

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 406 (2017)¹ A better future for Europe's rural areas

1. A striking feature of Europe's rural areas is their social, economic and environmental diversity. While some rural areas are performing well in socio-economic terms, outperforming their neighbouring urban areas with prosperous populations working in well-paid jobs, others are experiencing depopulation, demographic ageing, high levels of poverty, land abandonment, a heavy reliance on small-scale agricultural production, a limited level of basic service provision and infrastructure challenges.

2. Disparities between rural areas have become more marked since the 2008 financial crisis. While rural areas close to cities have demonstrated increasing dynamism and resilience, remote rural areas have been unable to return to their former levels of employment and productivity. Other long-term trends such as globalisation, technological change and climate change are contributing to making the differences within and between rural areas even more pronounced.

3. Many rural areas are witnessing a shift to a "new rural economy", with reduced dependence on land-based activities and the emergence of a more diversified economy, including a range of manufacturing and service sector activities, facilitated by advances in information and communication technologies and more flexible working practices.

4. Against this backdrop, new approaches to rural policy are required to support the exploitation and valorisation of local assets, the local identification of needs and opportunities, and to improve the competitiveness of rural areas through identifying new economic functions beyond agricultural production.

5. In the light of the above, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe:

a. bearing in mind:

i. Congress Resolution 128 (2002) and Recommendation 107 (2002) on the problems of Europe's countryside;

ii. Congress Resolution 252 (2008) and Recommendation 235 (2008) on services of general interest in rural areas, a key factor in territorial cohesion policies;

iii. Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on local and regional public services;

iv. the Cork 2.0 Declaration 2016, "A better life in rural areas";

b. aware of the social, economic and environmental diversity that characterises Europe's rural areas and localities;

c. aware of the importance of rural areas in the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural heritage;

d. convinced that improved interrelations and partnerships among urban centres and rural areas are important preconditions for economic viability, environmental performance, territorial cohesion and social sustainability in the member States of the Council of Europe;

e. convinced of the value of rural resources capable of delivering sustainable solutions to current and future societal challenges, such as assuring a safe provision of quality food, developing the circular economy and combating climate change;

f. concerned about rural depopulation and youth outmigration and the need to ensure that rural areas and communities remain attractive places to live and work;

g. determined to secure the sustainability of Europe's rural areas and guarantee a high quality of life and well-being for those living in them,

6. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers call upon the governments of its member States to:

a. recognise the diversity of regions and the special qualities and assets of rural areas and communities;

b. devise new policies to support rural development adapted to the specific features of rural areas, and grounded in a territorial and multisectoral investment approach by:

i. building on rural-urban interdependency, in particular by being more aware of the linkages and interrelationships between rural and urban areas and how to maximise them for mutual benefit;

ii. working strategically and holistically across policy portfolios on a territorial basis, focusing on places rather than supporting different sectors;

iii. developing an integrated approach to rural development policies involving all levels of government and various local stakeholders operating across all sectors, and encouraging initiatives and innovations from local private stakeholders, associations or companies, in particular by providing them with greater access to skills and know-how;

iv. placing emphasis on supporting the exploitation and valorisation of the local assets of rural areas, rather than highlighting their needs and deficiencies;

v. promoting rural prosperity and the potential of rural regions to propose innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for current and future societal challenges, such as economic prosperity, food security, climate change, resource management, social inclusion, and the integration of migrants;

vi. boosting knowledge and innovation, ensuring that rural businesses have access to appropriate technology, state-of-the-art connectivity and new management tools in order to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits;

c. promote greater equity and maximise well-being in rural areas by:

i. guaranteeing continuity and equity of access to quality services through appropriate legislation;

ii. paying particular attention to overcoming the digital divide and developing the potential offered as a result of ensuring the connectivity and digitisation of rural areas;

iii. decentralising regional administrative services from regional capitals in order to provide skilled employment in rural zones and remote areas;

d. encourage and develop the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in order to gather accurate and up-to-date

information about all aspects of rural areas and stakeholders in the field, with a view to ensuring the implementation of more effective rural policies across Council of Europe member States;

e. guarantee, within the limit of financial and budgetary constraints, continuity in the provision of those local and regional public services which are considered to be essential for the population.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 19 October 2017, 2nd sitting (see Document [CG33\(2017\)16](#), explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Philippe LEUBA, Switzerland (R, ILDG).