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8 Youth and Sport

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Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States
on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth
Explanatory Memorandum

I Introduction

This explanatory memorandum accompanies the Committee of Ministers (CM) Recommendation on Social, Economic and Political Participation of Rural Youth. The Recommendation aims to address the challenges faced by rural youth and to eliminate the barriers with which they are confronted in order that they may fully enjoy human rights under international and national law. It also aims to improve the accessibility to essential services, including youth services, facilitating the meaningful and active participation of rural youth in social, economic and political life, and to ensure better access to and the realisation of these rights. When referring to “**rural youth**”, the Recommendation includes all groups, including those from marginalised, indigenous and under-represented groups.

Rural youth play a crucial role in the development and sustainability of rural communities. As the backbone of agricultural production and local economies, young people in these areas possess the potential to drive innovation, foster social cohesion, and contribute to the overall well-being of their communities. However, they often face significant challenges that hinder their participation in social, economic, and political life. These challenges include limited access to quality education, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient employment opportunities, and a lack of supportive services tailored to their unique needs. In response to these pressing issues this explanatory memorandum outlines the specific challenges and elaborates on a series of strategic measures aimed at empowering rural youth and enhancing their engagement in various domains.

Drawing on research, consultations and practices from the Council of Europe member States and youth organisations, the memorandum emphasises the importance of creating an enabling environment that supports the aspirations and potential of young people in rural areas. By addressing barriers to participation and providing the necessary resources, member States can cultivate a vibrant and inclusive rural landscape where youth can thrive.

The following sections will detail specific recommendations and measures for ensuring equitable access to education, promoting youth engagement and democratic participation, strengthening youth structures, and fostering an enabling environment. The drawn recommendations and measures are essential for unlocking the potential of rural youth and ensuring their active contribution to the social, economic, and political fabric of their communities.

II. General Considerations

The recommendation adopts a **holistic approach** that recognises the multifaceted issues faced by rural youth. It emphasises the importance of creating an enabling environment that fosters their well-being, participation, and empowerment. This approach aligns with the core values of the Council of Europe enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

An evidence-based approach has been adopted involving the use of reliable secondary data along with primary data gathered from rural youth organisations and national authorities of the member States, to ensure that recommendations are grounded in the current realities and needs of rural communities.

The recommendation also **acknowledges the diversity of rural contexts** across member States. It encourages **a territorial approach**, tailoring support mechanisms to the specific needs and opportunities of each rural area. This could involve considering factors such as proximity to urban centres, dominant economic activities, and the presence of existing youth initiatives. It would be beneficial to **approach this in a cross-cutting manner**, starting with the main issues facing each of the different rural areas.

In order to achieve this, it is recommended that **a prior diagnosis of the territory** be carried out in consensus with the stakeholders involved in rural youth affairs, including the public and private sectors and civil society. It is of particular importance to give a special role to rural youth organisations (local, regional, national and European¹) and the co-management scenario, which should be considered from the start of analysis of the situation. This should be done through **a participatory approach**, which ensures that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of rural communities. It is of the utmost importance to establish multi-level governance and effective inter-institutional coordination that includes rural youth themselves in order to optimise resources and efforts. This will ensure balanced and equitable rural development that addresses the demographic and socio-economic challenges of rural youth, thus achieving social and territorial cohesion.

III. Why a Recommendation on Rural Youth?

Rural youth are a vital, yet often overlooked, demographic. They contribute significantly to the cultural heritage, economic dynamism, and social composition of rural communities. However, their potential is often hindered by a unique set of challenges that disproportionately impact their well-being, participation, and overall life trajectory. Rural youth face multiple barriers to social, economic, and political participation, while policy makers manifest an increasing interest in opening the dialogue that would lead to consistent policy measures to support rural youth. But very little is being known about the very specific barriers that rural youth is facing, about their interests and aspirations. The development of bigger urban areas and centralisation of the infrastructure in bigger cities has created more incentives for young people to move from rural areas to urban areas for a better future. Lack of opportunities in rural areas, lack of access to essential services, lack of perspectives for personal and professional growth and employment makes young people look for more opportunities in big cities. Moreover, on the one side, lack of access to social rights and lack of fulfilment of basic social needs, and on the other, the ongoing process of consolidation of rural settlements throughout Europe largely hinder youth engagement in participatory processes including in decision-making.

Even in these conditions, rural youth are part of different consultation processes and have expressed their interest and need for an increase in the range and quality of leisure, cultural, educational and healthcare opportunities where they live and asked for an increased quality of life. Democratic participation of the youth is not only expressed by voting. The actions of intermediary bodies such as youth-led associations, youth unions and youth-led non-governmental organisations (NGOs) would be essential to boost rural youth participation and create an enabling environment for participation.

Additionally, rural youth must be considered as a heterogeneous group and when it comes to access to rights, interventions should be tailor-made and intersectional. However, many policy documents tackle rural youth as a general social category; though, one cannot address rural youth as a “one size fits all” model as within the rural youth category one may find several categories (diverse and under-represented ethnic and religious groups, Roma youth, young LGBTQI+ people, youth with disabilities, young women, refugees, and migrants, etc.). They do not open the debate on the diversity of profiles and inequalities within the group of rural youth.

