Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis for rural development

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This AEIDL briefing highlights lessons for rural development based on the analysis of a limited number of relevant local rural initiatives implemented across the EU to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Local examples were mostly identified from a number of repositories of initiatives developed by international organisations and networks such as ENRD, FARNET, ICLEI, etc. Hence, this briefing does not intend to provide an exhaustive analysis, but to feed the debate around the consequences of the pandemic for rural areas, by showcasing key learnings from outstanding local responses of some rural areas of Europe. Special acknowledgements to AEIDL colleagues Ewan Geffroy, Ana Nava, Patricia Martinez, Roxana Vilcu, Lucia Garrido and Blanca Casares for their contribution with ideas and inputs to this document.

COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerability of our society as a whole – in both urban and rural areas - to health crises. Despite the crisis is affecting us all, measures to mitigate its impacts have been developed from a very urban perspective (e.g. home and businesses lock downs, mobility restrictions, remote education and work, etc). Hence, these measures have not taken into consideration the specific features and realities of many rural areas, in terms of population dispersion, high percentage of elderly, lack of and distance to health and social care, education provision, poor internet connectivity, low levels of digital skills, labour-intensive food production systems or mobility constraints, which make people in rural areas more vulnerable. This reflects the need to enhance awareness and sensitivity among national policy-makers towards rural realities, and re-design governance structures and mechanisms put in place in most Member States to address rural issues.

In the short-term, local responses were very important for coping with the immediate consequences of COVID-19. Areas with high social capital provided inspiring examples of community mobilisation, and local coordination and planning. There are examples of rural communities organising themselves to manufacture masks, adapt businesses, ensure basic services, provide care, etc. In some areas, LEADER Local Action Groups had a crucial coordinating role to channel territorial needs and organise responses.

But this was only possible after many years of EU investment in activities that enhanced social capital and cohesion of the rural areas, something which is difficult to quantify by the indicators used in result-based policies.
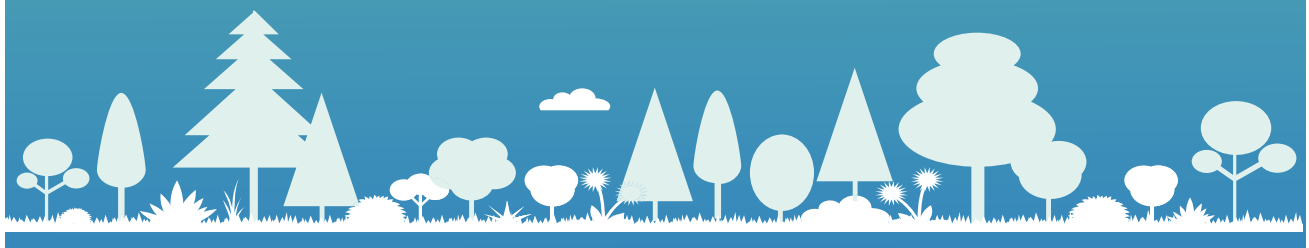
Rural areas have experienced negative impacts from the crisis, just like urban areas, and yet they seem to be forgotten once again by policy-makers. This emergency has had a great impact on the lives of men and women working in agriculture, livestock or fishing around the world. They are part of the rural communities that produce our food globally and, thus, are vital for society[1], even though the general population might not be fully aware of it. While these have been considered essential activities and continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, these labour-intensive sectors have faced

A Spanish rural community takes action against COVID-19

Over 3 500 families depend on the activities developed around the famous cherry trees of Valle del Jerte, Spain. Key economic sectors in the area include agriculture and tourism - the spectacular cherry blossom in the valley has become a national event. Easter is usually the peak season for rural tourism in the area, but this year no tourists were expected. Even the picking of cherries is compromised due to coronavirus crisis. In this community of 11 villages and about 12 000 inhabitants, the **LEADER Local Action Group** took a series of notable actions involving all the key stakeholders:

- The women's organisations and municipalities in each village organised groups of volunteers to produce face masks;

- They set up a pool volunteers to give a helping hand to the most vulnerable in the community;

- They looked at ways of offering jobs in the cherry season to people who have lost their jobs in tourism – thereby helping those in need and covering the shortage of workers caused by the confinement;

- They helped the cherry sector to develop common protocols for the safety of workers.

shortages of manpower, agglomeration of workforce (increasing the risk of infection with COVID-19), and disruptions in transport for trade. The fishing and coastal communities have also struggled with the closure of restaurants, decrease of fish demand and lower prices, difficulties in respecting social distancing and safety measures on board, and tourism took a significant hit.

