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Developing urban-rural interplay

Governance Committee

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Resolution 458 (2020).....	2
Recommendation 448 (2020)	4
Explanatory memorandum	6

Summary

In recent years, local and regional governments in Europe have been facing numerous challenges resulting from the changing interplay between urban and rural areas and in particular the demographic challenges caused by progressive urbanisation. Urban and rural areas each have their own specific challenges. Usually, urban areas face increasing pollution, poverty and housing shortages, whereas rural areas struggle with demographic ageing, the emigration of young people and infrastructure challenges.

At the same time, each has its own particular assets and strengths. Urban areas for innovation and economic growth, rural areas safeguarding the diversity of the environment and the quality of resources, including water and food. There is a need to pay more attention to the interdependence between urban and rural areas and suburban areas connecting them, to strengthen the relationships between all these areas and to foster their linkage to ensure greater territorial cohesion, sustainable local development and prevent further fragmentation.

The report is looking at different practices and instruments to ensure more efficient territorial integration, collaboration and partnership between rural and urban areas. It addresses the changing rural-urban interplay and examine good practices of and for territorial governments to deal with the demographic, social and political challenges of urbanisation.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
 EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress
 SOC/G/PD: Socialist/Green/Progressive Democrats Group
 ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group
 ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
 NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

RESOLUTION² 458 (2020)

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (hereinafter “the Congress”) refers to:

a. the European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe’s Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe adopted on 18 March 1992 and the follow-up Resolution 269(2008) European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity;

b. the Priorities of the Congress 2017-2020, in particular paragraphs 119 and 120 on empowering rural areas;

c. Congress Resolution 128(2002) on The problems of Europe’s countryside adopted on 21 March, 2002;

d. Congress Resolution 252(2008) on Services of general interest in rural areas, a key factor in territorial cohesion adopted on 14 March 2008;

e. Congress Resolution 422(2017) on A better future for Europe’s rural areas adopted on 19 October 2017;

f. the thematic debate at the 36th Session of the Congress’ Chamber of Local Authorities on Addressing the Urban/Rural Divide: Solutions for Territorial Renewal in April 2019;

g. the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities;

h. the Declaration of cooperation on A smart and sustainable digital future for European agriculture and rural areas signed by 24 EU States on 9 April 2019;

i. the Rural People’s Declaration of Candás Asturias adopted by the 4th European Rural Parliament on 9 November 2019.

2. The Congress points out that:

a. In recent years, local and regional governments in Europe have been facing a number of issues resulting from the changing interplay between urban and rural areas, both having their own specific assets and challenges, particularly in areas like demographic transition as well as in environmental and social questions;

b. there is a need to pay more attention to the interdependence between urban and rural areas, to strengthen the relationships between urban and rural areas and to foster their linkage to ensure greater territorial cohesion and sustainable local development and prevent further fragmentation;

c. suburban municipalities and rural areas that are close to urban areas have a specific role to play in developing urban-rural relationships;

d. local and regional policy-makers need effective strategies and instruments for better integrating rural and urban areas to bridge the gap between them and achieve economic, social and environmental benefits for both. They also need to be made aware of the assets of urban-rural cooperation for their societies and territories.

3. In light of the above, the Congress invites the local and regional authorities of Council of Europe member States to:

² Debated and adopted by the Statutory Forum on 7 December 2020 (see Document CG-FORUM(2020)02-03, explanatory memorandum), co-rapporteurs: Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO, Netherlands (L, ILDG) and Matija KOVAC, Serbia (R, EPP/CCE).

- a.* ensure that interplay between the multiple levels of governance be guided by the principle of subsidiarity and to recognise that subsidiarity is crucial not only for national-subnational-local relations, but also for relations at the local level as well;
 - b.* strengthen the mutual understanding of the very different realities of areas at different positions on the broad urban-rural continuum in order to further develop the urban-rural interplay;
 - c.* ensure an equilibrium between more urban and more rural areas by demonstrating equal appreciation and equal consideration in policy-making, in particular, concerning spatial planning and economic development;
 - d.* ensure an integrated strategy for coherent land use planning that duly considers the specific conditions of areas at different positions on the urban-rural continuum, taking into account, for example, the multifunctional character of areas in the fringe of cities.
4. The Congress calls on the local and regional authorities and their national associations to take account of this resolution and the accompanying explanatory memorandum.

RECOMMENDATION³ 448 (2020)

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (hereinafter “the Congress”) refers to:

a. Article 2, paragraph 1.b, of the Charter of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities appended to Statutory Resolution CM/Res(2020)1 relating to the Congress, stipulating that one of the aims of the Congress is “to submit proposals to the Committee of Ministers in order to promote local and regional democracy”;

b. the terms of Reference of the Governance Committee of the Congress on Developing Urban-Rural Interplay adopted on 21 May 2019;

c. the European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe’s Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe adopted on 18 March 1992 and the follow-up Resolution 269(2008) European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity;

d. the Priorities of the Congress 2017-2020, in particular paragraphs 119 and 120 on empowering rural areas;

e. Congress Recommendation 406(2017) of the Congress on A better future for Europe’s rural areas adopted 19 October 2017;

f. the thematic debate at the 36th Session of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress on Addressing the Urban/Rural Divide: Solutions for Territorial Renewal in April 2019;

g. the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

2. The Congress points out that:

a. In recent years, local and regional governments in Europe have been facing a number of issues resulting from the changing interplay between urban and rural areas, both having their own specific assets and challenges, particularly in areas like demographic transition as well as in environmental and social questions;

b. There is a need to pay more attention to the interdependence between urban and rural areas, to strengthen the relationships between them and to foster their linkage to ensure greater territorial cohesion and sustainable local development and prevent further fragmentation;

c. Suburban municipalities and rural areas that are close to urban areas have a specific role to play in developing urban-rural relationships;

d. Local and regional policy-makers need effective strategies and instruments for better integrating rural and urban areas to bridge the gap between them and achieve economic, social and environmental benefits for both. They also need to be made aware of the assets of urban-rural cooperation for their societies and territories.

3. In light of the above, the Congress requests that the Committee of Ministers invite the respective national authorities of member States of the Council of Europe to:

a. ensure that interplay between the multiple levels of governments be guided by the principle of subsidiarity and to recognise that subsidiarity is crucial not only for national-subnational-local relations, but for relations at the local level as well;

b. facilitate formalised urban-rural collaboration by creating incentives for cooperation, for example through a favourable legal context (e.g. mandatory joint special planning) and framework for inclusion of private stakeholders from urban and rural levels;

³ See footnote 2.

c. strengthen infrastructure links to further develop the urban-rural interplay, for example by road and railway constructions and public transport systems, and guarantee that different kinds of transport infrastructure are established based on different needs on urban and rural levels;

d. prioritise initiatives towards “virtual proximity” in order to reduce the digital divide between urban and rural areas by improving connectivity to high-speed and next generation broadband Internet, through governmental incentives for telecommunication providers to invest in internet infrastructure also in areas with lower population density;

e. ensure equal access of urban and rural areas to basic public services by, for example, providing funding schemes for projects in areas like health care, spatial planning, local supply and the improvement of physical infrastructure;

f. promote urban-rural interconnectedness for development purposes by cooperation between peri-urban regions including, next to agriculture, the setting up of adequate urban-rural infrastructure links or the preservation of a green belt for recreation;

g. pursue economic development and employment strategies that rely on multiple strengths of territories, interconnecting urban and rural areas in sectors like food production, local gastronomy and tourism;

h. step up efforts in ensuring equivalent living conditions in urban and rural territories, for example, by gradually relocating a portion of government institutions to structurally weaker areas.