Consultations with rural youth and consultations that involved organisations and structures working with and for rural youth, showed that targeted policies, standards, and programmes specific for and with rural youth have almost never been developed and implemented at the local, regional, national, and European levels. Mainstreaming the inclusion of rural youth has not been systematically employed in policy design at the national and European levels; rather rural youth issues have been tackled within general issues of young

¹ When referring to European level in the text it should be read as Council of Europe member States' level.

people despite the clear divide of the issues, needs, aspirations and opportunities between young people from urban and rural areas. The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted the importance of tackling rural youth issues separately by putting the spotlight on specific issues that young people face because they live in rural areas.

The policies, projects, initiatives, if any, are rather developed **for** rural youth and essentially for young farmers and for youth involved in the agricultural sector. Many young people in rural areas have diverse interests beyond agriculture, and while some are passionate about farming, they may face challenges in accessing the necessary resources. Therefore, it is essential to explore a range of opportunities across various sectors to support the aspirations and growth of rural youth.

Rural areas must not be seen only in their productive or environmental dimension but also under their cultural, innovative, social and aesthetic one. Also, subjects as climate change, sustainability and sustainable development and digitalisation are also to be highlighted on the policy agenda for rural areas having these as cross-cutting themes in policies and programmes designed with and for rural youth.

To address these structural obstacles, the recommendation calls attention to the rights, needs, interests, and priorities of rural youth and to including them to legislation and transversal and cross-sector youth policies (including education, health, housing, employment, access to rights, etc), measures, programmes and projects at European, national, regional and local levels (including community level). The proposed measures of the recommendation also aim to support member States and to guide the national and local authorities into mainstreaming rural youth within matters to rurality and rural development as well as to youth policy per se.

The Challenge Spectrum

Situation of rural youth in general, demographic changes and the current economic situation have put young people in a difficult position in which they are experiencing increasing challenges to the full enjoyment of human rights and to a smooth transition to an autonomous life.

Young people in rural areas face barriers related to access to appropriate education opportunities, to a sluggish employment process, barriers to social inclusion, reduced participation and engagement in civic life and have very few opportunities to participate in cultural activities, while struggling to get access to basic services and infrastructures).

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership's study on barriers to social inclusion *Finding a Place in Modern Europe* (2015) marks five possible areas of inclusion or exclusion: *education, labour market, living, health and participation*, defined also as "safety nets" as they provide basic resources and prerequisites for the fulfilment of social needs on a daily basis. The situation with the safety nets in the rural community is rather different than in the urban areas and due to the unavailability, lack of stability and accessibility the risk of social exclusion for rural youth is extremely high².

Specific rural communities and vulnerable groups, for example, ethnic minority youth, youth with disabilities, young migrants and refugees, women and girls, and young workers 15-17, may face additional vulnerabilities, challenges and possibly marginalisation, owing to their specific difficulties in accessing training, resources and employment³.

The complex web of challenges faced by rural youth can be broken down in the following:

- **Educational Disadvantage:** Limited access to quality education and specialised programmes in rural schools compared to urban institutions. This translates to lower educational attainment and fewer career options for rural youth.

² Șerban, A.M, Brazienne, R. (2021) Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled, EU-CoE Youth Partnership, available at: <https://pip-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/106317733/Rural-youth-study.pdf/1fde9ee6-48ce-a2f7-2985-124b44ae46e7?fbclid=IwAR0LEOaqwOigpQAVLuYhQmREs7zMLMCXniYSeddNqNN1P6hmLWxrMucugU> , last accessed 19 August 2024.

³ IFAD (2019) Rural youth, today and tomorrow, available at: https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/41187395/08_White_2019+RDR+BACKGROUND+PAPER.pdf/8c891caa-12f1-783e-3b88-7e2b903c66de, last accessed 19 August 2024 and Nordregio (2019) Enabling vulnerable youth in rural areas not in education, employment or training, available at: <https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1326483/FULLTEXT01.pdf>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

- **Employment and Entrepreneurship Obstacles:** Higher unemployment rates, a scarcity of diverse job opportunities, and a lack of infrastructure, public investment and support services stifle youth employment and entrepreneurship in rural areas.
- **The Digital Divide:** Limited access to high-speed internet and digital technologies creates a significant disadvantage for rural youth in education, employment, and overall participation in the digitalised world.
- **Social Isolation and Limited Services:** Rural areas often have fewer cultural activities, healthcare facilities, and social services readily available. This can lead to social isolation and a lack of access to essential services for rural youth, particularly those facing mental health challenges or belonging to marginalised groups.
- **Underrepresentation in Decision-Making:** Rural youth are often underrepresented in local governance and decision-making processes, resulting in policies that do not address their specific needs and aspirations.

These challenges contribute to a phenomenon known as rural youth outmigration, where young people leave rural areas for urban centres seeking better opportunities. This weakens the social and economic composition of rural communities, creating a cycle of population decline and limited opportunities for **social, economic and political participation** for those who remain. The recommendation tackles those challenges and needs of rural youth by acknowledging the hindrances of rural youth participation.

Challenges to Social Participation

Rural youth have often found themselves marginalised both by decisions on the formulation and development of rural policy and by decision-making processes related to youth policy. Young people in rural areas are significantly impacted by the economic, social, and technological transitions occurring in contemporary society, which have heightened social inequalities. These changes include shifts towards urbanisation, the decline of traditional industries, advancements in technology, and changes in the labour market⁴. Such transitions have a profound effect on the opportunities available to youth who wish to remain in the countryside. Policies that favour privatisation and wealth extraction have exacerbated wealth inequality, eroding the support networks and investments that sustain rural communities, often deemed less profitable⁵. Consequently, the consolidation of power and wealth has led to the closure of schools and cuts to social welfare programmes, causing rural communities to decline and leaving young people with few choices other than to leave their homes.

