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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Special Committee on Agriculture/Council

Subject: Conclusions on a Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (LTVRA)
- *Approval*

Following the confirmation by delegations of non-objection to the annexed text of Council conclusions on the above subject, in the framework of a “silent consultation” with deadline 9 November 2023, the SCA/Council are invited to approve these Conclusions without any change during their meetings on 14 and 20 November 2023 respectively.

On the occasion of the public debate during the Council meeting on 20 November 2023, Member States are invited to further highlight their priorities and to point out their concerns on the future development of the EU's rural areas.

The Council of the European Union,

RECALLING Articles 39 and 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and that working towards vibrant, multifunctional and prosperous rural areas constitutes an important element of overarching EU strategies and a common objective of a range of EU policies and policy instruments;

NOTING

- Commission communication (COM(2021)0345) of 20 June 2021 entitled ‘A long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas: Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040’;
- The European Parliament’s resolution of 13 December 2022 (2021/2254(INI)) and the Opinions of the European Committee of the Regions (2022/C 270/04) and European Economic and Social Committee (2022/C 290/22) on the Long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas;
- The report of the Rural Pact Conference held in Brussels in June 2022 and the launch of the Rural Pact Coordination Group;
- The lessons learned from the Rural Pact Conference in Uppsala (Sweden) on 3-4 May 2023; and
- The outcomes and recommendations of the high-level rural policy forum on shaping the future of rural areas, organized by the Spanish Presidency and the European Commission in Sigüenza, Spain on 27-29 September 2023;

HIGHLIGHTING

- that rural areas are essential contributors to the overall prosperity and economic strength of the EU and to the green and digital transitions, assuming a pivotal role in matters such as food production, environmental preservation, climate action and the fostering of our cultural heritage; that agriculture plays a fundamental role in this respect and is key for the economic, social and territorial cohesion of rural areas; and that many rural areas in the EU face unique challenges, including population decline and aging, a gender gap, poverty, limited connectivity, underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of diverse employment opportunities and gaps in the availability of and access to services;

has adopted the following Conclusions:

I. A VISION FOR RURAL AREAS TOWARDS 2040

The Council

1. WELCOMES the European Commission's Communication on A Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, also known as rural vision, the holistic approach and structure around four complementary areas of action for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, the related EU Rural Action Plan, and the launching and development of the Rural Pact;
2. INVITES, in this respect, the Commission, Member States and regional authorities to address the diverse and multifaceted territorial development challenges and complexity of rural areas and the socio-economic gaps between rural and other areas and calls upon policy makers at all levels of governance to pay specific attention to rural areas to improve the living conditions and promote housing and access to basic services of rural inhabitants;
3. HIGHLIGHTS, in particular, the diverse nature and specific needs of all rural areas, in particular outermost regions, coastal communities and sparsely populated areas as well as areas that are remote or suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as mountains, islands and northernmost regions with very low population density;

4. STRESSES that balanced and integrated territorial development, anchored in place-based approaches, echoes the recently adopted new Territorial Agenda 2030 of the EU, and that it is necessary to make the most of the potential of rural areas to foster their economic diversification through new industrial, digital and service sectors, creating quality jobs and more adequate, diverse and flexible employment opportunities; taking also under consideration the particular needs of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises;
5. RECOGNISES the important role of cooperatives as contributors to the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of rural areas, providing work opportunities, and keeping rural areas alive and populated;
6. EMPHASISES, in this respect, the importance of investments in a range of sectors, including agriculture, and of achieving structural changes on the ground to keep rural areas populated and viable, promote smart development and to make the most of the green and digital transitions, inter alia by addressing the prevailing depopulation of rural areas, demographic decline and ageing, providing training and other supporting measures for reskilling and upskilling people, especially with regards to digital skills and rural development;
7. WELCOMES, in this connection, the Commission Communication on harnessing talents in Europe's regions, and ENCOURAGES European, national, regional and local authorities to address the low availability of public services, mobility, and infrastructure and to seize whatever opportunities exist in rural areas, developing, for example, integrated and community-led local development (CLLD) strategies and by improving access to financial and technical support and capacity-building at local level;
8. UNDERLINES, once again, the important role of Local Action Groups within the LEADER initiative and the bottom-up approach when implementing their CLLD strategies;
9. STRESSES that, while strong involvement of citizens and organizations from rural areas is paramount for developing local strategies, active public participation at all levels of governance is also essential to develop capacity-building measures, tailor-made, place-based and integrated policy solutions, including multiple sources of financing and public investments;