4. The Congress calls on the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to take account of this recommendation and the accompanying explanatory memorandum in their activities relating to Council of Europe member States.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Table of contents

Introduction: The threefold challenge of changing urban-rural relations	7
Background	7
Conceptual framework: Urban-rural divide, continuum and interplay	8
<i>Urban-rural divide</i>	9
<i>Urban-rural continuum</i>	10
<i>Urban-rural interplay</i>	10
Introducing urban-rural cooperation	11
<i>Purpose of cooperation</i>	11
<i>Forms of cooperation</i>	12
Practices of urban-rural cooperation in five crucial policy fields	13
<i>Economic development and employment</i>	14
<i>Land use planning</i>	14
<i>Transport infrastructure</i>	15
<i>Virtual interconnectedness</i>	16
<i>Equitable provision of public services</i>	17
Conclusions	18

Introduction: The threefold challenge of changing urban-rural relations⁴

1. Europe's local governments have had to face in recent decades the challenge of changing urban-rural relations. The root cause of this challenge is a fundamental demographic change that has gripped almost all parts of the continent, albeit to varying degrees.

2. The phenomenon of urbanisation has fuelled urban growth and sparked the emergence of what came to be known as metropolitan areas. Such areas, defined as cities with a large urban core plus adjacent areas that are socially and economically integrated with the core,⁵ vary considerably in terms of their size. Some of them are relatively small with less than one million inhabitants (e.g. Geneva), while others (e.g. London) exceed in their population size even many smaller countries. Furthermore, metropolitan areas differ from each other regarding several other factors like population growth rate, economic development and territorial extension with some of them cutting across subnational boundaries (e.g. Hamburg) and others even across national borders (e.g. Geneva sprawling into France).⁶ As one observer put it, the last 60-70 years have been characterised by processes of population growth and parallel urbanisation in which urban areas "physically overflowed the jurisdictional limits of their original human settlements."⁷

3. The reverse side of this development is the emergence of increasingly depopulated rural areas. Admittedly, the extent of the demographic challenge of urbanisation obviously varies from country to country. Yet, it is a sufficiently general phenomenon to be justifiably characterised as one of the defining trends of our times.⁸ This trend has actually led in most countries to a decreasing share of rural population. According to World Bank data,⁹ this share has fallen globally between 1960 and 2017 worldwide from 67% to 45%. Within Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina is with 52% the only country in which the rural population prevails, but down from 81% in 1960.

4. While it might be tempting, therefore, in view of urbanisation to conceive of cities and the countryside as two things diametrically opposed, the traditional binary thinking of an urban-rural divide is, as this report argues,¹⁰ overly simplistic. Instead, it is the interplay between the many different areas on the broad urban-rural continuum that needs to be reinforced for an effective response to the above-mentioned challenge of changing urban-rural relations, which has three distinct dimensions. The already mentioned demographic challenge of urbanisation entails a social challenge, including, for instance, rural demographic ageing, and it also brings about the political challenge of an increasing divergence between local governments in terms of their political leverage and financial resources. This report sets out to highlight effective strategies and practices of cooperation between urban and rural local governments so as to further develop their interplay.

Background

5. The phenomenon of urbanisation and the challenges that it entails certainly have not gone unnoticed in academia, national law and governance practices, as well as in policies at the European level. Especially from the 1990s onwards, comparative research on local government has developed from the perspectives of various disciplines a strong focus on the repercussions of the ongoing change in urban-rural relations.¹¹

4 Report drafted with the contribution of Dr. Karl Kössler, Senior Researcher at Eurac Research (Bolzano/Bozen, Italy) and Scientific Coordinator of the EU-Horizon 2020 project "Local Government and the Changing Urban-Rural Interplay (LoGov)" which involves 18 partners, among them Eurac Research and the Congress. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 823961.

5 See R Stren and R Cameron, 'Metropolitan Governance Reform: An Introduction' (2005) 25 *Public Administration and Development*, 275–76.

6 See E Slack and R Chattopadhyay, 'Introduction' in E Slack and R Chattopadhyay (eds), *Governance and Finance of Metropolitan Areas in Federal Systems* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013) 7.

7 B Graizbord, 'Governance of Megacities in Federal Orders' in J Kincaid and R Chattopadhyay (eds), *Local Government in Federal Systems* (New Delhi, Viva Books, 2008) 72.

8 See T Champion, 'Urbanisation, Suburbanisation, Counterurbanisation and Reurbanisation' in R Paddison and W Lever (eds), *Handbook of Urban Studies* (London, Sage Publications, 2001) 143.

9 World Bank, Urban population (% of total population), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.in.zs>.

10 See below paras 17-19.

11 See eg R Paddison and W Lever (eds), *Handbook of Urban Studies* (London, Sage Publications, 2001); B Denters and LE Rose (eds), *Comparing Local Governance: Trends and Developments* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); E Slack and R Chattopadhyay (eds), *Governance and Finance of Metropolitan Areas in Federal Systems* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); M Shucksmith and D Brown (eds), *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies* (London and New York, Routledge, 2016).

6. Importantly, this has gone hand in hand with reformed legal arrangements and governance practices, as (local) governments felt the need to respond to this change. In Switzerland, for instance, the new Article 50 (2–3) of the 1999 Constitution obliged the national government to take into account regarding all its activities the impact on municipalities and thereby to bear in mind “the special position of the cities and urban areas”.

7. As for policies at the European level, recent decades have witnessed a surge in initiatives with some of them focusing on urban areas, others on rural areas and still others on the relations between them. The Congress has thereby played a prominent role. A significant early policy paper was the European Urban Charter of 1992,¹² and its follow-up, the European Charter II of 2008.¹³ The Congress soon attended to rural territories as well by passing a resolution in 2002 on “The problems of Europe’s countryside” and more recently in 2017 on “A better future for Europe’s rural areas”.¹⁴

8. The European Union laid still in the late-1990s the groundwork for an increased policy focus on urban-rural relations, especially through the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP).¹⁵ Despite being a non-binding document approved in 1999 at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning, this initiative is credited, together with parallel initiatives in some member states such as the United Kingdom and France, with introducing the idea of urban-rural cooperation into European regional policies,¹⁶ as reflected especially in the 2007 Territorial Agenda of the EU and in concrete projects funded under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).¹⁷ Moreover, the ESDP also initiated the Study Programme on European Spatial Planning (SPESP)¹⁸ and the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON),¹⁹ which contributed to broadening the knowledge base on urban-rural relations.

