGs and is designed to safeguard that people living in rural communities can participate in decision-making and draw up and implement Local Development Strategies (LDSs). The LAG identifies the developmental needs of a local area and make decisions on what types of funding and actions are best suited to address these needs.

This approach has proven to foster a uniquely integrated, relevant, and coherent approach to local development. An integral feature of LEADER is to be bottom-up ensuring that local actors are involved in decision-making in their local area with respect to the selection of priorities and strategies, as LEADER considers that local actors are in the best position to tackle territorial and local challenges based on their capacity to create endogenous development. LEADER's objective is to use local initiative and skills, promote the acquisition of know-how on local integrated development and disseminate this know-how to other rural areas.

LEADER proved that networking is essential to broaden the reach of rural development policy in rural areas. Based on the success of LEADER, networking was introduced as of 2007 with National Rural Networks (NRNs) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), currently known as the CAP Support Network. These networks have the objective of creating hubs that connect rural development stakeholders throughout Member States and at the EU level. They are drivers of change, stimulating local capacity to overcome territorial challenges (ENRD, 2021). LEADER and rural networking have enabled bottom-up responses to issues and opportunities of rural areas by connecting different actors (including farmers, advisers, researchers, businesses, NGOs and others) and leveraging their unique roles as knowledge providers.

2.3. Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, EU Rural Action Plan, and Rural Pact

The LTVRA, launched in June 2021, puts a renewed spotlight on the importance of inclusive rural governance within the EU. The LTVRA envisions stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (European Commission, 2021a). One of the ten-shared goals of the LTVRA is that rural areas are "engaged in multi-level and place-based governance, developing integrated strategies using collaborative and participatory approaches, benefitting from tailor-made policy mixes and interdependencies between urban and rural areas". It highlights that inclusive governance is important so that communities can be empowered and all individuals (women, men, youth, elderly) can take active part in policy and decision-making processes and be given access to social, care and educational services. It can also help creating a connection between peri-urban and urban areas (European Commission, 2021a). Part of the LTVRA, the EU Rural Action Plan serves to put the LTVRA in action through various flagship projects and other actions. Such flagship projects and other actions include, among others, setting up platform which will promote LEADER, CLLD, Smart Villages and Interreg, but which will also include increased support in education, training, youth, sport and volunteering, and the integration of urban, peri-urban and rural linkages (European Commission, 2021b).

In order to realise the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas, the Rural Pact was launched in December 2021 (European Commission, 2022). This instrument specifically aims to strengthen MLG for EU's rural areas and it places a particular focus on the management of structural transitions and MLG and participatory governance to design and implement solutions that work best for rural areas. the goal of the Rural Pact is to act on the needs and aspirations of rural inhabitants and maximise the positive effects of collective efforts to create stronger, prosperous, resilient, and connected rural areas. The Rural Pact establishes a bottom-up process that focuses on building a community around the LTVRA and links the multiple levels of governance for the first time in a multi sectorial dimension.

This framework for engagement and cooperation intends to join EU's rural stakeholders from multiple governance levels (i.e EU, national, regional and local) and multiple types of organisation (i.e. public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and research, and citizens).The Rural Pact was created to enable interactions among the different actors at different levels, stimulating synergies, complementarities and coherence, especially among organisations which are traditionally less involved in rural areas and relevant actions (European Commission, 2022).

As stated before, there is a strong need to be more connected and to together create the rural future that is to be achieved as set out in the LTVRA. The Rural Pact is an important initiative for this: the first structured initiative where rural stakeholders are actively organised and requested to take joint action for the development of rural areas. The Rural Pact will ensure the execution of a bottom-up approach to the best of its abilities. The goal is to have the rural stakeholders on all levels of governance not just listened to, but also actively heard and valued. It will function as the necessary framework to bridge the gaps between the multiple levels of governance and facilitate collaboration on all aspects. The Rural Pact is meant to last for a long time and achieve long-lasting impact in order to facilitate achieving the LTVRA by 2040.