While these issues have long existed, various actors are actively working to address the visible inequalities affecting rural communities. These actors include local governments, NGOs, community leaders, educational institutions, and international development agencies. The roots of many challenges faced by rural youth lie in systemic social inequalities and power dynamics that exclude young people based on age, race, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other factors. To truly support rural youth, it is essential to address these deep-seated inequalities and foster more inclusive opportunities for participation and development.

The organisations working with rural youth claim that rural areas are often left behind when designing policy measures, i.e. inclusive education, employment, infrastructure projects, etc. This lack of investment has particularly detrimental effects on vulnerable youth in these areas.

Since nowadays the rural youth's primary activity does revolve around working in the rural area, one of the main challenges identified is indeed the lack of choice in general. Since youth is faced with the constant necessity to work at the farm/households in order to aid the family in which they live, the freedom of choosing their path inhibits their ability to properly become active civic participants in this regard.

Particular groups within the rural youth are facing other structural issues for exercising their social rights and meeting their social needs. For example, there are additional obstacles to accessing healthcare services for rural LGBTQI+ youth. These include economic obstacles to see healthcare providers located in urban areas

⁴ OECD (2016), *A New Rural Development Paradigm for the 21st Century: A Toolkit for Developing Countries*, Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264252271-en>.

⁵ Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674979857>

(cost of transport often not reimbursed, limited access to training and/or information, etc.), facing ignorance/conservative views when visiting local healthcare providers, no choice for provider and danger of lacking anonymity when accessing healthcare.

The role of NGOs and youth structures in ensuring social inclusion of young people in general, also needs to be emphasised. It should be noted that there is a lack of such structures in rural areas. Usually youth centres, youth organisations, informal groups of young people are the ones who are disseminating information about available opportunities for young people for social participation, but due to their inexistence or inactivity this information does not reach rural youth.

The inactivity of youth NGOs in rural communities and non-existence of other youth structures is often emphasised as a result of the lack of policy standards and measures towards social inclusion of rural youth. Traditionally, NGOs are the ones promoting youth work and inclusion of young people; however, due to lack of structural support they are not able to operate in rural communities where infrastructures are less developed, funds are not available.

One of the aims of youth policy is to ensure young people enjoy the same opportunities, benefits, access to services and rights, regardless of where they live. While one of the most pressing issues for the sustainability of rural areas is the exodus of young people, the migration of young people from rural to urban areas is often an obvious choice, as they search for opportunities, and a better quality of life. This problem can present a dilemma for policy generally, and youth policy in particular, as the depopulation of rural areas further exacerbates the economic status of these communities, while at the same time increasing the strain in over-crowded urban spaces.

Challenges to Economic Participation

Rural youth face numerous economic challenges, particularly those from low-income families. These financial constraints often hinder their access to the internet, travel opportunities, participation in activities outside their communities, and even enrolment in educational systems. The obstacles to accessing these essential resources and opportunities exacerbate their social and economic exclusion.

Moreover, rural areas are disproportionately impacted by climate change, which further aggravates the difficulties faced by rural youth. Environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and job losses in key sectors such as agriculture are direct consequences of climate change. Since agriculture is the backbone of many rural economies, climate-induced phenomena such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather events significantly disrupt agricultural productivity. These disruptions lead to job losses and reduced incomes for rural families, who often rely heavily on farming for their livelihoods. As agricultural viability declines, many young people are forced to seek employment in urban areas, contributing to the depopulation of rural regions.

Climate-induced migration, driven by extreme weather and reduced agricultural opportunities, significantly impacts rural youth. As people leave for better prospects, local economies shrink, leading to fewer job opportunities and reduced economic activity for those who stay. This situation limits employment and entrepreneurial prospects for young people and worsens poverty, making it harder for them to access education and training. The economic strain on rural areas also hinders investments in climate resilience, further affecting the economic stability and opportunities available to rural youth. Economic instability, brought on by fluctuating agricultural yields and financial uncertainty, makes it increasingly difficult for rural youth to secure steady employment and financial independence.

Additionally, the lack of generational renewal in rural industries exacerbates the problem, as the departure of older workers without adequate replacements further hampers the ability of young people to engage in and sustain local agricultural and economic activities.

Adapting to climate change necessitates new skills and knowledge and rural youth often require training in sustainable agricultural practices, climate-resilient technologies, and alternative livelihood strategies. However, the availability of such training is scarce, further hampering their ability to respond to environmental changes and secure their futures.

Economic and social development in rural areas hinges on the ability of youth to find opportunities that match their skills and abilities, enabling them to transition into stable livelihoods. While agriculture has traditionally been the mainstay of rural economies, rural areas are undergoing transformations that challenge this long-standing tradition. Economic growth and development in rural areas are closely linked to urban areas, yet rural economies have unique characteristics that affect all economic opportunities, including those available to youth.

To develop effective youth employment strategies, it is crucial to diagnose the rural economy and identify employment opportunities. This requires a clear understanding of how economic transformation is occurring and where future opportunities may emerge. While increased educational enrolment has raised aspirations among rural youth, who now seek better paying and more secure jobs, the economies of many low-income countries remain centred on household farms and small firms that operate with limited external labour.

Successful interventions must acknowledge this reality and work to create more employment opportunities for rural youth that do not necessarily revolve around agriculture. Rural youth economic participation is often viewed primarily through the lens of farming, but rural areas also hold potential for other economic opportunities, such as rural entrepreneurship. Expanding the scope of economic activities in rural regions can help provide young people with diverse and sustainable livelihood options, enabling them to build a more secure future.