9. As far as the Congress is concerned, the theme of developing urban-rural interplay is very much in line with its political priorities set out for 2017-2020. The aforementioned fundamental demographic trends that have profoundly changed urban-rural relations²⁰ did not go unnoticed and the Congress vowed, under its first priority “Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy”, that it would continue to follow these trends.²¹ While the priorities contain a reference to the European Urban Charter II,²² which is often cited in the present report, they even dedicate, under the second priority “Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity”, five full paragraphs to the topic of empowering rural areas.²³ The Congress specifically justifies this commitment with the development of urban centres to the detriment of rural areas and the latter’s depopulation and calls for comprehensive policies that guarantee equal living standards.²⁴ Strategies to develop urban-rural interplay are a key element of such policies.

Conceptual framework: Urban-rural divide, continuum and interplay

10. This section introduces a conceptual framework regarding the relations between urban and rural local governments. It argues that these relations may be perceived, and in fact have been perceived, in different geographical contexts and at different points in time in three ways, i.e. focusing on the urban-rural divide, urban-rural continuum and urban-rural interplay.

12 European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe’s Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) on 18 March 1992.

13 Congress Resolution 269 (2008)1 European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity.

14 Congress Resolution 128 (2002)1 on the problems of Europe’s countryside; Congress Resolution 422 (2017) A better future for Europe’s rural areas.

15 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/pdf/sum_en.pdf.

16 See A Caffyn and M Dahlström, ‘Urban-Rural Interdependencies: Joining up Policy in Practice’ (2005) 39 *Regional Studies*, 283-96; W Zonnenveld and D Stead, ‘European Territorial Cooperation and the Concept of Urban-Rural Relationship’ (2007) 22 *Planning, Practice & Research*, 349-453.

17 See J Bachtler, M Ferry, C Mendez and I Mc Master, ‘The 2007 – 2013 Operational Programmes: A Preliminary Assessment’ (2007) 19 *IQ-Net Thematic Paper*.

18 Final Report of the Study Programme on European Spatial Planning, https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/Publications/BMVBS/Forschungen/1999_2006/DL_forsch_103_2.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=3.

19 <https://www.espon.eu/>.

20 See above para 1.

21 Congress of the Council of Europe, *Priorities of the Congress 2017-2020*, <https://rm.coe.int/168071b2cb>, para 40.

22 Ibid, para 41.

23 Ibid, paras 119-123.

24 Ibid, paras 119 and 120.

Urban-rural divide

11. According to a long dominant traditional conception, urban and rural areas were seen as being very clearly and easily distinguishable on the basis of certain (supposedly) objective criteria such as population density, central or peripheral location, differences in land use, prevalence of specific economic sectors and even certain typical landscapes. Yet, historical developments like industrialisation, as well as improved transport and communication technologies have changed that to a significant extent. It therefore appears plausible to claim that “a clear-cut visual divide is simply gone”.²⁵

12. However, even in the absence of such a divide urban and rural local governments still seem to have at least certain specific assets and problems. Looking at assets of urban local governments in economic terms, they are often regarded as major sites of innovation because they may, as agglomeration economies, reap the benefits of proximity, that is increased interaction of a critical mass of territorially concentrated people and companies. Especially in times of increasing interconnectedness worldwide, they function as nodal points of a globalised economy with close interdependent relationships with urban areas in other countries or even continents as both commercial partners and competitors. Large urban areas are therefore said to determine, to a large extent, the “wealth and health of nations”.²⁶

13. As for rural areas, it was a long-held belief that they would be almost completely dependent on urban centres.²⁷ But contrary to this view, local governments in rural areas are important in their own right and it is key for policy-makers, as emphasised by the Congress, to change their perspective on these local governments “from emphasising their needs to their assets”.²⁸ Rural areas indeed have assets that are crucial for other areas in many respects, not least in terms of economic development. Good examples are the provision of food security, clean water and raw materials, the ecological value of forests for clean air and waterways for renewable energy or their function as magnets for outdoor tourism and recreation areas.

14. Similar to their assets, urban and rural local governments also face a number of rather distinct problems. It is important to recognise that urban areas bear several specific burdens like air pollution, housing shortages, urban sprawl, congestion and the social impact of de-industrialisation on working-class neighbourhoods.²⁹ Those problems are quite distinct from the ones faced by local governments in rural areas. The above-mentioned depopulation of the countryside is not, of course, a mere statistical fact but has very concrete knock-on effects that are well-known and well-documented.³⁰ Typical problems include, for example, diminished public services for the population remaining in rural areas as a result of falling demand and a lack of a critical mass of people for adequate service provision, lower levels of (administrative) capacity in these areas, which is particularly alarming in times of more and more partnership-oriented rural development strategies,³¹ and in extreme cases even landscape changes, if agricultural land is abandoned.

15. One of the most critical effects associated with urbanisation is the phenomenon of rural demographic ageing. Only in the decade between 2008 and 2018, the median age of the EU-28 population increased by 2.7 years to reach 43.1 years with Ireland having the youngest (37 years) and Germany and Italy the oldest (46 years) population. Comparing NUTS³² level 3 regions, it is indeed striking that territories with the lowest median age are typically the capital city regions or suburban regions close to it, whereas those with the oldest population are mostly rural and sparsely-populated areas like in central Greece, central France or eastern Germany. It is hardly surprising then that the highest old-age dependency ratios are also found in the latter areas with the central Greek region of Evrytania topping the list with 67%, i.e. for every two persons aged over 65 years there are just three people aged 15-64 years.³³

²⁵ C Bengs and K Schmidt-Thomé (eds), *Urban-rural relations in Europe* (Luxembourg, ESPON, 2006) 12.

²⁶ N Steytler, ‘Comparative Conclusions’ in N Steytler (ed), *Local Government and Metropolitan Regions in Federal Systems* (Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2009) 394.

²⁷ See below para 21.

²⁸ Report of the Congress, A better future for Europe’s rural areas CG33(2017)16final, Explanatory Memorandum, paragraphs 45 and 99.

²⁹ Resolution 269 (2008)1 European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity.

³⁰ Report of the Congress, A better future for Europe’s rural areas CG33(2017)16final, Explanatory Memorandum, para 14.

³¹ See below para 35.

³² A geocode standard developed by the EU for referencing the administrative divisions of countries for statistical purposes.

