

OCTOBER 2023 | WEGREEN PROJECT ARTICLES

REFLECTING ON PAST ACHIEVEMENTS: EMPOWERING EUROPE'S RURAL FUTURE WITH THE RURAL PACT

This article was written by Anastasia Costantini, Diesis Network



In recent years, the European Union (EU) has been dedicated to revitalising its rural areas and ensuring their long-term sustainability. This vision for the EU's rural regions, referred to as the Long-Term Vision for EU's Rural Areas (LTVRA), has gained significant political momentum. Various EU institutions and Member States have shown a growing interest in shaping the future of these regions. At the heart of this transformative initiative lies the Rural Pact, a framework for cooperation and collaboration. Since its launch in 2021, the LTVRA and the Rural Pact have evolved into central themes on the EU's political agenda. European institutions, including the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and the Committee of the Regions (CoR), have actively contributed to this initiative by developing opinions and aligning themselves with this vision. A key milestone was reached when the Council of the European Union acknowledged the importance of the EU rural vision in its conclusions on the 8th Cohesion Report in June 2022. Subsequently, in April 2023, the Council highlighted the rural vision in its conclusions on the bioeconomy, emphasising the continued commitment to this transformative agenda.

The Rural Pact: A Collaborative Framework

The Rural Pact served as a pivotal instrument in advancing the goals of the LTVRA. It fostered cooperation among authorities and stakeholders at various levels, including European, national, regional, and local. This collaborative approach encouraged interaction on rural issues among public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia, and citizens.

The Rural Pact, officially launched in December 2021, had been meticulously developed through the collective efforts of EU institutions, stakeholders, and members of the Rural Pact community. Its final proposal received endorsement at the 1st Rural Pact conference held on June 15-16, 2022.

Building on this momentum, the Rural Pact conference in Sweden, which took place on May 3-4, 2023, provided a valuable platform for knowledge-sharing and discussing strategies to support rural areas within the framework of the Pact.

The Road Behind and Ahead

The High-Level Rural Policy Forum, organised by the Spanish presidency of the Council of the European Union and the European Commission in collaboration with the Rural Pact Support Office, had been a bold initiative to accelerate progress towards the future of rural areas. This forum aimed to facilitate high-level policy exchanges between national authorities, which would contribute to the Council of the EU's conclusions on implementing the LTVRA. It also sought to foster a dialogue to explore enhanced multi-level governance frameworks and participatory structures to better incorporate the perspectives of rural actors and stakeholders in the design of rural policies. Additionally, the forum aimed to gather experiences on how EU policies and funds could best contribute to realising the rural vision, specifically in priority areas identified by the Spanish presidency.

The forum brought together 200 participants, primarily policymakers and public authorities from all 27 EU Member States involved in managing EU funds, including the standard agricultural and cohesion policies. Additionally, it involved the participation of EU networks, regional and local authorities, stakeholder groups, civil society organisations, and academic institutions working on relevant policy areas.

Insights from WE GREEN's Project Participation

Among the notable developments during the forum was the active participation of the WE GREEN project. WE GREEN presented its valuable contribution to the thematic session, "Boosting women's role in rural areas." The project, part of the Erasmus+ KA2 initiative (2022-2024), focused on promoting social green entrepreneurship among rural women through localised training programs. This initiative aimed to bridge the gap in green and entrepreneurial skills among rural women.

WE GREEN recognised the untapped potential of rural women as entrepreneurs and emphasised the need for tailored programs, peer learning approaches, and sharing experiences. It stressed the importance of empowering rural women with innovative skills to create fresh ideas for products and services, ultimately contributing to the development and sustainability of rural communities.

The European Union's commitment to shaping the future of its rural areas is evident. Through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and high-level policy discussions, European institutions, Member States, and stakeholders are working together to achieve a more vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive future for European rural communities. Several initiatives have been launched towards realising the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, including projects like WE GREEN, which empowers rural women and promotes green social entrepreneurship. These efforts are bringing us closer to achieving our goals.