Sub-topic 1: Place-based policy-making

International organisations, including the organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), have advocated the concept of territorial governance (TG) as a key mechanism for promoting place-based policy-making in European rural areas (European Commission, 2008; OECD, 2020). The European Commission regards TG as essential for empowering rural areas by helping to better integrate local stakeholders and knowledge into Multi-Level Governance (MLG) policy-making processes (Schmitt & Van Well, 2016). In the field of EU regional policy and EU agricultural policy, the European Commission has introduced a wide range of measures to open the EU policy-making processes to a wider range of regional and local stakeholders (i.e. the partnership principle, Local Action Groups (LAGs) in LEADER, Smart Specialisation processes, and CLLD). Despite these developments, the role of the sub-national level in rural policy-making remains severely constrained, primarily because EU regional and agricultural policies are predominantly top-down policy-making processes dominated by national governments and the European Commission (Bache, 1999).

Strengthening the position of rural areas in MLG policy-making is important as local level institutions and stakeholders have voiced concerns that their restricted role in policy development leads to EU and national level rural development policies and plans that fail to fully address rural challenges and citizen needs (ESPON Escape, 2021). To help overcome political concerns regarding the dominance of EU and national level institutions, the Commission have argued that 'more "active subsidiarity" is needed as 'the important voice of local and regional authorities is often unheard in the early phases of policy-making.' (European Commission 2018). 'Active subsidiarity' is regarded as a potential remedy to this problem by advocating the continuous multi-level engagement of EU, national and regional/local actors throughout all stages of the policy cycle (Pazos-Vidal, 2019). The European Committee of the Regions, acting in their capacity as an EU level lobbying group for European regions, has been actively involved in developing the concept of active subsidiarity. They argue that the concept goes 'one step further than the previous notion of subsidiarity. It is based on actively engaged, improved participation of national parliaments and local and regional authorities (LRAs) in creating and executing policies, aligned with MLG' (Committee of the Regions, 2020).

The empowerment of rural areas has been a consistent theme throughout MAP discussions within the SHERPA project. This theme is also reflected in the latest policy developments at the EU level where the idea of empowerment came out strongly during participatory processes in the development of the LTVRA. The LTVRA notes that "empowered communities are enabled to determine their own development path. This requires an appropriate governance system, promoting subsidiarity, connected, and coordinated across the different levels (EU, national, regional, local), where the voice of rural communities carries weight." The LTVRA acknowledges that balanced territorial development, anchored in place-based approaches and the involvement of all governance levels, is necessary to make the most of the potential of rural areas. For example, the Horizon 2020 project, BE-Rural, analysed the role of a place-based approach through smart specialisation strategies in fostering knowledge exchange and capacity building at regional and local levels. The results of five case studies highlight that this approach ensures ownership and engagement of local actors, building trust and providing them with a structured framework to continue contributing (Davies & Kah, 2019). Enhancing the role of regional and local actors in the development of rural policies was a key theme across all case studies within the ESPON Escape project which examined the issue of rural shrinkage (ESPON Escape, 2021). Commission officials interviewed as part of the ESPON Escape project strongly supported place-based policy-making approaches in the search for solutions to rural challenges, including the need to empower the sub-national level in developing, as well as implementing policy, within the context of coherent, long-term EU and national rural development strategies.

The policy debate emphasises the need for a more integrated and holistic approach to rural policy development based on building stronger synergies between EU, national and regional/local level strategies. Within SHERPA, Slätmo et al. (2021, D5.1) suggests that from a European perspective

place-based approaches to rural development are favoured because they aim to strengthen the resilience of rural areas to withstand global pressures. They do this by decreasing state dependency, and by increasing the economic competitiveness of and innovations in rural areas (Wellbrock et al., 2013). Fragmented multilevel governance and limited coordination and collaboration between different types of actors has resulted in low policy coherence and limited participation of stakeholders and citizens in decision-making. More integrated rural strategies are needed using multi-level collaborative governance and participatory approaches. EU regional policy provides incentives for a more effective multi-level governance based on partnership and integrated place-based approaches within its structures, including the LEADER, CLLD and smart specialisation programmes. For the European Commission (2015), effective MLG processes "require clear rules on the cooperation framework, clear roles for different stakeholders, and clear objectives for specific actions are all relevant to manage expectations and sustain engagement." MLG processes will vary depending on the policy theme, but effective MLG should meet certain important criteria, especially in relation to addressing vital societal issues and the need to provide an open and inclusive platform in which all interested groups are represented and voices carry equal weight (Faberi, 2018).