³³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_statistics_at_regional_level

16. Even though speaking of a divide is arguably most legitimate when it comes to the specific assets and problems of local governments in urban and rural areas, this distinction seems to be too simplistic even in this area, at least for some European countries. In certain parts of Europe, like Scotland, significant improvements of infrastructure have better connected cities with the countryside and thus facilitated the emergence of accessible rural areas. Surprisingly, these seem to have more in common in terms of assets and problems with urban areas than with remote rural areas.³⁴ From a demographic perspective, many of these areas do not face the problems of depopulation and ageing population. In economic terms, they are often quite affluent and, as OECD research in the wake of the financial and economic crisis in 2008 shows, much less vulnerable to external economic shocks than remote rural areas. The last decade has indeed witnessed a widening gap between them regarding productivity and employment.³⁵ Whereas accessible areas can rely in many countries on increasingly diversified economies that often involve significant activities in the manufacturing and service sectors,³⁶ remote areas are much more dependent on land-based agricultural activities.

Urban-rural continuum

17. The binary distinction implied by the thinking of an urban-rural divide should be overcome. It is indeed more appropriate to speak of an urban-rural continuum. The previous sub-section has already pointed out that even supposedly typical urban or rural assets and problems are as a matter of fact, at least in some parts of Europe, not as typical as they may seem.

18. Moreover, the emergence of hybrid areas that have both urban and rural characteristics makes a clear divide more and more implausible. Such areas are linked, in particular, to processes of peri-urbanisation (in original French *périurbanisation*), which refers to the increasingly urban nature of formerly clearly rural areas in the urban fringe (also called urban hinterland or “rurban” areas). The differentiation between an urban core and a ring surrounding it is implicit in the common conceptualisation of the various forms of demographic shifts between territories, i.e. urbanisation (population increase of the core), suburbanisation (increase of the ring, decrease of the core), disurbanisation (decrease of core and ring) and reurbanisation (increase of core, decrease of ring).³⁷ Interestingly, also the degree of urbanisation, as defined and measured by Eurostat, does not rely on an urban-rural dichotomy but differentiates, only on the basis of the purely objective criterion of population density, between “cities” (densely populated), “towns and suburbs” (intermediate density) and “rural areas” (thinly populated).³⁸

19. Another obstacle for a uniform and clear-cut distinction of “urban” and “rural” across Europe is the different meanings of these terms in different parts of the continent. For instance, “rural” in Turkey means something entirely different from “rural” in the Netherlands and this is not exclusively the result of demographic, geographical or economic factors. It also reflects the subjective element of inhabitants’ perspectives, shaped over generations, on what is urban and rural lifestyle.³⁹

Urban-rural interplay

20. In order to understand the interplay between local governments on the urban-rural continuum it is important to recognise that the functional links between cities and the countryside in Europe has gone through at least three historical stages⁴⁰ and that the rather recent third one is the context for the practices of cooperation outlined in this report. The first phase was focused on the exchange of commercial products of the cities against the agricultural produce of the rural areas which for centuries covered most of the continent.

21. During the second stage, triggered by the Industrial Revolution, this relationship started to give way to one of growing dependence of rural territories on urban economies. This formed the background for the growth poles theory according to which economic development takes place around a specific pole

34 Report of the Congress, A better future for Europe’s rural areas CG33(2017)16final, Explanatory Memorandum, para 13.

35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Regional Outlook 2016: Productive Regions for Inclusive Societies* (Paris, OECD Publications, 2016).

36 See A Copus and P de Lima, ‘From rural development to rural territorial cohesion’ in A Copus and P de Lima (eds), *Territorial Cohesion in Rural Europe* (London and New York, Routledge, 2015) 3-10.

37 See C Bengs and K Schmidt-Thomé (eds), *Urban-rural relations in Europe* (Luxembourg, ESPON, 2006) 14.

38 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/background>.

39 See S Davoudi and D Stead, ‘Urban-rural relationships: an introduction and a brief history’ (2002) 28 *Built Environment*, 270-273.

40 See C Bengs and K Schmidt-Thomé (eds), *Urban-rural relations in Europe* (Luxembourg, ESPON, 2006) 16-17.

(or cluster) because core industries would boost the development of linked industries benefitting from scale and agglomeration economies near the growth pole.⁴¹ Since cities are conceived under this approach as engines of development with positive trickle-down effects on the periphery that is naturally lagging behind, the logical policy prescription is that investments should be concentrated in urban centres.

22. A more recent third phase is arguably characterised by an incremental change in the urban-rural interplay towards more complex, dynamic and (potentially) mutually beneficial web of interdependencies. This perception is at the heart of accounts that point to the limited territorial reach of the trickle-down effects of growth poles and their possible negative backwash effects on rural areas, as economic development becomes increasingly concentrated in these urban clusters.⁴² Moreover, they highlight that there is evidence for a significant capability of rural areas, again more of some than others, to generate own endogenous growth and thus make a considerable contribution to the development of other areas too.⁴³

23. In contrast to growth pole theory, recent research has indeed shown increasing urban-rural interdependence so that policies with benefits of one side often also have benefits for the other.⁴⁴ Of course, as many have rightly pointed out, this interdependent relationship should be one of give and take: “Not just so that rural places are playgrounds for holiday makers or dormitories for urban dwellers but so that linkages bring real benefits and wealth for rural areas too.”⁴⁵ In other words, it is important that the countryside is not regarded as mere appendix of urban areas. The European Urban Charter II seems to implicitly acknowledge that, as the achievement of two of its main objectives is very much dependent on policy coordination with rural local governments. “Sustainable towns and cities” in the face of climate change are as much inconceivable without the environmental resources of rural areas as “cohesive towns and cities” are because cohesion needs to consider that urban settlements develop within a wider regional space.⁴⁶

24. The interconnectedness of towns and their surrounding rural areas is likewise reflected in a bottom-up initiative that is committed to promoting a lifestyle focused on slowness, sustainability and social justice. The Movement of Cittaslow goes back to 1999 and aims to extend the philosophy of Slow Food to the everyday lives of local communities. As a non-profit association bringing together Mayors of small- and medium sized towns, Cittaslow is dedicated to the idea of circular economies involving small businesses, farmers, craftsmen, etc. These micro-economies are supposed to be sustainable both in social and ecological terms and by definition require urban-rural cooperation.

25. Importantly, also certain networks of rural-rural cooperation see the interplay with cities as essential to their own success. A case in point is P10, a network bringing together the twenty largest rural municipalities in the Netherlands.⁴⁷ It is indeed striking that these municipalities seek to tackle their common problems such as relatively higher costs of public services due to their vast territories and low population density by declaring “interaction with the city” as one of three main strategic objectives. The aim is to enhance cooperation with urban local governments based on mutual interests, for example, as areas with specific relative strengths and resources that may complement each other for the sake of common economic development or mastering the energy transition.

Introducing urban-rural cooperation

Purpose of cooperation

26. Strategies to foster urban-rural interplay are instrumental in accomplishing the broader aim of territorial cohesion which is, according to the EU’s definition, about “ensuring the harmonious

41 See F Perroux, ‘Economic Space: Theory and Applications’ (1950) 64 *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 89-104.