COVID-19 put even more pressure on the provision of essential social services in urban areas – including health services – which in turn created shortages of

1 **http://www.fao.org/policy-support/tools-and-publications/resources-details/en/c/1276740/**

these services. This issue was particularly critical for rural areas considering their aging population. Local authorities were left alone in supporting their communities on issues that are far from their competences.

Despite the challenges, some opportunities are emerging for post-COVID times, which rural areas cannot afford to miss on. The OECD has conducted useful work in relation to the policy implications of the COVID-19 crisis for rural development. They highlighted digitalisation as a key driver for the future of rural areas, recommending to boost investment in both digital infrastructure and skills. According to the H2020 project, DESIRA, the availability of the right information about the state of digitalisation is essential for policy-makers to target support where it is most needed. However, this information is not available for rural areas. In fact, the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) report developed yearly by the European Commission, fails to provide information on digitalisation indicators that are disaggregated between rural and urban areas, or at local levels. Hence, additional effort should be made in this respect.

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), in its work on Smart Villages, outlined that for a digital transformation to take place in rural areas, there have to be mechanisms for involving local stakeholders to identify digital needs and to co-create the digital solutions needed. Additionally, villages must have access to intermediaries, brokers and 'spaces' to support a digital transition, such as local digital hubs, fab-labs, co-working spaces, living labs, etc.

There are many examples of communities working together towards a digital future. This is shown to be a long pathway that needs to be facilitated and animated throughout and in which local public authorities play an important leading role – 'championing' this process. If all this is in place, very interesting things can happen in rural areas.

Digital Villages (Germany)

The Fraunhofer Institute tested a holistic approach for the digitalisation of rural services in several pilot villages in Germany. They worked in a bottom-up way with residents, firms and the public sector to consider all aspects of the local digital ecosystem – the infrastructure, the technical platform, domain-specific applications, society (needs and skills) and the organisational system. Through the creation of a common digital platform, the Institute is developing new digital solutions in a variety of fields, such as the supply of local goods, communication, mobility and e-government. The platform enables the creation of shared services and common rules, and the incorporation of basic tools such as payments, login, data usage controls and partner networks. Local residents work with interdisciplinary teams to create a range of user-friendly apps.

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Lormes, le petit village du futur (France)

Lormes is a small market town (1 300 residents) located in the Morvan area, in the county of Nièvre, Burgundy (France). The 'village du futur' project was initiated in Lormes in 2015. This is the latest step in its digital and social journey towards being a village of the future, which began in the early 2000s, with a ground-breaking territorial 2.0 policy to foster the economic and social potential of ICT and the internet. Co-designing that future with the community has been a cornerstone of the process since the beginning, and is key to its success. In 2003, they set up the first 'Digital Mission' association to provide digital inclusion and education support to the community. This association acted as an accelerator of local 'digital transformation'. A digital hub opened in 2008 (in a derelict slaughterhouse), offering training and educational facilities and eight small offices. It expanded in 2015 with a FabLab, improved office space for six more businesses, and meeting-training facilities, offering a 300 Mbit/s connection. The Digital Mission serves all 166 Communes in the Pays Nivernais, and now manages a satellite working space and FabLab in two other towns with LEADER Local Development Strategies. By creating an open digital infrastructure and environment in Lormes, new digital innovations and services are being integrated into existing digital and 'future' strategies.

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COVID-19 has also triggered changes in work and consumption patterns which have associated environmental effects, including improved air quality, a switch towards sustainable mobility and more resilient agri-food systems and short supply chains. Another important change concerns remote working. According to the **Ellen McArthur Foundation**, remote working will become more and more popular, resulting in less need for commuting and even some workers relocating to rural areas. To cope with this trend, car-sharing and alternative forms of transport (including e-mobility), together with remote training and labour flexibility concerning working hours and location, could support the transition towards a "less polluting" working culture in the EU. This represents a valuable opportunity for rural areas that are able to exploit quality of life as a competitive advantage over other areas.

In the field of sustainability and improved rural environment, there are multiple innovative solutions that can be applied if the right support is channelled. One important area is e-mobility in combination with car-sharing. Rural areas have enormous potential for innovation in many sectors, but this potential needs to be combined with the right support.

Rezo Pouce: Shared mobility in rural areas (France)

The Rezo Pouce project has re-purposed an old tradition to boost local mobility and to enhance social cohesion. It enables carpooling at designated hitch-hiking spots. Registered users can get a ride to and from their chosen destinations. It provides a pragmatic solution for the often problematic first or last leg of a journey, for example, getting to or from a train station.

In rural and semi-rural areas of France, such as those in the regions of Île-de-France, Bretagne and Aquitaine, where the scheme is operating, the uptake has been substantial. The number of shared journeys is increasing threefold each year and more than 1 500 municipalities are now taking part.

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A preliminary study on the emissions savings that the new reality may entail, has been carried out by the LIFE project, **PrepAIR**. This report was based on the analysis of data obtained during the March 2020 lockdown in the Po Valley of Italy, one of the most affected areas worldwide in terms of both air pollution and COVID-19. The analysis shows that there is scope for air quality improvement that could be achieved if remote and decentralised working is encouraged at different levels.

Online retail was already a mega-trend that became even more important as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

A window of opportunity is open for local producers to increase the EU's agri-food systems competitiveness and resilience. Agri-environment-climate measures (AECMs), including environmentally-friendly practices (such as organic farming) and the digitalisation of the agriculture and small retail sectors, should be put forward when addressing the new needs of the post-COVID normality.

In addition, placing local production from small farmers at the core of the agri-food system will certainly contribute towards sustainable rural development across Europe.

The Open Food Network

In Ireland, a new open source platform was created to enable new, ethical supply chains. Food producers can sell online, and wholesalers can manage buying groups and supply produce through networks of food hubs and shops. Communities can bring together producers to create a virtual farmers' market, building a resilient local food economy.

Food, unincorporated.

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It is important to highlight the active role of migrants (and their descendants) in society during the pandemic. The inventor of one of the COVID-19 vaccines is a descendant from a migrant family that moved from Turkey to Germany. There is also a large number of migrant-led initiatives that have flourished in the spirit of tackling many of the challenges emerged during the pandemic. Those examples show that migrants are not passive agents receiving welfare support, but that they can be change-makers, developing their own social innovation actions to overcome major problems.

Moreover, the **integration of migrants** is also supporting the re-activation of rural areas facing depopulation. Hence, rural areas and policies must be inclusive and generate an environment of integration for those communities that want to contribute to the

future of European rural areas, as much as anyone else.

Therefore, in the long-term, the pandemic may produce shifts in consumption and production which open opportunities for rural areas. Particularly, those related to telework, digital health and digital education, leading to a reduction in the need to travel for work, healthcare, school – and a re-evaluation of the value of space, healthier living, the environment, community, healthier food, etc. In short, it might lead to a better quality of life and overall wellbeing. In these fields, many rural areas have 'competitive' advantages. However, it would require support for adaptation and innovation – e.g. new business models, investments in infrastructure, services and people, etc., if rural areas are to take advantage of these opportunities.

Refugees and migrants volunteer to thank Dutch village

In the Dutch village of Ter Apel, hosting Netherlands' biggest residential reception centre for asylum-seekers, teams of refugees and migrants are helping out at stores during the pandemic. They volunteered to carry out disinfection work to prevent the spread of the virus, as a token of appreciation for the nation that took them in and where they have applied for asylum. About 1 900 migrants stay at the centre situated on the edge of the village close to the border with Germany. School teacher Karina Zuidinga welcomed the initiative as she headed into the Jumbo supermarket to do her shopping. "I'm happy they're doing it," she said. "They are often in the news for the wrong reasons and that's a shame because 95% are doing really well here, and I'm glad they can show that to the rest of the village."

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All of the examples and experiences presented here, show that future policy responses need to go beyond traditional support to rural areas, and should support the transition of local communities to exploit the opportunities that the new post-COVID-19 reality will create.

The consequences of the crisis have made it clear that there is a need to improve governance systems to promote rural issues in the EU and national political agendas, and empower local communities further to support local responses. Going local seems to be a vital approach for the future, and in particular to help rural areas to take advantage of the opportunities emerging in this new context. In fact, a recent **foresight exercise** of the JRC, realised in the context of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas process launched by the EC, identifies as the two key drivers of shaping the future rural areas, rural governance and demographic shift. In this respect, the EU should continue supporting and strengthening its approach to local development and put in place mechanisms for encouraging coordinated policy action on all the issues relevant to rural areas in the EU Member States.

The exercise launched by the European Commission to develop a European Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas provides a good opportunity to rethink European rural policy, and put in place mechanisms and tools that support local communities to take action.

The **Rural and Territorial Development Unit** of AEIDL gathers experts who foster community-led innovation by facilitating peer learning, co-creating and transferring of knowledge. The Unit also provides analysis and evaluation of relevant EU policies and advocates for an enhanced support to community local action. It acts as a knowledge hub to inspire and connect local and EU stakeholders.

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