The 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy programme supports an integrated place-based approach in rural policy-making built on open and inclusive participation of stakeholders in the design of territorial policies, as well as in project selection and implementation. Many case study interviewees in the ESPON Escape project were appreciative of the LEADER and CLLD formats as they provide a framework for local actors to participate in MLG processes. Yet, many argued that the LEADER and CLLD approach should be upscaled with local and regional stakeholders given greater financial autonomy to determine how larger sums of EU and national money should be spent on rural issues (ESPON Escape 2021).

As mentioned before, the Rural Pact has been developed as part of the LTVRA with the main aim to strengthen multi-level governance in rural policy-making. The Rural Pact is designed to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between key stakeholders at the European, national, regional, and local levels to foster collaborating in support of the implementation of the shared goals of the LTVRA (European Commission 2021). Furthermore, the LTVTRA highlights the need for further research into the role of digital tools as a means to invigorate MLG processes by removing distance as a barrier to participation and ensuring that rural areas are better represented in EU and national level policy discussions. Within SHERPA, Miller et al. (2022) concludes that the enhanced multi-level and territorial governance that empowers local actors and communities needs to be facilitated through flexible funding schemes relevant to the characteristics of different areas.

O'Connell (2021) identifies in the ROBUST manifesto several guiding principles to enhance rural-urban synergies, specifically looking at the governance arrangements through a territorial lens. The project findings call for a more place-specific application of established principles. These can underline rural areas place-sensitivity and reveals the specific nature of the challenges faced when looking to establish and maintain governance arrangements which set out to balance rural and urban interests of different kinds.

In the Horizon 2020 project, PHUSICOS, Martin et al. (2019) looked at governance innovation models for nature-based solutions (NBS). The findings of five case studies established that it is essential to analyse and understand the success factors of NBS governance in order to advance policy instruments and institutional reform that can enable its implementation and upscaling. The project further identified three key areas in which governance innovation is required: public administration and stakeholder involvement, co-design of NBS policy options, and financial incentives for enabling NBS.

Sub-topic 2: Enhancing Rural-Urban interconnections and interdependencies

Integrated territorial development (ITD) is viewed as essential for the revitalisation of rural areas. Central to the notion of ITD is the need to establish stronger connections and interdependencies between rural and urban/peri-urban areas to help improve rural socio-economic growth and the range of public services available to citizens. The European Commission (2021b) notes that "rural areas are interdependent with one another and with urban areas in multiple ways and at multiple scales, within a country and across boundaries." Building stronger rural-urban connections has, therefore, become a central element of the LTVRA and the EU Rural Action Plan, with the Commission emphasising the need for greater interregional/intermunicipal collaborative governance mechanisms between key urban-rural institutional actors and stakeholders.

Traditional administrative boundaries, long distances, and fragmented policy coordination are viewed as obstacles for building stronger rural-urban connections. For the Commission, these challenges can be overcome through the identification of policy synergies and functional economic, business and public service interlinkages between urban and rural areas (European Commission, 2021b). The Commission note that urban-rural linkages refer to a complex set of bi-directional policy and socio-economic links that connect regions in areas related to demographic flows, labour market, economic and tax flows, public service provision, mobility, climate change, food production, green tourism, and cultural heritage (Ibid). Building rural-urban interlinkages in these areas requires interactions across policy sectors and different levels of regional and local administrations. This requires governance arrangements that facilitate the development of sustainable rural-urban partnerships and networks. For the Commission, these partnerships need to be balanced in composition, operating across distances, and not restricted by geographical proximity (European Commission, 2021c).

Integrated territorial development lays at the heart of the EU Rural Action Plan. A central objective of the Action Plan is to foster territorial cohesion between rural and urban regions. The Commission notes that "maintaining and improving public transport services and connections, as well as deepening digital infrastructures, are essential to ensure better-connected EU rural areas." Two flagship initiatives form part of the Action Plan focus on improving mobility and digital infrastructure between rural and urban areas, as outlined below:

- **Sustainable multimodal mobility best practices for rural areas** will be developed to support rural municipalities in identifying best practices and replicating them in their territory;

- **Rural digital futures** will address digital connectivity issues by closing the gap between rural and urban areas, encouraging digital innovation and the use of new technologies, boosting new competencies needed for the digital transformation and measuring the progress towards closing the digital gap.