42 See G Myrdal, *Economic Theory and Undeveloped Regions* (London, Methuen & Co., 1957); GL Gaile, ‘The Spread-Backwash Concept’ (1980) 14 *Regional Studies*, 15-25.

43 See A Copus and P de Lima, ‘From rural development to rural territorial cohesion’ in A Copus and P de Lima (eds), *Territorial Cohesion in Rural Europe* (London and New York, Routledge, 2015) 3-10.

44 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Innovation and Modernising the Rural Economy* (Paris, OECD Publications, 2014).

45 J Atterton, ‘Statement on “Addressing the urban-rural divide” / thematic debate’, 36th Congress Session – Chamber of Local Authorities, 3 April 2019, Strasbourg, 3.

46 Resolution 269 (2008)1 European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity, 3-5.

47 <https://p-10.nl/>.

development of all places and about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories.”⁴⁸

27. Next to the European Union, also the Congress has repeatedly invoked this concept. A case in point is a resolution that highlights the quality and accessibility in rural areas of certain enumerated services of general interest as a key factor of a wider national and European territorial cohesion agenda.⁴⁹ Recommendations regarding specific policy fields have emphasised the importance of ensuring territorial continuity of social services in rural regions and of a balanced distribution of health care in rural regions, combatting especially the phenomenon of so-called medical desertification.⁵⁰

28. Despite the value of territorial cohesion, it needs to be recognised that the absence of a critical mass of people and the high costs of the provision of certain public services in sparsely populated remote rural areas will require some compromises. More generally, it must be taken into account that cohesion is hardly uniform across territories, as the interplay between urban and rural areas tends to become weaker with growing distance. Research indeed appears to demonstrate that linkages are especially rare and thus arguably more difficult to foster if they go beyond a radius of 30 km from urban territories.⁵¹

Forms of cooperation

29. Urban-rural cooperation can be regarded as a particular kind of intermunicipal cooperation (IMC) because it involves different types of local governments, i.e. urban and rural local governments. This is a key difference compared to the very common forms of collaboration between just any neighbouring municipalities or between similar types of municipalities focusing on one or several topics such as city networks like Intercultural Cities⁵² or Eurocities.⁵³

30. Based on comparative evidence from Europe and beyond, IMC is best understood as “a broad umbrella term that encompasses an enormous variety of more or less institutionalised collaborative mechanisms under both public and private law and sometimes even including private actors.”⁵⁴ It is widely recognised that there is among European countries a very broad spectrum of cooperative practices and traditions. While IMC in the United Kingdom is characterised by a rather informal, pragmatic and flexible approach of joint local service provision, France relies on a more institutionalised public-law oriented model with distinct inter-municipal entities. Still others borrow from both these models.⁵⁵ Again, it is important to underline that not all forms of IMC are suitable as vehicles of urban-rural cooperation. In the context of France’s institutionalised cooperation, for example, it is primarily the *communautés urbaines*, bringing together cities and their surrounding areas, which are of interest for such cooperation.

31. Overall, the formalisation of urban-rural collaboration seems to depend on a number of factors such as the topic, a legal context favouring cooperation (e.g. mandatory joint spatial planning), the degree of inclusiveness with regard to private stakeholders and the tradition of predominantly formal or informal IMC.⁵⁶ As for the inclusion of private actors in urban-rural cooperation, there are several examples of them playing a significant role. A case in point is the Nuremberg Metropolitan Region which likens its governance structure to a sailing boat.⁵⁷ One sail is the council of the Metropolitan Region that includes 55 mayors and district administrators, while a second one is an association representing more than 150 local companies. The steering committee is the boat’s mast and has an equal number of members from both the council and the association. The hull is formed by eight expert forums concerning topics as diverse as transport and planning, culture, sport or climate protection. As with all instances of public-private decision-making, an adequate balance is important between politicians, having a democratic

48 European Commission, Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion: Turning Territorial Diversity into Strength, COM (2017) 534 final, 3.

49 Congress Recommendation 235 (2008) Services of general interest in rural areas, a key factor in territorial cohesion policies.

50 Congress Recommendation 224 (2007) Ensuring territorial continuity of social services in rural regions; Congress Recommendation 223 (2007) Balanced distribution of health care in rural regions.

51 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 19.

52 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/>.

53 <http://wsdomino.eurocities.eu/eurocities/home>.

54 F Palermo and K Kössler, *Comparative Federalism: Constitutional Arrangements and Case Law* (Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2017) 310.

55 European Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR), *Good Practices in inter-municipal co-operations in Europe* (Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2007) 19-25.

56 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 21.

57 <https://www.metropolregionnuernberg.de/en/about-us/the-nuremberg-metropolitan-region.html>.

mandate to make decisions concerning a certain territory, and private actors able to contribute new and different ideas.

32. As mentioned above, traditions of IMC are an important factor for the prevalence of either more formal or informal cooperation. But beyond that they are also decisive for whether such cooperation occurs at all. Whereas IMC has played, from a historical perspective, a strong role concerning local service provision in countries like France, Spain or Italy, this is not the case for all of Europe. Several other countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe,⁵⁸ lack such a tradition so that IMC in general and urban-rural cooperation in particular is not as widespread and more dependent on the initiative and political will of individuals.

33. Even if IMC is per definition “intermunicipal”, urban-rural cooperation that truly enhances the interplay between local governments will often have to look beyond just the local level of government. This is because there are a number of policy fields which do not fall within exclusive local responsibility such as infrastructure and environmental protection. A resolution of the Congress captured very well the rationale of such multilevel cooperation, as the latter can ensure an “over-arching vision and framework” and at the same time “flexibility and ‘fit’ to local context.”⁵⁹ It is exactly in guaranteeing this appropriateness to local context that local governments have, with their knowledge of the local context, a critical role to play.

34. Importantly, the therefore essential interplay between the multiple levels of governments should be guided by the principle of subsidiarity which is crucial not only for national-regional-local relations, but for relations within the local level as well. This concerns coordination of municipalities with second-tier local governments like counties (upstream dimensions) and infra-municipal areas such as boroughs and wards (downstream dimension).⁶⁰ The first dimension is typically of particular relevance for rural areas and the latter is for urban areas.

Practices of urban-rural cooperation in five crucial policy fields

35. This section presents and analyses practices of urban-rural cooperation across Europe in several policy fields of critical importance. Both for the selection of these fields and for the selection of the single practices it is again important to take into account that there is no binary distinction between “urban” and “rural” and that geographical distance between the various types of local governments on the urban-rural continuum plays a significant role.⁶¹

36. First, long distance is, because of the relative rareness of natural linkages, a crucial factor for the (un)feasibility of cooperation, as well as for the respective roles of partners. Therefore, the OECD distinguishes three spatial contexts for urban-rural partnerships: metropolitan areas with a relatively high level of integration, networks of small and medium sized-cities with a spatially more diffused economy and sparsely populated remote rural areas with market towns where urban areas hardly play a role as engines of development, which is thus necessarily by and large endogenous.⁶²

37. Secondly, distance can also be relevant for what topics are suitable for urban-rural cooperation. From the perspective of accessible rural areas, the management of urban sprawl and planning the use of land, an in these areas typically much contested resource, will be critical issues. Remote rural areas, by contrast, will be rather interested in cooperation regarding improved connections with urban infrastructure or the use of its landscape and cultural assets for recreation and tourism.⁶³ Even though there are of course a number of topics for cooperation that are equally relevant for each spatial setting,⁶⁴ the above-mentioned differences need to be taken into account when exploring cooperative practices in five policy fields.

