



2020/2039(INI)

7.12.2020

OPINION

of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

for the Committee on Regional Development

on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy
instruments
(2020/2039(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion: Mazaly Aguilar

PA_NonLeg

SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development calls on the Committee on Regional Development, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

- having regard to the report adopted by the Commission on 17 June 2020 on the impact of demographic change in Europe,
- having regard its resolution of 14 November 2017 on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by regions to address demographic change¹,
- A. whereas Europe's regions currently face far-reaching demographic changes, such as a low birth rate, a high mortality rate, an ageing population and an ongoing rural exodus;
- B. whereas rural and disadvantaged regions are often unable to acquire the same economic indicators for a given time period as other regions, which in some cases appears to pose problems when it comes to applying for support;
- C. whereas agricultural workers in rural areas, particularly those living in remote areas, suffer demographic disadvantages and are at a much higher risk of poverty and social exclusion;
- D. whereas rural areas suffering depopulation may experience land abandonment and increased risk of forest fires, and may face difficulties in their economic recovery²;
- E. whereas, in addition to already-established issues and trends, in the light of the pandemic, policies and instruments addressing demographic problems that focus primarily on low birth rates and the rural exodus must be reviewed, especially in the more sparsely populated and vulnerable areas of the Union; whereas policies that encourage higher birth rates must be encouraged in Europe;
- F. whereas issues relating to demographic changes and depopulation are putting a heavy burden on rural, peripheral and sparsely populated areas and islands, and is having a negative impact on ageing, generational renewal and agriculture development;
- G. whereas cohesion policy makes a key contribution to delivering digital single market objectives on the ground, in particular through significant financial allocations from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);
- H. whereas rural areas make up 44 % of the Union's surface area;
- I. whereas one of the main issues affecting rural economies is the declining share of agriculture; whereas data has shown that only 10.7 % of EU farmers are aged 40 years or under and that the farming population is ageing, which will have an impact on the agricultural sector;

¹ Text adopted, P8_TA(2017)0427.

² Forest fires — Sparking fire smart policies in the EU, European Commission (2018).

- J. whereas the needs of rural areas in the face of demographic change must be met in a more coordinated and effective manner;
1. Notes the gravity of the demographic problem and its link to the socio-economic reality; considers it necessary to create new opportunities and forward-looking investments in rural areas, for example through the development of short supply chains and regional food markets;
 2. Emphasises that inequalities in access to land, common agricultural policy (CAP) direct payments and support, both between and within the Member States, are among the issues that need to be addressed in order to halt regional decline, allow older people to retire from agriculture and encourage young people to start farming;
 3. Expects the deployment of new cohesion social programs such as basic-income pilot projects in rural areas;
 4. Draws attention to the importance of ensuring the availability of services in the regions, as their decline is encouraging older people to retire earlier and to move to cities where these services are easily accessible;
 5. Stresses that the ongoing depopulation of rural areas, which leads to difficulties in accessing public services and in providing adequate health coverage, is not only having serious economic and social consequences, since it represents enormous challenges in achieving the ambitious objectives outlined in the European Green Deal and other EU policies such as CAP and cohesion policy; insists that investments covered by the European Green Deal should take demographic factors into account;
 6. Urges the Commission, in developing the political guidelines for the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, to take practical steps to maintain the rural population in coordination with the Member States, and the regional and local authorities contributing to securing existing jobs and to creating new jobs, and to make it more attractive for skilled workers, especially in structurally weaker regions, in particular through the revaluation of agricultural activities in our regions;
 7. Calls on the Commission to harness both strategies to improve the way in which the agriculture sector and rural areas are perceived, while bearing in mind that a lack of knowledge about agriculture is responsible for a number of misconceptions regarding the work done by farmers and the contribution they make to the environment;
 8. Urges the Commission to develop local economies that would create job opportunities;
 9. Calls for the administrative burden on businesses and administrations to be reduced, with fewer requirements and greater legal certainty, which would therefore improve the framework conditions for successful funding on the ground and reduce barriers to investment;
 10. Recognises the great potential of the circular economy and bioeconomy in achieving a more efficient agri-food sector; calls for regulatory provisions that take into account the specific needs of agriculture to generate new opportunities in rural areas by supporting young people, cutting down on bureaucracy and promoting digitisation and

entrepreneurship;