The LTVRA also highlights that tailor-made rural strategies would benefit from carefully identifying policy synergies and interdependencies between urban and rural areas (European Commission 2021a). For example, the new EU Urban Mobility Framework will include specific actions to better integrate the urban, peri-urban and rural linkages. This will be done through further development of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs), where dedicated attention will go to better support connectivity between rural, peri-urban areas and metropolitan/urban areas. SUMP guidelines encourage urban areas to adopt sustainable mobility plans that pay attention to their surrounding peri-urban and rural areas. This means maintaining or improving affordable public transport services and infrastructure between urban and rural areas, such as railways, inland waterways, roads, charging and refuelling stations to support e-mobility solutions, cycling paths, multimodal connections including to active means of transport, as well as short-sea shipping and air transport links. The Commission (2021a) notes that rural areas can act as hubs for the development, testing and deployment of sustainable and innovative mobility solutions. They will support this process by helping rural municipalities to discuss and identifying mobility solutions by highlighting local level initiatives which local authorities could replicate in their territory and provide a forum for discussion on rural mobility issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the catalyst for newly emerging counter-urbanisation trend as people took advantage of the crisis to maximise multi-locality living and home working (Norlen et al., 2022). This trend offers significant growth and revitalisation opportunities for rural areas, but the continuation of counter-urbanisation is largely dependent on the quality of digital and broadband service provision. The Commission (2021a) point out in the LTVRA that "digital infrastructure is an essential enabler for rural areas to contribute to and make the most of the digital transition." They continue that the development of digital capacities in rural areas will improve their attractiveness by offering people greater access to important services, such as multi-modal intelligent transport systems, rapid emergency assistance in case of accidents, more targeted waste management solutions, smart energy and lighting solutions, and resource optimisation. Indeed, improving digital connectivity issues closes the gap between rural and urban areas which might increase multi-locality living among urban dwellers and encourage younger people to remain in rural areas through the potential for more digital employment opportunities.

The pandemic also highlighted the important connection between rural and urban areas in relation nature tourism, sustainable food production, and culture and heritage (Norlen et al., 2022). The LTVRA highlights the importance of raising awareness and advertising the value of rural areas to urban citizens and creating stronger rural-urban supply chains and innovation ecosystems by increasing understanding of rural business and citizen needs. For example, the proposed mission in the area of 'Soil health and food', under Horizon Europe, aims at implementing an ambitious research and innovation programme to tackle soil challenges in rural areas, but also in urban settings, building connections between rural and urban practices (European Commission, 2021c). The OECD (2013) note that rural-urban partnerships are central for building stronger connections and social capital between key actors. The B2C Platform in Iasi region, Romania, is a good example of platform where rural and urban food producers could meet to discuss collaboration opportunities (ESPON, 2022). Forums of this nature could be developed in other key areas, such as tourism, and culture and heritage. In France, the government selected four areas for piloting 'reciprocity contracts' between cities and their surrounding countryside. Local government officials and residents from both types of area get together and negotiate win-win partnerships and joint activities in areas of common concern such as employment, the environment and local services (ENRD, 2018).

The ROBUST (rural-urban outlooks: unlocking synergies) project aims to advance understanding of the interactions and dependencies between rural, peri-urban and urban areas, while identifying and

promoting policies, governance models and practices that foster mutually beneficial relations (Vihinen et al., 2021). The project is based on the premise that improved governance arrangements and synergies between rural, peri-urban and urban areas will in turn contribute to Europe's smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, maximising the creation of rural jobs and value-added. ROBUST highlights five policy thematic domains where there is the potential for enhanced rural-urban synergies: 1) Social services (e.g. social welfare, services and accessibility); 2) Social and spatial proximity relations (reduction of physical and social distancing through e.g. short value supply chains); 3) circularity (closing loops); 4) green economy (delivering ecosystem services), and 5) culture and heritage. Among the new governance arrangements identified by the project, there are those driven by the need to respond to the trend of growing multi-locality. In this case, the new governance arrangements being proposed contain various elements such as multi-local citizenship models with appropriate changes in terms of suffrage and taxation, and schemes where central government financial transfers to local government are made differently. The project concludes that rural-urban governance arrangements in these fields can increase territorial co-ordination capacity, raise awareness of rural values and local assets, and contribute to the development of new business models and supply chains. However, effective rural-urban governance arrangements require multi-stakeholder involvement, based on a deliberative and collaborative system of policy-making, characterised by significant degrees of self-governing, with resources, commitments and power shared between stakeholders (Vihinen et al., 2021).