58 See P Swianiewicz (ed), *Working Together: Intermunicipal Cooperation in Five Central European Countries* (Budapest, Open Society Foundations, 2011).

59 Report of the Congress, A better future for Europe’s rural areas CG33(2017)16final, Explanatory Memorandum, para 101.

60 Congress Resolution 269 (2008)1 European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity, 3.

61 See above paras 16-18 and 25.

62 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Urban-Rural Linkages, Issues, Measurement and Policies in OECD Countries* (Paris, OECD Publications, 2010).

63 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 20-21.

64 Ibid, 28-29.

Economic development and employment

38. Economic development in rural areas is arguably best promoted by an integrated strategy that relies on both traditional strengths of such territories as agricultural lands, as recognised by the Congress in an earlier report,⁶⁵ and on new potential beyond this sector. The latter was, for example, emphasised in the “The Cork 2.0 Declaration – A Better Life in Rural Areas”⁶⁶ in 2016 whose language points to innovation and the contribution of rural areas to the wider economy. Yet, the prevalence of agricultural land in many European countries should still be considered as an asset, especially for the increasingly popular production of local and healthy food.⁶⁷

39. Importantly, food production is not only a critical economic issue for remote rural areas, but for territories in the urban fringe too. This has been recognised, for instance, by “Agri-Urban”, an URBACT network,⁶⁸ dedicated to rethinking food production in small and medium-sized cities. One main aim is thereby to capitalise on competitive advantages of local food like healthiness, lower environmental impact and (often) a story to tell behind the product. Another aim is to tackle (youth) unemployment through new jobs, not only in agricultural production but also in related areas like local gastronomic activities and tourism. Several policies from this project seem relevant and interesting for other contexts too. A case in point is the Fundão Producers’ Club, a cooperation between farmers initiated by a small Portuguese town, which is based on the sharing of both equipment and ideas, as well as the joint merchandising of local products.⁶⁹

40. A similar initiative is the peri-urban agriculture initiative of the French Pays du Mans. This project is about joint (promotion of) agricultural activities, on the one hand, and about access for local communities to local farm products, on the other. The fact that French law foresees the possibility to form so-called “councils for development”, including representatives from the economy and civil society, provided an opportunity to build this initiative upon broad consent beyond local politics and administration. This certainly facilitated the establishment of the links needed between farmers, school canteens, restaurants, etc. in order to achieve the above-mentioned goals. Territorially speaking, these links connected urban areas with rural areas.⁷⁰

41. Another notable initiative is the Peri Urban Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE). Compared to the two aforementioned ones, its focus is less on agricultural production as traditional source of economic development. Similarly, however, it attempts to promote urban-rural interconnectedness for development purposes. Topics for cooperation between peri-urban regions include, next to agriculture, the setting up of adequate urban-rural infrastructure links (e.g. in Dublin) or the preservation of a green belt for recreation (e.g. in Frankfurt). All these collaborative initiatives are critical for both economic development and employment.⁷¹

42. While economic development may boost the creation of jobs in the private sector, employment opportunities in the public sector typically tend to be scarce in rural areas. There are, however, in a few regions deliberate attempts to change that, which may be of interest for others too. A case in point is Bavaria where the aim of achieving equivalent living conditions in rural areas is enshrined in Article 3(2) of the Constitution. This prompted the government to adopt in 2014 the so-called “Heimatstrategie”.⁷² One of five pillars of this strategy is the plan to relocate in the course of ten years more than 50 of the *Land’s* government agencies to rural areas, especially to the structurally weaker northern parts of Bavaria. Certain degree of decentralisation of such agencies had already been carried out since 1990.

Land use planning

43. Land use is another crucial topic for urban-rural relations and closely related to the issues discussed in the previous section. Especially “rurban” areas in the fringe of cities and towns are often characterised by fierce competition for land, high prices of land and difficult zoning decisions of whether to use it for

65 Report of the Congress, A better future for Europe’s rural areas CG33(2017)16final, Explanatory Memorandum, para 106.

66 https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/events/2016/rural-development/cork-declaration-2-0_en.pdf.

67 See C Bengs and K Schmidt-Thomé (eds), *Urban-rural relations in Europe* (Luxembourg, ESPON, 2006) 26.

68 <https://urbact.eu/agri-urban>.

69 <https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/urbact-citystories-fundao.pdf>.

70 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 9-10.

71 www.purple-eu.org.

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[https://www.bestellen.bayern.de/application/eshop_app000004?SID=19799340&ACTIONxSESSxSHOWPIC\(BILDxKEY:%2706008015%27,BILDxCLASS:%27Artikel%27,BILDxTYPE:%27PDF%27\)](https://www.bestellen.bayern.de/application/eshop_app000004?SID=19799340&ACTIONxSESSxSHOWPIC(BILDxKEY:%2706008015%27,BILDxCLASS:%27Artikel%27,BILDxTYPE:%27PDF%27))

residential, recreational or economic purposes. In the latter case, it still has to be determined whether to use a certain area for services, industries or agriculture.

44. While questions of land use figure prominently in the Europe-wide PURPLE network (Peri Urban Regions Platform Europe), there are notable initiatives in single countries as well. One example is the ERDF-funded project URBAN Plus – Integrated and Sustainable Urban-suburban Development in the South of the city of Graz. Four urban districts of this Austrian city joined forces with 16 municipalities in the urban fringe in order to adopt an integrated plan of land development for the whole area, a territory of mixed use for residential and manufacturing purposes, to expand mobility links within this area and provide for open spaces dedicated to recreational activities. These joint initiatives were supplemented by a monitoring mechanism and an inter-municipal scheme of financial equalisation.⁷³

45. Urban-rural interplay with regard to land use was also one of the core topics of Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF), an initiative partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund within the INTERREG IV B North Sea Region.⁷⁴ Case studies in the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands demonstrated that open spaces are in some urban fringes still under pressure because of the expansion of residential areas, whereas others face the opposite problem of depopulation and knock-on effects on the accessibility of public services that are rather typical of more rural areas. What urban fringes, however, seem to have in common is a transformation from areas of production to multifunctional areas that are important for recreation, nature conservation, housing, more diverse job opportunities, etc. This is obviously relevant for land use. Land use planning therefore needs to ensure, due to the position of urban fringes between urban centres and more rural areas, the compatibility with planning in both these neighbouring areas through an interactive process.

