

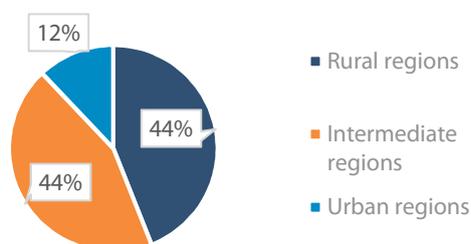
Urban-rural divide: Blame it all on my roots...

From the remote Scottish islands to the Danube Delta in Romania, via the Alps, rural Europe shows sharply contrasting landscapes and climates as well as manifest economic and demographic differences. Rural reality in Europe is complex: statistics highlight general trends, showing not only that many rural areas suffer from a number of socio-economic issues, but also that they have many assets, not least dynamic stakeholders and local communities, and the potential to help address critical societal challenges. Dedicated EU policies and tools provide rural players with support as they strive to achieve balanced territorial development and harness the full potential of rural territories.

Overview of rural Europe

Highly diversified European rural areas

EU territory by type of region



Rural regions cover nearly [half](#) of EU territory, and are home to [28 %](#) of the EU population, or 143 million people. In some countries, such as Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Portugal and Austria, rural regions represent around 80 % or more of the national territory. Some Member States are highly urbanised, with a very low share of their populations living in rural areas (for example the Netherlands, the UK, Spain or Belgium), whereas in [Ireland](#), Slovenia and Romania, more than half of the population is located in rural regions. In addition to the amazing diversity of Europe's landscapes, rural areas can also differ widely from an economic and demographic point of

view. Well-connected rural areas, close to urban centres, tend to attract population and serve as residential areas, while peripheral and remote areas may suffer from poverty and depopulation owing to the lack of services and infrastructure.

Agriculture

While agriculture and forestry have always been associated with rural areas, their share in rural economies has declined. The primary sector accounts for [13.9 %](#) of all employment in rural areas, with stark differences between Member States (ranging from 3.3 % in Belgium to 40.5 % in Romania). Nevertheless, agriculture plays an essential role as a platform for economic diversification and a driver for rural development.

Strengths and weaknesses of European rural areas

The vital role of rural areas

Rural areas are essential for the EU, first of all as the place where farmers produce food for the more than 500 million EU citizens, securing food security in Europe. They also contain most of the EU's water resources and are home to forests covering nearly [half](#) of the EU's land area and supplying multiple environmental, social and economic benefits to society. Rural areas are important centres of renewable energy production: solar, geothermic, wind and biomass energy. Moreover, their natural and cultural assets are the source of economic activities such as rural tourism. Many rural areas also provide lower housing and living costs, a less stressful lifestyle and less polluted environment, and close proximity to nature, which makes them attractive as places to live and work.

Challenges

Many rural areas face a number of socio-economic difficulties, the most important of which are:

- unfavourable demographics: an exodus of inhabitants, especially those of working age, leading to an ageing population in rural areas (the EU rural population is projected to fall by [7.9 million](#) by 2050);

- more limited access to education: in rural areas, primary and secondary schools are often [less accessible](#) in terms of cost and the time needed for daily commuting. The quality of education also tends to be lower in rural areas due to a lack of ICT equipment, other facilities for vocational training and the lower qualification level of staff. The share of the rural population that has completed tertiary education is much lower than that of urban dwellers;
- a weaker labour market: rural areas offer fewer job opportunities than urban areas, within a narrower range of activities. The number of [NEETs](#) (young people not in education, employment or training) has increased significantly in rural areas and is higher than in cities;
- more limited access to basic services: health services, child care facilities, postal and banking services, public transport, etc.;
- the digital divide: many rural areas of the EU are still lagging behind in terms of broadband coverage; [88 %](#) of households in cities have access to internet, as opposed to 80 % in rural areas. Only [40 %](#) of rural households have next generation access (fibre-based high-speed broadband) compared with 76 % of total EU households.

Most of these factors can be considered as drivers of poverty: in Europe today, the risk of poverty or social exclusion is slightly [higher](#) (25.5 %) in rural areas than in cities, (24 %), with the lowest risk for people in towns and suburbs (22.1 %). These [figures](#) mask very contrasting situations across Europe. In Romania and Bulgaria, for example, the proportion of the population at risk of poverty is more than 20 percentage points higher in rural areas than in cities, while in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark or the UK, the urban population is more exposed to the poverty risk.

Rural or urban? Nowadays the traditional distinction between rural and urban areas is somewhat blurred on account in particular of the rapid expansion of peri-urban areas, where the space around city centres merges into rural landscapes (the urban fringe). This creates complex rural-urban linkages. A truly integrated, cooperation-based approach to development (as opposed to separate rural and urban policies) can be more efficient in rising to common challenges such as energy and climate change, demographic change and access to public services. Specific European tools support an integrated rural-urban approach, in particular [community-led local development](#), whereby local actors work in partnership to implement their own strategies, and [integrated territorial investments](#), which make it possible to pool funding from several EU funds to implement territorial development strategies.

EU action in rural areas

The EU's rural development policy

[Rural development policy](#) is one of the main tools for EU action in rural areas. It has three overarching objectives: fostering agricultural competitiveness; ensuring sustainable management of natural resources and climate action; and achieving balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities. Part of the common agricultural policy, it has been endowed with close to €100 billion (9 % of the total EU budget) for the 2014-2020 period. These funds, complemented by national funding, are invested at local level to implement rural development actions (e.g. setting up small businesses, village renewal, and basic services). The policy encourages rural actors' involvement through a participatory approach called [LEADER](#).

Towards a more integrated approach

This policy is part of a broader EU investment strategy for all EU rural or urban territories, covering many areas: job creation, digital single market, energy union and climate, internal market, etc. It is supported by [five EU structural and investment \(ESI\) funds](#) jointly managed by the EU and Member States. Part of this support is targeted to rural areas. For example, in the case of **broadband roll-out** in rural areas, which is essential to maintain strong rural communities, several ESI funds can be used to co-finance development projects. Moreover, to overcome the rural/urban digital divide and develop the potential presented by connectivity and digitisation of rural areas, an [EU action for Smart Villages](#) was launched in 2017. It aims at enhancing quality of life, growth and jobs, public services and better use of resources in rural areas using digital technologies and innovation. Its implementation relies on an integrated strategic approach linking various EU policies and tools and bringing together policy-makers, rural stakeholders and project promoters.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