Challenges to Political Participation

The political participation of rural youth raises a critical question: How can it be meaningful when these young people are unable to address their fundamental social needs due to existing barriers and conditions? The limited engagement of rural youth in political activities is largely a consequence of their unmet social needs, leading to a perception that political participation is ineffective. Additionally, political institutions are often seen as self-serving entities primarily focused on furthering their own agendas, diminishing the motivation for young people to engage in the political process.

Young people in rural areas often do not perceive political participation as a viable means to effect social change, resulting in a noticeable lack of initiative and engagement in political activities.

Another challenge frequently highlighted by rural youth organisations is the lack of awareness among rural youth regarding the tools and mechanisms available for accessing public information about government activities and ensuring transparency. This includes both formal and non-formal means through which individuals have the opportunity to exercise their right to participate in decision-making processes.

This highlights that, on the one hand, there is a lack of information about available participation mechanisms in decision-making processes, on the other hand, existing mechanisms are inadequate for ensuring meaningful political engagement among rural youth. While digital participation could enhance their engagement and bridge the gap to available opportunities; however, barriers such as insufficient infrastructure (e.g., lack of internet connectivity) and limited capacity to use digital tools among the rural population also pose significant challenges to effective digital engagement.

The challenges faced by rural youth in their social, economic, and political participation primarily arise from two critical issues: inadequate representation and insufficient information about their daily lives and livelihoods. This lack of awareness among the broader population creates a significant gap, leading to misconceptions and a deficiency in targeted interventions by NGOs and authorities, which impedes effective problem-solving. Moreover, prevailing stereotypes that portray rural youth as uneducated and incapable further exacerbate the situation, reinforcing negative perceptions and discouraging them from transcending these limiting labels. Addressing these root causes is essential for fostering meaningful engagement and growth opportunities for rural youth, ultimately enabling them to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential.

IV. Policy Framework

The participation of young people at the local level is vital for revitalising local democracies, yet existing Council of Europe policy documents often overlook the specific needs of rural youth. The **Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2015)** emphasises the necessity of including youth perspectives in local policies but primarily focuses on social participation, neglecting economic and political engagement essential for rural youth development. This categorisation of rural youth into a single social group fails to address their diverse needs, particularly regarding intersectionality.

Similarly, **CM/Rec(2016)7** on young people's access to rights addresses social rights but lacks specific measures to tackle the unique challenges faced by rural youth, such as access to education, employment, and transportation. The **Enter! Recommendation (CM/Rec(2015)3)** recognises young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods but mainly targets urban areas, leaving many rural youth without support despite their experiences of social disadvantage.

CM/Rec(2016)5 on internet freedom vaguely calls for improved internet access for rural populations but does not detail necessary measures. For rural youth, who are significant consumers of digital services, policies should also include education on digital literacy and critical thinking to prevent misinformation and cyberbullying.

Other recommendations, such as **CM/Rec(2019)4** for young refugees and **CM/Rec(2011)14** on disability participation, similarly generalise the challenges faced by targeted groups, failing to account for the intensified difficulties in rural contexts. Similarly, the promotion of youth work, highlighted in **CM/Rec(2017)4**, lacks tailored strategies for rural areas, underscoring the need for strong infrastructure and resource mobilisation.

The **EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)** and the **Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030** advocate for a European Youth Work Agenda, emphasising sustainable structures and resources for quality youth work in rural areas. The **Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention** calls for national policies to incentivise local youth policymaking, highlighting the need for quality youth work development in rural communities.

While existing policy documents provide a foundation for addressing rural youth participation, they often fall short of recognising the unique challenges and intersectional needs of this group. There is a critical need for policies that encompass the diverse experiences of rural youth, addressing social, economic, and political participation comprehensively. These insights can inform this Recommendation to enhance the participation and empowerment of rural youth in decision-making processes. By synthesising the strengths of these existing frameworks and addressing their limitations, the new recommendation offers targeted measures to ensure the full participation and empowerment of rural youth in all aspects of life—social, economic, and political.

V. The Drafting Process

The CM/Recommendation on the Social, Economic, and Political Participation of Rural Youth was developed to address the unique challenges faced by rural youth across Council of Europe member States. The initiative began in 2020 when the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) formed an informal working group to consult stakeholders and gather data for a new recommendation.

The process started in 2020 when a working group within the CCJ was created, and then the working group was expanded to include members of the CDEJ. The key debate took place (online) on 8 February 2021. This debate, which included stakeholders such as the Youth Spokesperson of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, highlighted the need for multi-sectoral policy-making and encouraged the treatment of rural youth as equal partners, by ensuring their active participation in decision-making. Following this debate, the CMJ decided to conduct consultations at the meeting of 23-24 March 2021 (44th CMJ meeting).

A broad consultation was carried out, with an online questionnaire distributed through youth networks, resulting in **sixty-four responses from youth organisations** across the Council of Europe member States. Based on these findings, a report was presented at the 45th CMJ meeting in October 2021, leading to the decision to draft a CM recommendation.

A drafting group was formed in early 2022, comprising members from the CCJ, CDEJ, a rural youth organisation, and consultants/rapporteurs. Throughout 2023 and 2024, the group held five meetings to develop the recommendation, focusing on barriers to participation, structuring the recommendation, and proposing actionable measures based on youth participation, non-discrimination, and human rights principles.