Sub-topic 3: Inclusive and Participatory Governance

Inclusive and participatory citizen engagement in EU policy-making has become a prominent issue for the European Commission (European Commission, 2020). Cohesion policy is one of the few areas of EU competence where citizens in rural areas could contribute substantially to policy-making given its focus on issues that directly affect people. For this reason, bringing the EU closer to citizens is one of the five core objectives of EU Cohesion Policy for the 2021–2027 period. In February 2020, the role of citizen engagement was also a central focus of a European Commission conference event titled 'Engaging Citizens for good governance in Cohesion policy' (European Commission, 2020). The aim of the conference was to identify new solutions to involve citizens in EU cohesion policy. At this event, Dubravka Suica, European Commission Vice President, highlighted the key role of regions and local authorities in facilitating citizen engagement in cohesion policy (Territoria, 2020). There was widespread agreement amongst participants that citizen engagement is essential for improving the quality of policies and enhancing trust and legitimacy (Territoria, 2020). The event concluded that it is vital to increase direct citizen involvement through the use of new ICT digital technologies and open data and ensure that all groups and minorities are represented in the policy-making process.

While the majority of Europeans (55%) interviewed in a recent Eurobarometer stated that voting in European elections is the most effective way of ensuring their voices are heard at EU level, 15% say that taking part in events such as citizens' debates or citizens' assemblies is an important means of political participation (Eurobarometer, 2021). However, rural residents tend to be less politically active citizens (i.e. attending a meeting, signing a petition, or participating in activities related to political groups, associations or parties). In contrast, rural residents are more likely to participate in formal and informal voluntary activities that support regional development (European Commission, 2021). It is essential, therefore, for policymakers to explore ways of practically involving citizens in rural policy-making processes through the identification of feasible and easily applicable citizen engagement tools.

Maximising opportunities for rural areas requires the involvement of local communities and citizens in decision-making. Indeed, the Commission regard to proactive engagement of rural citizens as vital for the preparation and implementation of place-based policies. The Commission (2021b) note in the LTVRA Communication that: "Rural areas should be home to empowered and vibrant local communities. Enabling all individuals to take active part in policy and decision-making processes, involving a broad range of stakeholders and networks as well as all levels of governance is key to developing tailor-made, place-based and integrated policy solutions and investments. New possibilities for active public participation such as consultations of rural constituencies or online voting can make rural areas, particularly remote and depopulating ones, more attractive by engaging people in decisions on their own future and in how to make the most of the cultural and economic strengths of their area." (EC, 2021a). In the Horizon 2020 project, CLIC, Garzillo et al. (2019) proposes a circular governance approach for adaptive reuse of cultural heritage as an example of inclusiveness and participatory governance model. This model is a values-based, principled approach for valorising, protecting, and sustaining cultural heritage assets as a common good for society.

The commitment to citizen engagement is also reflected in the widespread public consultation process undertaken with citizens living in rural areas in the preparation of the LTVRA Communication. An open consultation process was conducted allowing citizens, civil society and stakeholders to share their views, experience and expectations in relation to the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas. Citizens were also encouraged to participate in workshops that asked rural citizens to explore their ideal vision for the future of their own rural area and feed their views into the process. 170 contributions were received from workshops organised in 19 EU countries involving over 3 000 rural citizens (European Commission 2022). The role of citizens is also central to the Rural Pact initiative that aims to achieve the shared goals of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas by facilitating interaction on rural matters between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia, and citizens (Ibid).

However, there are several limitations and weaknesses with citizen engagement processes. Firstly, levels of inclusivity can be restricted to include only those citizens selected to participate, or citizens with the time, interest, resources and knowledge to participate (Elstub & Escobar, 2017). Secondly, discussions are often framed around a predetermined agenda set by politicians and experts, which restricts the capacity of citizens to drive the overall direction of policy (Phillips, 2012). Thirdly, local and regional public authorities lack the capacity and resources to implement citizen engagement effectively and are reliant on expert facilitators to assist with the process (Escobar, 2011). Fourthly, the ideas and issues raised by citizens have little impact on the final outcomes and decisions of policymakers (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). Policymakers, practitioners, and facilitators need to be aware and vigilant to these shortcomings to ensure that democratic innovation processes are implemented in an open and transparent manner, and that citizens' ideas and views are adequately represented in policy decisions. Specific attention also needs to be paid to the process of formalising successful citizen engagement methods for the long term, scaling them up from trials and project-based initiatives into recurring and more widely accessible platforms (OECD, 2020).