10. EMPHASISES that more cooperation is needed between rural and urban areas in the just transition to a climate-neutral, sustainable, and prosperous EU, based on a fair and mutually beneficial rural-urban relationship and integrated development and investment strategies; RECOGNISES the “anchoring” and “catchment” roles small and medium sized cities play to achieve a more balanced territorial development and to help for the surrounding rural areas;
11. UNDERLINES the need to ensure a just and inclusive transition within rural territories, promoting rural economic vitality and territorial and social cohesion, and leaving no one and no place behind;

II. THE EU RURAL ACTION PLAN AND THE RURAL PACT

12. WELCOMES the rolling out of the EU Rural Action Plan to achieve the goals of the Long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas by 2040;
13. INVITES the Commission to continue monitoring systematically the implementation of the EU Rural Action Plan, ensuring its regular update and the continuous and effective mobilisation of all relevant EU policies;
14. SUPPORTS the implementation by the Commission of the concept of rural proofing by assessing the anticipated impact of major EU initiatives on rural areas and encourages similar approaches at national, regional, and local levels with the aim to ensure coherence, consistency and complementarity between policies and instruments covering issues of importance for rural areas;
15. STRESSES the need to enhance the coherence and synergies between EU policies and instruments, including the CAP and the cohesion policy, and to build bridges between public authorities to tackle economic, social, and territorial cohesion in rural areas and address depopulation and brain-drain related trends; the principle of coherence should also refer to administrative- and implementation-related elements when pursuing common objectives with different supporting instruments;

16. UNDERLINES the importance of expanding the EU Rural observatory, and the need to improve data collection and the quality of rural statistics, inter alia with municipal-level and, sex-disaggregated data and other types of functional areas, to inform the design and development of evidence-based and relevant rural policies and actions and improve the effective implementation of territorial impact assessments without increasing significantly the administrative burden and costs;
17. WELCOMES, the rural revitalisation platform, and looks forward to the completion by the Commission of the toolkit on EU Funding opportunities for rural areas;
18. STRESSES the particular importance of generational renewal in rural areas and in the agrifood sector and INVITES Member States to actively support young rural citizens, inter alia by facilitating their access to funding and land, providing, diverse and flexible employment and training and educational opportunities and involving them in policy design and in local decision-making processes;
19. HIGHLIGHTS the need to reinforce public investments and provide EU and national funds that contribute to connectivity in rural areas; and the digital transition, necessary for them to have access to new opportunities that need stable, very high-capacity network, and accessible broadband coverage;
20. WELCOMES the EU Rural Action Plan flagship “Rural Digital Futures” and notes the need to encourage digital innovation, data infrastructure and the acquisition of digital skills to boost the competencies needed for the digital transformation of rural areas;
21. RECOGNISES that women represent a significant driving force for prosperity and social inclusion in rural areas, however they are facing additional challenges and in need of supporting measures to better integrate into the labour market, utilize existing and creating new opportunities for employment and innovation, and participate in decision making; and WELCOMES, in this respect, the inclusion of gender equality as one element of one specific objective of the new CAP, promoting the equal participation of women in farming and the socio-economic development of rural areas;