46. A particularly innovative example regarding the financial aspects of land use planning in such areas is the joint founding in 2004 of a bank, the Grondbank RZG Zuidplaspolder,⁷⁵ by Rotterdam and several other municipalities of South Holland. As the municipalities have the right of pre-emption regarding the purchase of plots, the purpose of this bank has been to buy and then hand over the plots to public or private developers obliged to use the land according to a joint development plan. With the Zuidplaspolder⁷⁶, located in the urban fringes of Rotterdam, being a main area of urban expansion, this measure sought to balance demands for housing, recreation and agriculture and to avoid real estate speculation.⁷⁷

Transport infrastructure

47. While it is probably beyond doubt that policies of strengthening infrastructure links is a key element of developing urban-rural interplay, it also needs to be acknowledged that different kinds of infrastructure are important in different places. Improved mobility between cities and urban fringes is often best achieved by focusing on public transport systems and how to organise them in an efficient and customer-friendly manner across administrative boundaries. By contrast, connecting remote rural areas to more urban territories is probably in many European countries only possible by investing in road construction.⁷⁸

48. As for the reasoning behind investments in whatever infrastructure, there may also be different interests at play depending on where the areas involved are located on the urban-rural continuum.⁷⁹ For instance, a common aim of regional policies in a number of European countries is what is called “regional enlargement”, i.e. the idea to invest in infrastructure that links cities with their surroundings and thus to gradually extend the urban area.⁸⁰ An enlarged commuting area and labour market are thereby regarded as a potential for economic growth. However, such an integration of infrastructure risks in some cases to go against the interests of remote rural areas which remain excluded. Polycentric spatial development needs to take into account their interests too. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the development of integrated regional infrastructures in sparsely populated and peripheral areas, as recommended by the Congress in 2007, should not be neglected.⁸¹

73 https://www.graz.at/cms/dokumente/10027232_8033447/c8e6fd0b/Pr%C3%A4sentation%20URBAN%20PLUS_131008.pdf.

74 http://archive.northsearegion.eu/files/repository/20130716132157_FinalreportSustainableUrbanFringesproject.pdf.

75 RZG is the acronym for Rotterdam-Zoetermeer-Gouda.

76 A polder is a low-lying tract of land that forms an artificial hydrological entity, enclosed by embankments known as dikes.

77 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 34.

78 Ibid, 29.

79 See above paras 17-19.

80 See C Bengs and K Schmidt-Thomé (eds), *Urban-rural relations in Europe* (Luxembourg, ESPON, 2006) 23.

81 Congress Resolution 245 (2007) on challenges and opportunities for peripheral and sparsely populated regions.

49. Poland provides in this regard interesting examples. The main responsibility for public transport lies in this country with the municipalities which results in a variety of services with different quality and at different costs existing alongside each other. While the state-owned enterprise PKS had as a monopolist in Communist times maintained a quite dense network of local connections also in more remote rural areas, privatisation in pursuit of the New Public Management approach has reduced (unprofitable) connections.

50. However, fragmentation of public transport services at the local level, which further aggravates this problem, can be reduced through a mechanism of inter-municipal cooperation. So-called “unions between municipalities” (*związki międzygminne*) may be established and 18 out of 313 such unions have, as their exclusive purpose or one purpose among others, the collaboration with respect to public transport. While this number may appear low in view of the potential for cooperation at this basic local level, there is vertical cooperation too. Seven of the “unions between municipalities and districts” (*związki powiatowo-gminne*), which have been established since 2016, concern the joint provision of public transport at the supra-municipal level.

51. Compared to these unions, the organisation of public transport in the City of Warsaw and its surroundings is a particular case. As many commuters from outside Warsaw use their own cars to enter the city, the modal share of public transport in the urban fringe is only at 45% and thus lags behind the 60% in the urban centre. To prevent the resulting problems of air pollution and congestion is an aim of the regional public transport system including Warsaw and 30 neighbouring municipalities. Even if this cooperation is less institutionalised and sometimes involves difficult annual renegotiations (especially of the respective financial contributions), it is still considered as a good starting point for more integrated transportation services in the capital cities and its surroundings.⁸²

Virtual interconnectedness

52. Apart from transportation links, the importance of virtual interconnectedness is obvious in an age in which information and communication technologies are central to the lives of people in more urban and more rural areas alike. In view of the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has entailed in particular for densely populated urban areas and the increasing use of IT technology in both professional and private life, such interconnectedness has in recent months assumed even greater importance. At the European level, access to high-speed and next-generation broadband internet has been prioritised for years as an issue that is considered key for cohesion. But the much-discussed digital divide still persists, as urban centres benefit from getting faster access to ever-increasing broadband speeds. The fact that in 2017 merely 47% of rural areas had access to fast broadband internet proves this point.⁸³

53. It cannot be overemphasised that tackling this divide and improving connectivity of more rural parts of Europe is crucial in several respects. “Virtual proximity” is not only an important factor for social interaction between urban and rural spaces. It can also be a precondition for people in the countryside to get access to certain public services⁸⁴ and for businesses to merchandise and sell their products online.

54. Appropriate internet infrastructure is even increasingly seen as important in an economic sector where this might not be self-evident. It is in fact one priority of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) in its efforts to achieve the goal of “Smart and Competitive Rural Areas” to promote innovative farming technologies. Something that has been under discussion for several years is so-called “smart farming” or “precision farming” which uses information technology systems such as GPS, drones, robots, sensors and others in order to optimise agricultural processes. While it is obvious that high-speed broadband coverage is needed for these systems to work properly, the question of how to achieve such coverage leads back to the aforementioned problem of the digital divide. As a result of the lower population density in rural areas, there is still considerable reluctance on the part of telecommunications companies to make the necessary investments so that public financial backing appears critical.

82 See J Artmann et al, *Partnership for sustainable rural-urban development: Existing evidences*, Report for DG Regio (Berlin, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2012) 30.

83 Declaration on “A smart and sustainable digital future for European agriculture and rural areas”, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-member-states-join-forces-digitalisation-european-agriculture-and-rural-areas>, 2.

84 See below paras 56-57.

55. The EU has recently emphasised on several occasions the importance of digitalisation for agriculture and rural areas more generally, not least also as something to enhance the quality of life and thus, potentially, to attract a younger generation to farming and rural business start-ups. A Communication of the European Commission from 2017 highlighted the crucial role of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in connecting farmers with the digital economy.⁸⁵ A declaration adopted in 2019 by 25 countries commits the signatories to support the above-mentioned digital technologies in farming.⁸⁶ The fact that only 11% of farmers in the EU are under the age of 40 might complicate the practical realisation of this strategy.⁸⁷ Another concern is that economies of scale might make reliance on digital technologies viable for big agrobusinesses but not for small farms so that the real potential of smart farming initiatives remains in doubt.