The LTVRA highlights the importance of inclusive and participatory governance processes in rural policy-making, particularly emphasising the need to increase the participation of women, young

people, and minority groups in rural decision-making processes. Raising the awareness of younger people to EU policy objectives, particularly in relation to climate and environmental issues, is particularly important for the future support of the European project. The European Commission have, therefore, been active in encouraging researchers to find ways to integrate schools into Horizon Europe projects.

The main challenge for citizen involvement in rural policy-making remains one of logistics and finding the time and resources to hold citizen engagement events. Many of these obstacles are not insurmountable, but they would require three things: firstly, greater reflection on how new digital tools can be harnessed effectively to increase citizen involvement; secondly, targeted EU, national and regional funding and investment, particularly at the policy formulation stage, in helping to build the capacity of regional authorities to mobilise citizens and implement different types of citizen engagement techniques. Thirdly, vigilance on behalf of policymakers and facilitators to ensure that all citizens can participate actively and equally in the process and discussion (Moodie et al., 2021).

In SHERPA, Slätmo et al. (2021, D5.1) concludes that if based on inclusiveness, previous research shows that science-society-policy interfaces can contribute to: greater trust between local and central actors, and governments; the transformation spreading beyond individuals; the creation of common visions for sustainable regional development; the transformation of disadvantageous power relations; collaborative learning; the democratising of knowledge processes; a sense of ownership; a commitment to the implementation of plans and decisions; ensuring stakeholder relevance, applicability and the use of research results; and strengthened resilience and economic competitiveness for rural areas.

Similarly, ROBUST's conclusions as to the need for inclusiveness, openness, transparency and equity in governance arrangements, can readily be applied to considerations of the policy-making process itself, and the decision-making arrangements it uses. There is valuable common ground in the contexts of meaningful citizen engagement, public consultation and involvement and the careful management and balancing of different inputs from different sectors and actors with different (not necessarily contradictory) interests (O'Connell, 2021).

Sub-topic 4: Collaborative Rural Network Governance

Effective regional leadership that promotes socio-economic development and growth is built on successful collaboration between key regional and local institutions, stakeholders, and citizens (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021). The concept of collaborative governance and planning has gained salience in recent years (Cedergren et al., 2021; Moodie & Sielker, 2022). The pandemic has been a catalyst for greater collaboration both within (interdepartmental) and between (interregional and intermunicipal) regional and local authorities in rural areas (ESPON, 2022). The crisis has also facilitated increased cooperation between institutions and other key regional and local stakeholders in developing policies that respond to local socio-economic challenges. Facing further potential revenue reductions as a result of the pandemic and ongoing energy and cost of living crises, collaborative governance approaches will become particularly important for smaller rural areas and municipal authorities to help increase financial resources and administrative capacities, reduce transaction costs and establish economies of scale (Nordregio, 2022).

For the OECD (2021), 'cooperation is an imperative – and not an option' in responding to the socio-economic challenges presented multiple crises for effectively implementing just, green and smart transitions. Similarly, the European Commission recognise that 'delivering on the goals of the LTVRA and adapting to changing economic and social realities can only be done in cooperation with citizens living in rural areas, national and regional administrations, local authorities and all rural stakeholders.' This is particularly the case in relation to delivering on the green deal which will 'require the development of partnerships in all economic activities in rural areas, between businesses of all sectors, local authorities, researchers and services based on innovation, knowledge sharing and cooperation.' (European Commission, 2021e).