The drafting group refined the recommendation, incorporating feedback from CMJ members and youth organisations. It has been decided to develop an Explanatory Memorandum to guide implementation, including examples of practices from member States.

Due to the efforts of various stakeholders and their effective engagement in the drafting process the **CM/Recommendation on the Social, Economic, and Political Participation of Rural Youth** is prepared to effectively empower rural youth as active citizens, ensuring their voices are heard and their participation in society is enhanced. Through this inclusive process, the Council of Europe commits to fostering rural youth engagement and inclusive policy making across its member States.

VI. Key Areas for Action (Measures)

Building upon the identified challenges and opportunities, the recommendation prioritises several key areas for action and proposes measures in five main domains:

- (1) Strengthening an enabling and accessible environment**
- (2) Promoting youth engagement and democratic participation for all**
- (3) Strengthening youth structures**
- (4) Ensuring access to quality education (formal and non-formal)**
- (5) Creating economic opportunities in rural areas**

To effectively engage rural youth in social, economic, and political life, the recommendation emphasises that member States should take decisive action across several key areas. These measures are designed to address the unique challenges faced by rural youth, ensuring they have access to meaningful opportunities and resources.

The standards referred to herein stem primarily from the Council of Europe youth sector's policy guidance. The aim of the current framework is to create an enabling environment where rural youth can fully exercise their human rights, become informed and active citizens, and act as agents of change. The measures are transversal and encompass the needs of the diverse groups within the rural youth cohort and ensure that policies cater to their unique needs and challenges.

The Recommendation outlines a comprehensive framework for member States to empower rural youth. By implementing these measures, member States can create a more inclusive and vibrant rural landscape, ensuring that young people have the opportunities and support they need to thrive in their communities.

To encourage member States to actively implement the measures outlined in the recommendation, a collection of practices has been assembled. These practices are presented in the Addendum to this explanatory memorandum and are meant to provide valuable examples of strategies and initiatives that can help foster rural youth participation.

• Strengthening an enabling and accessible environment

An enabling environment for rural youth is essential for fostering their full potential, ensuring they can contribute meaningfully to the social, economic, and environmental development of their communities. To ensure an equitable delivery of public services for rural youth, member States should strengthen infrastructure in rural areas. This includes improving data connectivity, internet access, reliable public transportation, and affordable living conditions through partnerships, such as public-private initiatives. Research from the European Investment Bank highlights the importance of targeted investments in rural infrastructure to enhance connectivity and service delivery, which are crucial for economic development and

providing a high quality of life for rural youth⁶. Such efforts would allow young people to continue living in rural areas while contributing to social, economic, and political life.

In addition to infrastructure, it is vital to design and implement programmes that provide rural youth with accessible healthcare services, including mobile hospitals and polyclinics. Improved access to medical practitioners and specialised doctors is essential for their overall well-being. Studies indicate that enhancing healthcare access can significantly improve the health and participation of rural youth in their communities⁷. Addressing mental health is equally important. Rural areas often have limited psychological services, and raising awareness through campaigns, counselling services, and support systems is key to ensuring rural youth's mental well-being⁸.

Ensuring a clean, healthy, and safe environment is also essential, especially in the context of climate change. Member States should focus on mitigation and adaptation strategies to safeguard rural areas from the effects of climate change, providing rural youth with a safe environment in which to live. Furthermore, promoting social cohesion is crucial to eliminating discrimination, radicalisation, and marginalisation. Tailor-made programmes that foster intergenerational exchange, intercultural and interreligious dialogue can help prevent violence and ensure the integration of young migrants, refugees, and newcomers.

Finally, co-operation and networking among rural youth, both nationally and internationally, should be encouraged through exchange activities and community-building initiatives. The recommendation also highlights the importance of ensuring that policies reflect the cultural diversity of rural communities. Supporting the preservation, transformation, and transmission of cultural heritage not only fosters social cohesion but also strengthens the sense of identity among rural youth. By valuing cultural diversity, member States can create an inclusive and supportive environment where young people from all backgrounds feel empowered and engaged. Member States should also ensure that climate change adaptation activities are integrated into these efforts, helping rural youth lead sustainable lives in their communities.

- **Promoting youth engagement and democratic participation for all**

Rural areas often exhibit a strong sense of community but also face significant challenges related to social exclusion, particularly for marginalised groups (e.g. ethnic minorities), women, low-educated individuals, and young people with disabilities etc. Youth engagement in democratic processes is vital for the sustainability and vitality of democratic societies. However, rural youth frequently encounter barriers to participation in political and civic life due to geographical isolation and limited opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes. To enhance the legitimacy and responsiveness of governance structures, member States should ensure that rural youth have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives. This active civic engagement empowers young people to contribute to community development and advocate for their rights and interests.

Meaningful participation of rural youth in decision-making processes is essential. Member States should achieve this by creating new platforms and spaces, including digital ones, and ensuring that existing platforms are well funded and supported by the public sector. When young people are actively involved in decision-making, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their communities⁹. To support this, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including participatory assessments, should be introduced, with adequate resources allocated for evidence-based policy development grounded in up-to-date data. This approach aligns with the principles outlined in the EU Youth Strategy, which emphasises the need for data-driven decision-making to enhance youth engagement¹⁰.

⁶ European Investment Bank. (2020). *Rural connectivity toolkit*.

https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/rural_connectivity_toolkit_en.pdf

⁷ A4AI (2022). *Meaningful Connectivity for Rural Communities: Geographic Barriers & Policy Strategies for Digital Inclusion*. Alliance for Affordable Internet, available at: https://webfoundation.org/docs/2022/04/MC_Rural-Report-English.pdf, last accessed 19 August 2024.