11. Underlines the fundamental role of the CAP in maintaining and creating employment in the rural and agricultural sector, but recognises its limitations; urges, therefore, that cohesion policy resources and the new Union recovery fund be harnessed more effectively to meet the needs of rural areas, by consolidating efforts in this area and seeking new forms of cooperation;
12. Calls the Commission to ensure that priority is given to creating opportunities for the labour market, supporting energy transition and developing transport and broadband infrastructure in order to address structural challenges that are the main causes for migration from rural areas;
13. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the future publication setting out its long-term vision for rural areas includes a detailed analysis of the role of agriculture, livestock farming and forestry as mainstays of the rural economy;
14. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that the positive impact and successful results of cohesion policy in the EU be better communicated and publicised;
15. Underlines the potential of sustainable agriculture in terms of creating decent and long-term jobs in rural areas;
16. Stresses the need to foster and develop projects to promote the return of young people to rural areas by supporting youth employment, digital connectivity and entrepreneurship using best practices from the Member States;
17. Recognises that the policies most effectively addressing demographic challenges are those seeking long-term objectives and resulting from consultation with local stakeholders and civil society organisations;
18. Points out that, notwithstanding the Commission's repeated statements, we still lack a long-term strategy to enable rural areas to face demographic challenges, the threat of poverty and limited access to services;
19. Urges the Commission to factor in demographic considerations as an integral part of all cohesion policy instruments; stresses the importance of coordinating any Union initiatives with strategies adopted by the Member States in response to demographic challenge;
20. Considers that the new CAP strategies should be flexible and include instruments specifically designed to support digitisation, rural mobility and the development of smart towns;
21. Points out that cohesion policy must focus more decisively on innovation in rural areas; stresses that CAP resources must be deployed as part of a concerted effort to help family farms benefit from innovation and new technologies;
22. Stresses that measures to ensure the economic profitability of agriculture are essential to the success of demographic policies designed to inject fresh life into rural communities

and to make them attractive for younger generations;

23. Calls for more ambitious measures at political level to promote generational replacement in this sector through substantial changes regarding conditions of access to land and credit; seeks comprehensive Union support for young farmers through the adoption of policies over and above a CAP that has to address more objectives with less funding;
24. Considers that, in order to encourage the more effective integration of young farmers and newcomers to agricultural activity, it is imperative to facilitate the transfer of holdings by cutting down on bureaucracy and to ensure decent terms for farmers taking retirement;
25. Recognises the key role of women in agriculture; calls for measures to be taken in rural areas to make it easier for women of all generations to remain in their immediate environment, and to and thus contribute to the revival and further development of these areas;
26. Supports initiatives to improve the quality of rural employment through diversification and innovation; observes that this objective should be given priority under the numerous strategies under the European Green Deal and action plans and pursued in a coordinated manner with the Member States;
27. Supports innovation and digitisation with a view to promoting a vibrant, dynamic and economically viable rural environment; calls on the Commission to draw on the smart cities and towns initiatives to develop a new instrument to support undertakings and start-ups in continental and outermost rural areas, thereby also boosting their economic and productive fabric, in order to pave the way for a digital economy in rural areas;
28. Calls on the Commission to support the financing of renewable resources as part of the European Green Deal and the EU's bioeconomy action plan, which can generate jobs and can help with the economic renewal of many rural areas; calls on the Member States to consider introducing computer-skills training modules for regions where these skills are not at a satisfactory level; emphasises that the local action groups have made a significant contribution to strengthening interactions between rural economic sectors and have made a significant contribution to the implementation of rural development policies;
29. Recalls that the outermost regions must also benefit from a major public health plan in order to ensure that every citizen in these regions, particularly in rural areas, has access to drinking water;
30. Highlights the central role played by Community-led Local Development initiatives in keeping and restoring living and thriving local rural economies, and the need to keep a sufficient level of funding for the Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (LEADER) approach; calls on the Member states to make full use of LEADER's capacities;
31. Calls on the relevant authorities at national, regional and local level to consider introducing educational modules as part of compulsory education aimed at forging

and/or strengthening the link between students in urban areas on the one hand and activities and ways of life in non-urbanised areas on the other, so as to increase knowledge of, and the link between, future generations and rural areas;