The LTVRA emphasises the importance of collaborative network governance based on well-coordinated, collaborative and collective decision-making and citizen participation. Many rural areas have a strong foundation for cultivating regional leadership and collaborative governance activities due to high levels of trust and social capital between institutions and stakeholders. Cooperation has been largely built up through dialogue and collaboration within existing rural networking hubs. The LTVRA Communication outlines the significant role of existing rural hubs in providing a platform for local stakeholders and citizens to contribute to political and policy-making processes. In this regard, EU regional and agricultural policy have been instrumental in empowering local communities by facilitating the development of collaborative rural networks such as LAGs as part of the LEADER and CLLD initiatives that bring stakeholder together to design and deliver EU rural strategies. As the Commission notes, these existing networks will be central in the delivery of the Rural Action Plan. Many stakeholders that participated in the development of the LTVRA stressed the importance of existing instruments, notably LEADER, to help facilitate collaboration at the local level. Furthermore, the Commission recognise that local rural actors can be empowered by strengthening the role of Local Action Groups (LAG) and LEADER methodology for designing rural development actions. For example, in the Horizon 2020 project, [FoodSHIFT2030](), advocates for a citizen-driven governance of food systems where interdepartmental and multi-stakeholder governance arrangements at national, municipal and community level to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of food system governance (Walthall et al., 2022).

The LTVRA notes that 'improving the governance of territorial interactions is one of the ways forward to improve future rural prospects. Governance arrangements that facilitate cooperation and networks between authorities and/or other actors (citizens, NGOs, businesses etc.) are needed to better govern these linkages with adequate scales and formats depending on the issues at stake.' (European Commission 2021e) The emphasis here is on the need for collaborative network governance arrangements that foster integrated cooperation between rural areas both across borders and at a macro-regional or transnational scale. The European Network for Rural

Development (ENRD) plays a central role in facilitating cross-border collaboration between rural areas. The work on the ENRD will now be supplemented by the Rural Pact involving a flagship transitional platform for rural areas and actors to share knowledge, ideas and learnings.

Enhancing networking, cooperation and partnership building can contribute towards increased social innovation in rural areas (European Commission, 2021d). The Commission note that 'there is a strong need to foster and support capacity building, engaging local actors and easing access to knowledge and solutions to unlock the potential for innovation, that in rural areas is often collective (social innovation). This requires development of community leadership and support for community activities and networking.' Academic literature on regional leadership highlights the important role that "place leaders" play in facilitating collaboration initiatives and building relationship between clusters and networks (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021). Indeed, regional and local authorities are regarded as being particularly well placed to lead place-based collaborative initiatives and network development processes (Böhme et al., 2015); however, leadership can also come from industries, businesses and universities (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020).

Strong innovation ecosystems that bring together public authorities and other key public and private players are viewed as central for building knowledge, trust and social capital between actors at regional and local levels (Malecki, 2021). However, the emphasis placed on modernising rural economies through knowledge-based innovation means that the role and transition of traditional industries is neglected within the LTVRA. Indeed, further policies are needed that explore ways of facilitating cross-sector integration between traditional and modern knowledge-based industries and businesses that can help deliver green transitions. In this regard, rural areas present ideal testing grounds for the development of innovation labs and living labs, as seen in the ROBUST project, that bring together key actors to develop and test innovative solutions to rural challenges (Vihinen et al., 2021). Furthermore, research on the development of industrial symbiosis networks in rural areas could also be of relevance (Mirata & & Emtairah, 2005; Johnsen et al., 2015). Industrial symbiosis focuses on creating an industrial ecosystem in which industries and businesses share natural resources (e.g. by-products like hot energy or biowaste) and production infrastructures for mutual economic, social and environmental gains. The key element of industrial symbiosis is promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and potential synergies between industries and firms within close geographic proximity (Moodie et al., 2019).

The RURITAGE project concluded that the more usual types of governance models are the ones with a high level of community participation, with a special incidence of network governance and societal resilience models. Collaborative, multisector, and polycentric governance models have been the more usual governance models for rural heritage-led processes. Although top-down and bottom-up approaches are equally represented, most of the cases rely on a strong collaboration between the public administration and the community. The introduction of the private sector in the processes is a challenge that is not so well documented (Egusquiza et al., 2019).

Conclusions

This is an important moment for MAP members to discuss the role of rural institutions, stakeholders, and citizens in MLG processes. Empowering and strengthening the role of regional and local actors and networks is essential if rural areas are going to maximise the opportunities for revitalisation presented by green transitions and rapid advances in digitalisation. The knowledge and practical experience of MAP members is vitally important for providing new insights, knowledge, learning, and best practices that can improve rural governance and stakeholder engagement in MLG processes. All MAP ideas formulated in relation to the key-governance related themes in this document will provide the basis for the development of governance and stakeholder engagement related recommendations that will contribute directly to the effective delivery of the LTVRA, EU Rural Action Plan, and Rural Pact.

Acknowledgements

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