⁸ Șerban, A.M, Brazienne (2021). *Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled*. Council of Europe. EU-CoE Youth Partnership. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/106317733/Rural-youth-study.pdf/1fde9ee6-48ce-a2f7-2985-124b44ae46e7>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

⁹ Gobeli, V. C. (2021). *Extension rural youth programmes: Part of a comprehensive strategy for sustainable development*. <https://www.fao.org/4/w1765e/w1765e09.htm>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

¹⁰ European Youth Portal. (2020). *Engage: The EU Youth Strategy*. https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/engage_en last accessed 18 August 2024.

Furthermore, sufficient resources must be allocated to awareness raising schemes and platforms for sharing best practices related to participatory models. This includes fostering cooperation among public, private, and civil society sectors to enhance rural youth participation at all levels. The Council of Europe's co-management system serves as a valuable example of how collaborative approaches can empower youth. The Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy further underscores the importance of inclusive youth participation and collaboration in decision-making processes, aiming to enhance the quality of youth policies across member States¹¹.

Additionally, establishing a national interministerial working group (or any other type of formal or informal structure) on rural youth will facilitate research, mainstream youth perspectives, and monitor strategies across various sectors, ensuring targeted and comprehensive solutions to the unique challenges faced by rural youth. Fostering social and civic engagement among rural youth is also critical for promoting community development and active participation in public life, including electoral processes. By supporting initiatives aimed at developing a sense of belonging, member States can cultivate a generation of informed citizens who positively contribute to their communities¹².

Direct contact, continuous dialogue, and collaboration between authorities and rural youth organisations will provide insights into the challenges faced by young people, their needs, and aspirations, thereby sharing good practices in democratic life. While addressing the diverse needs of rural youth, it is crucial to recognise the unique challenges faced by different groups. For instance, rural young women and girls often struggle to access education and employment opportunities due to traditional gender roles deeply entrenched in rural communities. Therefore, focused efforts must be made to ensure that these groups are not left behind and to promote gender equality.

Investing in programmes that facilitate volunteering, community service, and leadership development will empower rural youth to contribute meaningfully to their communities, develop practical skills, and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. By creating cohesive and inclusive communities, member States can ensure that all rural youth, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to participate fully in social, economic, and political life. Strengthening social inclusion is essential for building resilient communities that can adapt to changing social and economic conditions, ultimately benefiting not just rural youth but society as a whole.

• Strengthening Youth Structures

Strengthening youth structures, including organisations, networks, and councils, is vital for representing the interests of young people, especially in rural areas where their voices are often marginalised. This recommendation emphasises the importance of capacity building, resource allocation, and support to enhance the effectiveness of these youth structures. By empowering them, member States can provide rural youth with the platforms they need to advocate for their rights, engage in policy discussions, and contribute to community development.

Research highlights that young people in rural areas face numerous challenges, including limited access to youth work services, community engagement opportunities, and personal growth¹³. The absence of dedicated spaces for youth activities can hinder their ability to develop skills and connect meaningfully with their communities. Establishing supportive structures and spaces, both physical and virtual, such as youth centres and online platforms, is essential for enhancing youth involvement in local and national level decision-making and fostering a sense of belonging¹⁴.

Member States should prioritise the establishment, maintenance, and continuous support of these spaces to ensure all rural youth can access necessary services. This includes fostering a supportive environment for community centres, clubs, and self-managed houses, enabling rural youth to participate actively in

¹¹ Council of Europe. "Youth Sector Strategy 2030." Adopted January 22, 2020. Accessed September 28, 2024.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/our-youth-strategy>.

¹² Friends of Europe. (2023). *Fostering youth engagement and democratic revitalisation while addressing inequalities*.

<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-fostering-youth-engagement-and-democratic-revitalisation-while-addressing-inequalities/>, last accessed 18 August 2024.

¹³ Șerban, A.M., Braziene, R. (2021) Ibid.

¹⁴ EYCA Youth Panel. (2024). *Rural Youth Report*. https://eyca.org/www_write/media/rural_youth_report.pdf, last accessed 18 August 2024.

decision-making processes. These hubs serve as crucial environments for social interaction, skill development, and community engagement, empowering young people to connect, collaborate, and thrive.

Sustainable long-term structural and financial support from authorities is essential for the creation and maintenance of rural youth organisations and informal groups. This includes providing adequate funding, expertise, and physical spaces that enable these organisations to effectively address local issues and foster community development¹⁵. To create a favourable environment for these entities, member States should develop targeted youth policy strategies and action plans, streamline funding procedures, and prioritise youth-led initiatives. Simplifying application processes will help empower organisations unfamiliar with funding opportunities and informing those organisations about the procedures and legal regulations, including financial ones related to the underage youth establishing and running a youth organisation will support rural youth to work independently within national legislation.

Promoting accessible and sustainable rural youth work is crucial, particularly through mobile and detached forms of youth work that can reach young people in remote areas. Existing youth centres should serve as focal points for delivering services and support, ensuring that rural youth have opportunities to engage with youth workers and participate in activities that enhance their skills and confidence. Additionally, providing funding and training to rural youth organisations is necessary for promoting education and training in human rights and democracy. Guidance on integrating a rights-based approach into youth work activities will empower rural youth to advocate for their rights, engage in civic life, and foster a culture of active participation and responsibility.

By strengthening youth structures, member States can ensure that rural youth not only have the resources and support they need but also play an active role in shaping their futures and contributing to the development of their communities. Ultimately, this commitment to empowering rural youth will contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society, in line with the objectives outlined in the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy¹⁶.

- **Ensuring access to quality education (formal and non-formal)**

Rural youth encounter significant challenges in accessing quality education, including inadequate infrastructure, transportation issues, financial barriers, and shortages of qualified educators. According to a study, educational opportunities in rural areas are often limited, leading to lower enrolment and completion rates for higher education compared to their urban counterparts. Research indicates that rural youth are less likely to have access to advanced educational programmes and resources, missing out on critical offerings such as advanced placement courses and career counselling services. The lack of transportation options further complicates their ability to attend schools or training programmes located in distant towns, significantly limiting their educational and employment prospects¹⁷.

Ensuring access to quality education, both formal and non-formal, is fundamental for empowering rural youth, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to actively participate in community development and the modern workforce. To ensure equitable access to quality education for rural youth, it is vital to implement a comprehensive set of measures that address the unique barriers faced by this demographic. The recommendation highlights measures aimed at fostering educational opportunities that empower rural youth to acquire essential knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and pursue higher education. Addressing inadequate infrastructure, transportation (including public transport services), financial barriers, and shortages of qualified educators is critical. These improvements can help create an environment where rural youth can thrive academically.

¹⁵ Gobeli, V. C. (2021). *Extension rural youth programmes: Part of a comprehensive strategy for sustainable development*. <https://www.fao.org/4/w1765e/w1765e09.htm>, last accessed 18 August 2024.

¹⁶ Council of Europe. "Youth Sector Strategy 2030." Adopted on 22 January 2020. Accessed on 28 September 2024. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/our-youth-strategy>.

¹⁷ Şerban, A.M., Braziene, R. (2021) Ibid.

This recommendation emphasises the need for targeted educational programmes that address the specific challenges faced by young people in rural areas, including the development of digital competences and entrepreneurial skills. It is crucial that member States ensure educational policies and programmes, as well as changes within educational systems (e.g., consolidation or closing of schools in rural areas), do not hinder young people in these areas from accessing quality education where they reside. Maintaining local educational institutions supports accessible learning opportunities and encourages community engagement.

Access to non-formal education and lifelong-learning opportunities is vital for fostering sustainable development, democratic citizenship, and self-realisation among rural youth. Member States should allocate resources to improve the access of rural youth to these opportunities, enabling them to obtain knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for active participation in community development. Bridging the digital divide in rural areas is essential for promoting digital literacy and e-learning initiatives. Therefore, member States should ensure equal access to technology and ICT training programmes, equipping rural youth with the necessary skills to succeed in a digital economy¹⁸¹⁹.

Moreover, tailored support structures are needed to facilitate the transitions of rural youth from school to extended education and qualified work. Providing professional orientation and career guidance, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can help rural youth navigate their educational and career pathways more successfully, ultimately leading to better employment outcomes. Consolidating educational programmes that encourage encounters and mobility among young people in rural areas is important for enriching their educational experience. Member States should promote national and international exchanges, civic education, and intercultural learning, fostering a sense of global citizenship and helping rural youth develop a broader perspective on their roles in society.

Finally, financial and non-financial support schemes, such as scholarships and mentorship programmes, are essential for incentivising and supporting students from rural areas in accessing higher education. These initiatives can help ease the financial burdens that often deter rural youth from pursuing further education²⁰. Additionally, establishing specialised vocational education and training (VET) programmes tailored to the emerging sectors and labour market shortages specific to rural areas is crucial for enhancing the employment prospects of rural youth. Culturally sensitive and inclusive educational policies that recognise and promote the cultural and linguistic diversity of rural youth are also essential. Integrating various knowledge systems and teaching methods creates an educational environment that respects and values the unique backgrounds of all students, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. The proposed measures are essential for ensuring that rural youth have equitable access to quality education and the opportunities necessary for personal and professional development. By addressing the barriers they face and implementing comprehensive educational strategies, rural youth can be empowered to actively participate in their communities and contribute to sustainable development.

- **Creating economic opportunities in rural areas**

Rural areas hold immense potential, and unlocking it requires a strategic focus on young people. By creating a thriving economic ecosystem in rural communities, member States can empower youth to become catalysts for positive change. Rural entrepreneurship can be a powerful tool for economic development in these areas, especially when supported by appropriate financial instruments, mentorship programmes, and market-relevant training. Such initiatives have been shown to increase youth employment, promote innovation, and strengthen local economies.

To guarantee fairly remunerated employment opportunities, member States should ensure decent working conditions for rural youth, including those with low or no education. This strategy promotes entrepreneurship and quality jobs, empowering young people to create their own opportunities while offering jobs at a larger scale. The recommendation encourages member States to provide rural youth with access to financial resources, mentorship, and business development services, thus fostering rural prosperity and an

¹⁸ OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

OECD (2020), *Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities*, OECD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d25cef80-en>, last accessed 18 August 2024.

²⁰ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2022), *Report on The future of youth in rural areas: responsibilities of local and regional authorities*. CG(2022)42-15. <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a5b14d>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

entrepreneurial mindset. Many international organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), emphasise the importance of creating conditions that enable youth entrepreneurship in rural areas²¹.