Equitable provision of public services

56. A key issue regarding inequalities between urban and rural areas concerns the access to basic public services. In this regard, it is worth noting that some parts of Europe, such as Bavaria, explicitly commit to ensuring that living conditions in rural areas are equivalent to those in urban areas.⁸⁸ Taking into account that 60% of its population live in the countryside, the Bavarian government aims to achieve this goal, in particular, through the program for „village renewal“ (*Dorferneuerung*), a funding scheme for projects in a wide range of areas like spatial planning, local supply with goods and the improvement of physical infrastructure.⁸⁹

57. Apart from the provision of funds, ensuring equivalent living conditions in rural territories also warrants action on the part of public authorities regarding the provision of public services. This is often complicated by the considerable distance that separates people from service providers. A relevant case in point for this problem with possible solutions is Sweden. In the country's sparsely populated rural areas, the access to healthcare has become an increasingly urgent issue. An attempted solution was the introduction in 2016 of an e-health scheme which enables patients to make video calls with their physician via a smartphone app. As Swedish healthcare falls within the responsibility of the 21 county councils, which have the authority to tax citizens and shape policy within the limits of general government guidelines, they are faced with the task of managing e-health's rapid increase in popularity. In contrast to other countries, digital entrepreneurs providing these apps connect their services to county councils and are thus integrated into the public healthcare system.

58. It is therefore primarily up to the counties and their representative body, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) to navigate through the challenges of this digital solution. On the one hand, there are some obvious benefits such as a reduction in waiting time for non-urgent appointments and eliminating the need to travel (often) long distances to a physician. On the other hand, some observers have pointed out that it remains unclear whether the sharp increase in e-health consultations really entails a reduction in physical visits or add to the latter visits, resulting in overconsumption of care at the expense of patients with serious needs.⁹⁰ Moreover, counties might lack the economies of scale and leverage that would be available at the national level at least regarding some issues like remuneration systems and the question of how to triage patients between digital and physical care. However, this does not seem to be an insurmountable obstacle, but rather require a finetuning of e-health provision by recalibrating the respective roles of the various actors involved. The latter is crucial because e-health in rural areas, where it has particular potential, can still be amplified.⁹¹ Attitudes towards e-health were to a certain extent changed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Especially, start-ups providing telemedicine, like Doktor24 in Sweden, seem to have received a boost, even if it remains to be seen whether this only holds true for the time of the Covid-19 emergency or also for post-pandemic healthcare.⁹²

85 European Commission, Communication on the Future of Food and Farming, COM(2017) 713 final. Brussels: European Commission.

86 Declaration on "A smart and sustainable digital future for European agriculture and rural areas", <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-member-states-join-forces-digitalisation-european-agriculture-and-rural-areas>.

87 <https://en.euractiv.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/special-report/EURACTIV-Event-Report-Striking-a-balance-IT-infrastructure-and-digital-sovereignty.pdf>.

88 See above para 42.

89 https://www.landentwicklung.bayern.de/mam/cms01/landentwicklung/dokumentationen/dateien/le_infokompodium.pdf, 87.

90 See M Blix and J Jeansson, 'Telemedicine and the Welfare State: The Swedish Experience', (2018) *IFN Working Paper No. 1238*, 2 and 8.

91 According to data from 2017, Stockholm accounted for 43% of all digital visits while only making up 23% of the country's total population. M Blix and J Jeansson, 'Telemedicine and the Welfare State: The Swedish Experience', (2018) *IFN Working Paper No. 1238*, 10.

92 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/telemedicine-covid-19-game-changer/>.

Conclusions

59. The report identified the need to strengthen the mutual understanding of the very different realities of areas at different positions on the broad urban-rural continuum. Mutual understanding seems essential as precondition for and basis of developing urban-rural interplay. This is because it helps to put oneself in each other's position and to identify common interests. Mutual understanding of different realities is, of course, equally important among political decision-makers. In this respect the lack of it among a class of politicians from predominantly urban backgrounds was recently deplored in a declaration of the European Rural Parliament in 2019.⁹³

60. Further, an equilibrium between urban and rural areas needs to be established by demonstrating equal appreciation and equal consideration in policy-making, in particular, concerning spatial planning and economic development. Again, the above-mentioned 2019 declaration of the European Rural Parliament draws attention to this issue by objecting to a dominance of urban growth thinking in political discourse and policies. Consequently, one of four main categories of demands in the declaration is "valuing and thinking rural".⁹⁴

61. Economic development and employment strategies need to rely on multiple strengths of territories so as to make them less vulnerable to external economic shocks. In the case of areas in the urban fringe and more remote rural areas, for instance, it seems important to not only focus, on supporting the agricultural sector. A broader strategy of promoting economic development and employment should also exploit potential in other sectors of the economy, as done by the Peri Urban Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE). It may even take into consideration creating job opportunities in the public sector through the relocation of government agencies from urban centres.

62. There should be an integrated strategy for land use planning that duly considers the specific conditions of areas at different positions on the urban-rural continuum. For example, the intense competition in the fringe of cities and towns concerning land and the use of it, which results from the increasingly multifunctional character of these territories, is not a characteristic of more rural areas. It is important to take into account these specific conditions in order to achieve maximum coherence in land use planning.

63. Different kinds of transport infrastructure should be established based on different needs and should be interconnected as efficiently as possible. While the needs of many territories will be best served by expanding public transport systems, other areas, especially more remote rural ones, will also benefit from accessibility through road construction. Infrastructure policies should not narrowly focus on the enlargement of urban areas by integrating the surrounding areas inhabited by commuters (and thus valuable workforce), but also ensure the interconnectedness of sparsely populated and peripheral areas.

64. There is a need for initiatives towards "virtual proximity" between more urban and rural areas through their interconnectedness via high-speed internet. This is equally crucial for territorial cohesion as transportation links. Such proximity facilitates social interaction, access to certain public services, contacts of businesses with commercial partners and customers, as well as the use of digital technologies in agriculture. Yet, bridging the still persisting urban-rural digital divide requires decisive action on the part of governments, as telecommunication providers do not have, due to the lower population density in rural areas, a natural incentive to invest in internet infrastructure in such areas.

65. Finally, all abovementioned efforts should aim at ensuring equivalent living conditions in urban and rural territories not only through adequate funding but also through the equitable provision of public services. In finding the right mix and balance of who does what most efficiently collaboration needs to be established between different levels of government, public and private sectors, as well as urban and rural areas.

93 The 4th European Rural Parliament (<https://erp2019.eu/>) in 2019 adopted the Rural People's Declaration of Candás/Asturias and therein expressed its concern regarding the "dominating urban and growth agendas combined with the disconnection between local people and decision-makers as a threat to rural life." The European Rural Parliament also published a more elaborate document, The European Rural Parliament Manifesto 2019, which contains 29 aspirations, commitments and demands.

94 The other three others are "Quality of life", "Rural policy, programmes and financing" and "Doing together at all levels".