22. HIGHLIGHTS the essential role of the agricultural, food, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, and other bioeconomy sectors in the rural economy, creating employment, bringing innovation and enhanced and diversified incomes for local population as well as being a source of sustainable and renewable raw material; and CONSIDERS that it is a priority to further build agricultural, forestry and rural resilience to face demographic, economic, climate and environmental challenges; EMPHASISES the adaptive capacities of rural areas strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change;
23. WELCOMES, in this respect, actions aiming at improving land use planning, sustainable and resilient farming while enhancing food security, biodiversity, water availability, soil health, renewable energy production, local value chains and quality agrifood products;
24. EMPHASISES the importance of implementing the Long-term Vision for rural areas in close cooperation with rural citizens, encouraging increased attention to place-based development and innovation through smart villages, community-led local development, regional development, and boosting territorial approaches and local-led initiatives to create new economic opportunities and innovative ecosystems and enhance basic services and infrastructures in rural areas;
25. INVITES all national and regional administrations, local authorities and all stakeholders and communities to engage and commit within the framework of the Rural Pact and to actively contribute to the goals set up under the Rural Vision Communication and the objectives of the Rural Pact;
26. STRESSES, in this respect, that networking under the Rural Pact and the CAP networks and other relevant cohesion-related networks can play a pivotal role in disseminating and sharing information and results on the rural vision among rural stakeholders;
27. ENCOURAGES the Member States, who have not yet done so, to engage in the Rural Pact and design holistic strategies and action plans at national, regional and local level to address the challenges faced by rural areas and enhance the opportunities they offer;

III. THE WAYS FORWARD

28. NOTES that the future EU, national, regional and local funding for rural areas should duly reflect the pivotal role rural areas are playing to meet the economic, environmental and social challenges the EU and its Member States are facing, including the ones created by the current geopolitical situation;
29. RECOGNISES that the current geopolitical context requires increased resilience and competitiveness of EU rural areas, ensuring food security at EU and global level in the framework of the Open Strategic Autonomy of the European Union food systems and reducing external dependencies in key areas where the EU needs to build a sufficient level of capacity to guarantee its economic and social welfare, such as sustainable agriculture, as stated in the Granada declaration;
30. WELCOMES the Commission's stocktaking exercise of actions carried out or planned in support schemes for rural areas financed by the EU and Member States in the 2021-2027 programming period under the CAP and Cohesion Policy Funds;
31. UNDERLINES that, besides Cohesion Policy, the Common Agricultural Policy and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, all relevant EU policies should, enhancing their coherence and synergies, be involved and contribute appropriate resources to support rural areas;
32. INVITES the Commission to set up a monitoring instrument to assess EU funding supporting rural areas by all relevant EU policies and instruments; SUPPORTS the establishment, at the beginning of each programming period, of a procedure to ensure complementarity, coherence and synergies between them without increasing administrative burden and costs;

33. STRESSES the importance of adapting existing and future policies and procedures to the diverse realities and needs of rural communities of small size and CALLS on the European Commission, Member States, and regional and local authorities to simplify the procedures and requirements for beneficiaries with limited administrative capacity, to facilitate investment by optimally drawing from different EU and national resources and the use of financial instruments;
34. CALLS on the Commission, when preparing the forthcoming public report in the first quarter of 2024 to consider thoroughly the views of the co-legislators, including the present Council conclusions and the non-legislative resolution of 13 December 2022 of the European Parliament and DRAWS ATTENTION to the fact that the discussions around this report are to feed the reflection on the preparation of the proposals for the next programming period;
35. INVITES the Commission to provide in this report an update of the rolling EU Rural Action Plan and a set of reflections on possible orientations for enhanced support action and financing for rural areas, and on the way forward; to lay out options to ensure further synergy, consistency, coherence and complementarity between the policies impacting on or benefiting rural areas and communities, and enhancing governance at all levels; and considerations for more targeted monitoring of the Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas as well as evaluation mechanisms embedded in updates of the EU Rural Action Plan and in the Rural Pact, without increasing administrative burdens and costs;
36. INVITES the Commission to consider, as a result of a future review of this rural vision, turning this concept into a EU rural strategy, with a comprehensive and flexible approach to address different challenges and diversity in EU rural areas while maximizing their potential and opportunities through a set of appropriate and relevant indicators, taking into account the principles of better regulation and simplification;
37. INVITES the Commission to report to the Council periodically on its actions in relation to these conclusions.