Member States should also provide financial incentives, such as grants or subsidies, to attract and retain young families in rural areas, ensuring economic stability and a supportive living environment. Connecting rural youth with economic opportunities and ensuring their transition from education to employment is vital. This can be achieved by providing upskilling and reskilling based on labour market needs through quality vocational training, internships, and apprenticeships in local, emerging, and traditional sectors, ensuring adequate training for educational providers. Simplifying regulatory frameworks and providing funding for rural youth to start businesses will further empower them to pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions.

To facilitate generational renewal in agriculture, member States should create favourable conditions that enable young farmers to access land, knowledge, finance, equipment, and essential resources through low-interest loans and technical assistance. Additionally, providing young farmers with adequate conditions for sustainable farming is essential. This includes addressing climate change and ensuring the transition toward environmentally friendly production, incentivising eco-friendly initiatives, and facilitating access to green technologies and practices. Ensuring social security coverage for young farmers will enhance their livelihoods and contribute to the overall sustainability of rural economies.

Finally, member States should encourage businesses, particularly those operating in rural areas, to actively support projects and activities for rural youth through Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. These initiatives should promote youth employment, mentorship, and economic engagement, creating a supportive ecosystem for rural youth to prosper.

²¹ ILO. (2019). *Decent Work for Rural Youth*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/decent-work-rural-youth>, last accessed 18 August 2024.

Glossary

Rural areas - areas outside urban clusters, mostly characterised by lower population density, specific socio-geographical and cultural image, vicinity to natural resources and therefore different economic prospects, while at the same time with identified needs for further improvement of specific services aiming at youth as well as the general population²².

Rural youth - Individuals between the ages of adolescence and young adulthood who reside in, have grown up in, or have moved into rural areas facing unique challenges and opportunities shaped by their geographic location and socio-economic context. The definition of the age range covered by the terms “young people” or “youth” should reflect the legal and constitutional framework of each member State, as defined in the member States’ legislation.

Young farmer - a person who is no more than 40 years of age, possesses appropriate training and/or skills, and is the head of an agricultural holding²³. The definition of the age range covered by the terms “young farmer” should reflect the legal and constitutional framework of each member State, as defined in the member States’ legislation.

Rural youth organisation - A structured group or association formed and led by and/or working with and for rural youth to address specific needs, interests, or concerns of the rural youth population.

Rural youth work - The practice of engaging with, educating, and supporting young people in rural areas through various forms of interventions (including mobile youth work, detached youth work), programmes, and initiatives aimed at their personal, social, cultural and professional development.

Mobile youth work - The aim of mobile youth work is to take youth work to geographical areas where there has been difficulty for young people to access it or where a targeted provision is required. Additionally, mobile youth work is of significant importance to young people who live in areas which are geographically remote, do not have appropriate facilities or where young people have particular needs which are not being met by more traditional provision²⁴.

Detached youth work - Is a model of youth work practice, targeted at vulnerable young people, which takes place where young people are, such as streets, cafes, parks and pubs at times that are appropriate to them and on their terms. It begins from where young people are in terms of their values, attitudes, issues and ambitions and is concerned with their personal and social development. It is characterised by purposeful interaction between youth workers and young people and utilises a range of youth and community work methods. In addition to building bridges to other services and support systems, detached youth work includes the organisation of the follow-up work²⁵.

Young family - A household unit typically consisting of one or both parents in the early stages of family life with one or more dependent children, or a couple without children. The age range defining a ‘young family’ varies among member States and should be referenced to national legislation of each member State.

Youth Services - Programmes, facilities, and resources provided by public administrations, the private sector and civil society to address the diverse needs of young people. The youth services also include educational and recreational leisure-time activities, and associated facilities, which are for the improvement of young people’s physical, emotional, and mental well-being, especially those which are free or subsidised and voluntary to access.

²² Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas (2020/C 193/03), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2020.193.01.0003.01.ENG&toc=OJ.C:2020:193:TOC, last accessed 19 August 2024.

²³ European Commission. (2021). *Young farmers - Agriculture and rural development*. https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/young-farmers_en, last accessed 19 August 2024.

²⁴ Youth Work Wales (2017). <https://www.youthworkwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HB-Mobile-Youth-Provision.pdf>, last accessed 19 August 2024.

²⁵ The Prince’s Trust 1998 & European Commission (2014) Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf, last accessed 19 August 2024.

Youth Structures - Organisational frameworks or systems (including digital ones) that facilitate youth participation, representation, and decision-making to amplify youth voices, promote inclusivity, foster leadership skills, and ensure that policies and programmes are responsive to the needs of young people. Youth structures include youth organisations, youth councils, youth centres (spaces), advisory boards, informal youth groups, peer support groups, student associations, and youth-led initiatives.

Essential Services - Basic services that are necessary for the well-being, livelihoods and development of young people, as well as for the functioning of society, including, but not limited to, healthcare, education, transportation, infrastructure, and public safety.

Cultural Heritage - A group of resources/assets (tangible and intangible) inherited from the past with which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time. The heritage of a community consists of specific aspects of cultural heritage valued by its members, within the framework of social action, to sustain, transform and transmit to future generations²⁶.

Upskilling - refers to the process of learning new skills or improving existing ones to enhance performance in a current job or role. It focuses on deepening expertise or gaining additional competencies that help individuals stay competitive and adapt to new technologies or methodologies within their field.

Reskilling- involves learning entirely new skills that enable an individual to transition into a different job or career. This process is often necessary when a job becomes obsolete or when someone seeks to change their career path. Reskilling prepares individuals to take on new roles by acquiring the skills required for a different line of work.

²⁶ Council of Europe, "Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society," 2005, accessed 28 September 2024, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention>.

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