

Rural funding: Keep it simple, but make it better

Europe's rural regions vary within and between Member States. It is important to be aware of these differences and to ensure that rural programmes and measures take into account the differences at EU and Member State level. In its own-initiative opinion *From Cork 2.0 declaration to concrete action*, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) calls for more targeted funding, based on the priorities of Member States, regions and citizens' initiatives, to help rural areas develop.

Only rural proofing which is mandatory will ensure effective policies

Rural development is a horizontal issue and it is not sufficient for it to be mainly shouldered by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) only. Rural development practically affects all policy areas. The EESC therefore calls for a more cohesive policy as well as to increase the shares of the other ESI funds – in particular of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) – allocated to rural development. These are necessary steps in order to reduce existing disparities and territorial imbalances.

The EESC believes that rural proofing (a tool for identifying the impact of policy decisions on rural areas) must be mandatory. *“Rural proofing which results only in reports and findings is meaningless; it must deliver a true and accurate basis for people who are taking the rural policy decisions including the distribution of funding”*, said **Brendan Burns**, President of the EESC NAT section.

In its opinion, the EESC emphasises that **simplification** at all levels – EU, national, regional – is a matter of urgency. *“If the EU doesn't ease the regulatory burden, fewer and fewer farmers will be willing to safeguard and promote its unique landscape and this will be much more costly than targeted subsidies. The victims will be European citizens in both the cities and rural areas,”* stressed rapporteur **Sofia Björnsson**.

The EESC backs the Cork 2.0 Declaration as it offers strong support for a rural policy at EU level.

Boosting innovation and digitisation helps to create jobs in rural districts

Sustainable agriculture and rural development need innovative solutions. There is high potential for climate-smart solutions and a more circular and bio-based economy. Generating solar, wind, hydro and bio-energy would not only help the climate, but would also be a sustainable income source for people in rural areas. *“Implementing innovations and applying new technologies, however, often require extensive investment and high risk. To ease that risk either public funding could be used or a group of farmers could invest together”*, said Ms Björnsson, who believes that innovation

strategies and funding need to be based on identified needs. In the EESC's view, the European Innovation Partnerships (e.g. the EIP-Agri) can be useful because of their bottom-up approach.

If young people are to remain in rural areas and businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive, quality broadband coverage is essential, both for safety and quality of life. *"Broadband is a must for businesses and entrepreneurs, and modern farming is more and more dependent on a well-functioning internet"*, said Ms Björnsson. Where market forces are not enough, EU funding should be used in order to help broadband reach remote communities.

Farmland and forests make up 85% of the EU's land area and provide Europeans with food, animal feed, energy and fibre as well as with public assets such as rich flora and fauna. This diverse landscape can also help generate economic activities other than agriculture, particularly in the tourism and recreation industry.

Agriculture is also the main driver in the transition to sustainable food systems. Promoting local consumption not only benefits local economies and agricultural production, but shortens the supply chain and thus helps our environment.

Last, but not least, rural areas are key players in implementing the international commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate agreement (COP 21).