32. Stresses that investment in this area should become a priority for EAFRD;
33. Stresses that promoting mobility and networking opportunities, as well as supporting innovative measures by small and medium-sized enterprises and skilled crafts and trades, are seen as key success factors for rural areas;
34. Notes that an effective mobility system is one of the prerequisites for regional economic development, territorial cohesion and the development of regional potential; stresses that it is therefore necessary to provide the necessary funding for the development and maintenance of transport links, which could encourage older generations to stay in rural areas for longer and attract young people from urban centres to work in the countryside;
35. Deplores the fact that, once again, the agreement on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) is not ambitious enough to meet the challenges of demographic involution; criticises the cuts made to the EU's two main instruments designed to promote sustainable development in rural areas on the continent and in the outermost regions (i.e. cohesion policy and the CAP); deplores the fact that the agreement on the MFF is not ambitious enough to meet the challenges of demographic change;
36. Expresses its regret over the fact that the outermost regions are the first to be affected by cuts in funding for programmes such as the programme of options specifically relating to remoteness and insularity;
37. Expresses its regret over the fact that the outermost regions suffer from their insularity, geographical remoteness and lack of perspective for their young people, whereas Article 349 TFEU should enable them to address this issue;
38. Calls for a major plan to facilitate transfers for all undertakings in order to allow young people to gain access to employment, allow for economic activity to be resumed, and allow for the provision of an adequate pension for departing workers; notes that such measures would render the rural economy more attractive, starting with agriculture, and would benefit the outermost regions and rural areas in Europe.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

Date adopted	1.12.2020
Result of final vote	+: 38 -: 7 0: 0
Members present for the final vote	Mazaly Aguilar, Clara Aguilera, Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, Álvaro Amaro, Attila Ara-Kovács, Carmen Avram, Adrian-Dragoş Benea, Benoît Biteau, Mara Bizzotto, Daniel Buda, Isabel Carvalhais, Asger Christensen, Angelo Ciocca, Ivan David, Paolo De Castro, Jérémy Decerle, Salvatore De Meo, Herbert Dorfmann, Luke Ming Flanagan, Cristian Ghinea, Dino Giarrusso, Francisco Guerreiro, Martin Häusling, Martin Hlaváček, Krzysztof Jurgiel, Jarosław Kalinowski, Elsi Katainen, Gilles Lebreton, Norbert Lins, Chris MacManus, Marlene Mortler, Ulrike Müller, Juozas Olekas, Pina Picierno, Maxette Pirbakas, Bronis Ropé, Anne Sander, Petri Sarvamaa, Simone Schmiedtbauer, Annie Schreijer-Pierik, Veronika Vrecionová, Sarah Wiener, Juan Ignacio Zoido Álvarez
Substitutes present for the final vote	Petros Kokkalis, Ruža Tomašić

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

38	+
EPP	Álvaro Amaro, Daniel Buda, Salvatore De Meo, Herbert Dorfmann, Jarosław Kalinowski, Norbert Lins, Marlene Mortler, Anne Sander, Petri Sarvamaa, Simone Schmiedtbauer, Annie Schreijer-Pierik, Juan Ignacio Zoido Álvarez
S&D	Clara Aguilera, Attila Ara-Kovács, Carmen Avram, Adrian-Dragoş Benea, Isabel Carvalhais, Paolo De Castro, Juozas Olekas, Pina Picierno
RENEW	Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, Asger Christensen, Jérémy Decerle, Cristian Ghinea, Martin Hlaváček, Elsi Katainen, Ulrike Müller
ID	Mara Bizzotto, Angelo Ciocca, Ivan David, Gilles Lebreton, Maxette Pirbakas
ECR	Mazaly Aguilar, Krzysztof Jurgiel, Ruža Tomašić, Veronika Vrecionová
EUL/NGL	Chris MacManus
NI	Dino Giarrusso
7	-
Greens/EFA	Benoît Biteau, Francisco Guerreiro, Martin Häusling, Bronis Ropé, Sarah Wiener
EUL/NGL	Luke Ming Flanagan, Petros Kokkalis
0	0

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention