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## TEXTS ADOPTED

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### **P9\_TA(2022)0436**

#### **A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas**

**European Parliament resolution of 13 December 2022 on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (2021/2254(INI))**

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 June 2021 entitled ‘A long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040’ (COM(2021)0345),
- having regard to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals,
- having regard to the Paris Agreement reached at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change,
- having regard to Articles 39 and 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027<sup>1</sup>,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 June 2021 establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999 (‘European Climate Law’)<sup>2</sup>,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> OJ L 433, 22.12.2020, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> OJ L 243, 9.7.2021, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> OJ L 435, 6.12.2021, p. 1.

- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/2116 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 on the financing, management and monitoring of the common agricultural policy and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013<sup>1</sup>,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy<sup>2</sup>,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing the Digital Europe Programme<sup>3</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 27 October 2016 on how the CAP can improve job creation in rural areas<sup>4</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 4 April 2017 on women and their roles in rural areas<sup>5</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 November 2017 on an Action Plan for nature, people and the economy<sup>6</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 30 May 2018 on the future of food and farming<sup>7</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 3 October 2018 on addressing the specific needs of rural, mountainous and remote areas<sup>8</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 8 March 2022 on the role of cohesion policy in promoting innovative and smart transformation and regional ICT connectivity<sup>9</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 8 October 2020 on the European Forest Strategy – The Way Forward<sup>10</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 20 October 2021 on a farm to fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system<sup>11</sup>,
- having regard to its resolution of 9 June 2021 on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Bringing nature back into our lives<sup>12</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> OJ L 435, 6.12.2021, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> OJ L 166, 11.5.2021, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 215, 19.6.2018, p. 228.

<sup>5</sup> OJ C 298, 23.8.2018, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> OJ C 356, 4.10.2018, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> OJ C 76, 9.3.2020, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> OJ C 11, 13.1.2020, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> OJ C 395, 29.9.2021, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> OJ C 184, 5.5.2022, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> OJ C 67, 8.2.2022, p. 25.

- having regard to the Commission communication of 11 December 2019 on the European Green Deal (COM(2019)0640),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 20 May 2020 entitled ‘A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system’ (COM(2020)0381),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 20 May 2020 entitled ‘EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives’ (COM(2020)0380),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 12 November 2021 entitled ‘Contingency plan for ensuring food supply and food security in times of crisis’ (COM(2021)0689),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 16 July 2021 entitled ‘New EU Forest Strategy for 2030’ (COM(2021)0572),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 4 February 2022 on the 8th Cohesion Report: Cohesion in Europe towards 2050 (COM(2022)0034),
- having regard to the Commission report of 17 June 2020 on the impact of demographic change (COM(2020)0241),
- having regard to the Commission green paper of 27 January 2021 on ageing – fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations (COM(2021)0050),
- having regard to the Cork 2.0 Declaration entitled ‘A Better Life in Rural Areas’, adopted by the parties to the European Conference on Rural Development held in Cork in September 2016,
- having regard to the Bled Declaration for a smarter future of the rural areas in the EU, signed in Bled, Slovenia, on 13 April 2018,
- having regard to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, adopted by the Human Rights Council on 28 September 2018,
- having regard to its resolution of 3 May 2022 on an EU action plan for organic agriculture<sup>1</sup>,
- having regard to general recommendation No. 34 (2016) of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the rights of rural women, adopted on 7 March 2016,
- having regard to Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights,
- having regard to the study requested by Parliament’s Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development entitled ‘The future of the European Farming Model: Socio-economic and territorial implications of the decline in the number of farms and farmers

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<sup>1</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2022)0136.

in the EU', published by Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies in April 2022,

- having regard to the Commission communication of 25 March 2021 on an action plan for the development of organic production (COM(2021)0141),
  - having regard to its resolution of 24 March 2022 on the need for an urgent EU action plan to ensure food security inside and outside the EU in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>,
  - having regard to the Commission staff working document of 8 April 2021 entitled 'Evaluation of the impact of the CAP on generational renewal, local development and jobs in rural areas' (SWD(2021)0078),
  - having regard to the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions of 26 January 2022 entitled 'A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas'<sup>2</sup>,
  - having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of 23 March 2022 entitled 'A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas'<sup>3</sup>,
  - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the opinions of the Committee on Regional Development and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A9-0269/2022),
- A. whereas rural areas represent around 83 % of the total EU territory and are home to around 137 million people (30 % of the EU population); whereas the EU's rural areas are of great importance as places for food production, forests and energy production, in particular renewable energy, as well as for delivering on the European Green Deal, climate neutrality and the Sustainable Development Goals; whereas rural areas, in particular remote and less developed rural regions, mountainous areas, islands and outermost regions face specific long-term unresolved challenges and a lack of recognition of their unique potential for development and innovation;
- B. whereas the overall share of population in rural areas has been decreasing slightly at EU level over the past decade, and significantly over the past 50 years, due to ageing and outmigration (urbanisation); whereas the share of people aged over 65 years is generally the highest in rural areas, and is expected to increase in the future; whereas populations are likely to shrink in four out of five rural regions of the EU by 2050, with remote rural areas set to lose further inhabitants;
- C. whereas Article 174 TFEU states that the Union must aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions, paying particular attention to

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 361, 20.9.2022, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 270, 13.7.2022, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 290, 29.7.2022, p. 137.

certain regions, notably rural areas; whereas, in order to achieve sustainable development, rural territories must receive adequate financial support;

- D. whereas the average employment rate in the EU's rural areas evolved favourably from 2012 to 2020, although with differences between Member States and with variations in the quality of employment on offer; whereas the share of population that is at risk of poverty or social exclusion is higher in rural areas than in cities and towns;
- E. whereas the working conditions of a considerable proportion of workers employed in the EU agricultural sector are extremely challenging and precarious, characterised by poor wages, long working hours, undeclared work, high incidence of accidents and illness and deplorable housing conditions;
- F. whereas access to water services, sanitation, road connectivity, healthcare, education, broadband internet and other basic services is essential for the development of rural areas; whereas households in some rural areas still do not have access to essential basic services, notably water and sanitation services, while differences persist between the Member States<sup>1</sup>; whereas transport infrastructure and connections have been identified by citizens as the key needs in rural areas;
- G. whereas ultra-high-speed broadband connections are available to only one in six rural residents; whereas there is a substantial gap between rural and urban areas concerning basic digital skills, with 28 % of adults living in rural areas possessing basic or above basic digital skills, compared to 62 % of adults living in cities (2019); whereas significant differences among the Member States regarding internet connectivity still persist, while in some Member States up to 25 % of rural households still do not have access to the internet<sup>2</sup>;
- H. whereas gender equality is a fundamental value of the EU, recognised in the Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights; whereas significant gender inequalities persist in rural areas, with women suffering from higher rates of unemployment, precarious contracts and informal working conditions, as well as being under-represented in decision-making bodies such as agricultural cooperatives, trade unions and municipal governments;
- I. whereas the number of farms in the EU-27 declined by 32 % between 2003 and 2016, with the decline strongest among small farms below five hectares(38 %); whereas in 2016, there were 10,5 million farms in the EU, of which the majority (92 %) were family farms; whereas by 2040, the EU might lose an additional 6,4 million farms, resulting in a remaining number of approximately 3,9 million farms across the EU, an extraordinary 62 % decrease compared to 2016;
- J. whereas in 2016, for every farmer younger than 35 years of age, there were more than six farmers over 65 years of age<sup>3</sup>, making the ageing of the EU's farmers one of the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=SDG\\_6\\_-\\_Clean\\_water\\_and\\_sanitation#Sanitation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=SDG_6_-_Clean_water_and_sanitation#Sanitation)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC\\_CI\\_IN\\_H\\_custom\\_2784346/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_CI_IN_H_custom_2784346/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> CAP specific objectives explained - Structural change and generational renewal, [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/cap-briefs-7-structural-change\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/cap-briefs-7-structural-change_en_0.pdf)

greatest challenges rural areas are facing; whereas the share of young female farmers is especially low;

- K. whereas EU livestock farms employ around 4 million people and are the main beneficiary of common agricultural policy (CAP) second pillar aid to farms in disadvantaged areas, which account for 50 % of the utilised agricultural area in the EU;
- L. whereas the thematic groups of the European Network for Rural Development have proven to be an effective tool for public-private territorial partnerships; whereas these groups have succeeded, moreover, in providing a single forum in which to address issues related to territorial revitalisation, innovation, bottom-up and integrated approaches in agriculture and rural development, decentralised management, networking integration and cooperation;
- M. whereas one of the objectives for the CAP for the current programming period is to promote employment, growth, gender equality including the participation of women in farming, social inclusion and local development in rural areas;
- N. whereas concerns have been raised about the negative effects of mining activities on water, protected areas and the environment, and the ecological damage it can cause to the surroundings and to other sources of livelihood, potentially affecting people's incomes, health and quality of life<sup>1</sup>;

### ***Challenges and opportunities for stronger, resilient and inclusive rural areas***

1. Highlights the historical, geographical, economic and social diversity of rural areas across the EU; recalls that rural areas close to urban centres, coastal areas, cross-border areas or mountainous areas, in outermost regions and in sparsely populated areas face different challenges requiring tailored-made targeted solutions, to be implemented in cooperation with local stakeholders;
2. Stresses that policies and actions at EU level combined with national, regional and local ones with a place-based approach, are key to securing the prosperity and well-being of rural European citizens, as well as to tackling the challenges they face, namely population decline and ageing, higher risk of poverty and social exclusion and fewer quality job opportunities; recalls that rural areas have a per capita GDP significantly below the EU average;
3. Highlights further that rural areas lack access to high-quality services of general interest such as water services, sanitation, road connectivity, healthcare, childcare and quality education and training, and that they are poorly connected, with limited transport options and a lack of high-speed broadband, as well as of other basic services such as postal and banking services, in addition to the insufficient quality and availability of housing, climate and environmental pressures, the gender equality gap and limited opportunities for innovation and access to technological developments; points out that remoteness adds a significant element of difficulty in rural areas;
4. Highlights that demographic decline and ageing will affect all regions but most particularly rural areas due to population shift towards urban areas and youth

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/729156/IPOL\\_STU\(2022\)729156\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/729156/IPOL_STU(2022)729156_EN.pdf)

outmigration, which will negatively influence their growth potential, quality of life, skills development and access to services; notes that public policies have not been able to reverse the trend of depopulation in rural areas;

5. Highlights the central role rural areas can play in addressing social, economic and environmental challenges, by providing ecosystem services to mitigate climate change and environmental deterioration, ensuring sustainable, sufficient food production, including organic food, preserving tangible and intangible rural heritage, fostering nature conservation and biodiversity, and providing unique cultural landscapes for leisure and recreation purposes, as well as developing the circular economy and contributing to a just, green and digital transition;
6. Stresses in this regard the synergies between rural communities, environmental protection, food security and animal welfare awareness; stresses the need to adequately support farmers and compensate them for the provision of public goods and ecosystem services, contributing to the economic viability of rural areas;
7. Draws attention to the growing discontent among rural populations who feel their needs are insufficiently considered in political decision-making and who feel underrepresented, which creates fertile ground for civic and political disengagement, which in turn needs to be addressed and which could lead to the development of various forms of democratic disenfranchisement; insists that an increasingly stark rural-urban divide, geographical remoteness and a lack of basic services are combining to increase this discontentment; believes that the involvement of young people in local community life can contribute to slowing down the migration of young people from rural areas;
8. Takes note of the fact that EU citizens still have strong confidence in regional and local governments, as shown by Eurobarometer surveys, and stresses the importance of engagement from these levels of government in reviving support for the European project in rural areas;
9. Stresses that rural areas are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change, but are also capable of offering new opportunities and solutions in response to such crises and of playing a key role in ensuring food security, food self-sufficiency and independence from fossil fuels or energy imports, given the adequate support framework;
10. Highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in new behaviours in living, working and interacting, including teleworking, which generates new opportunities with many positive externalities for the regeneration for rural areas; notes that citizens have understood that rural areas can offer solutions to this crisis;

#### ***A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas***

11. Welcomes the Commission's communication on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas; agrees with its general aims and considers it a most valuable opportunity for coordinated and reinforced action on the present and future of rural areas, addressing new possibilities for social, economic and environmental renewal; stresses the importance of ensuring that EU funds and policies complement one another to support rural areas and that information is accessible to local stakeholders;

12. Emphasises that the development of rural areas must remain high on the EU agenda and calls on the forthcoming Presidencies of the Council of the European Union to fully pursue this ambition and express in their conclusions the need to act for rural territories;
13. Takes note of the proposal for a rural action plan, which should evolve into a dynamic tool for future action, with concrete results, supporting integrated strategies for sustainable development in accordance with the partnership principle; calls on the Commission and the Member States to give the highest priority to its implementation, setting clear quantitative binding targets for delivery, to ensure that it is accompanied by the necessary resources for effective implementation and to attain the goal of stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040;
14. Agrees on the need for a common, EU-wide, definition of functional rural areas, incorporating the distinction between rural and peri-urban areas and recognising the complexity, diversity and specificities of these areas;
15. Urges the Commission, in collaboration with national, regional and local stakeholders to quickly develop and operationalise such a definition; considers that this definition could be used to compare the evolution of European rural areas and inform the more targeted implementation of policies and measures in those territories; invites the Commission to develop a common methodology while including sufficient flexibility to cater for Member States' specific characteristics and needs;
16. Supports the development of a Rural Pact, stressing the importance of the inclusive involvement of local, regional and national stakeholders in its governance, including civil society, for the successful outcome of the initiative;
17. Considers that the Rural Pact needs concrete objectives, deliverables, multilevel governance and monitoring systems, along with clear institutional responsibilities; believes that the Rural Pact should serve as a platform to share good practices between rural areas and support them in employing the available tools, contributing to synergies, complementarity and coherence of EU interventions and facilitating the strategic autonomy of the EU;
18. Welcomes the announcement of a Rural Observatory to improve data collection and analysis on rural areas; considers it a valid instrument for informing, designing and monitoring better public policies, as well as for monitoring progress on the implementation of the long-term vision and future EU policies and rural strategies, including the EU rural action plan;
19. Considers that the rural observatory should be an opportunity to identify data gaps and improve databases, especially regarding gender-disaggregated data, to promote a more granular statistical approach and to develop indicators at an adequate geographical level to capture the population's needs; stresses the need for sufficient funding and resources, transparency and a clear roadmap with time frames and objectives;
20. Stresses the importance of implementing a rural proofing mechanism for EU initiatives so as to assess the coherence and complementarity of EU policies and their potential impact on rural areas; urges the Member States to promote the development and implementation of effective mechanisms for rural proofing at national level, assessing the impacts of proposed legislation in rural areas to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and



calls on the Commission to assist them to this end; considers that the rural proofing mechanism should be mandatory and underlines the importance of involving local and regional authorities in the definition and implementation of rural proofing mechanisms, as well as in their governance at both European and national levels;

### *A path for the future of rural areas for 2040*

21. Insists that rural citizens must benefit, like any other citizen, from equitable conditions for achieving their professional, social and personal goals, with a particular focus on more vulnerable groups, and insists that the European Pillar of Social Rights be applied;
22. Stresses that rural communities must have equal access to services of general interest in order to ensure inclusive and equitable conditions of living and well-being, notably healthcare services, education, training for up- and reskilling and lifelong learning, social care, child and elderly care, connectivity and mobility, and housing, as well as postal and banking services, social meeting places and cultural activities and infrastructure;
23. Highlights in this regard the importance of public investment and public partnerships, as well as of improving cross-border and rural-urban cooperation; points out the potential of decentralised and multifunctional service centres and of tailored repurposed renovated buildings, as well as of innovative approaches for service provision;
24. Considers that special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups living in rural areas, such as people with disabilities, older people and migrants, notably seasonal workers, ensuring that their specific needs are being addressed while promoting social inclusion; calls on the Commission to further harmonise practices between Member States in terms of inclusion of people with disabilities;
25. Stresses that targeted interventions supporting young people and fostering effective generational renewal should be a priority, in order to encourage the permanent presence of young people in rural areas and counteract the demographic decline; stresses that particular attention should be paid to overcoming the main challenges and remove existing barriers, such as access to higher education and the transfer of knowledge, employment opportunities, the acquisition of business skills and access to land and capital; stresses the need for high-quality agricultural education systems for the training of young professionals; highlights in this regard the important role of young farmers in modernising EU agriculture and in creating more opportunities in rural areas; stresses the need to support their successful integration, notably by facilitating the buying and leasing of farmland, noting in this regard the potential of farm incubators;
26. Calls on the Commission and Member States to develop and strengthen measures, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, to improve the rights, working conditions, safety, health and social protection of workers in rural areas, including the living and working conditions of seasonal and migrant workers, while ensuring coherence between policy areas affecting this issue;
27. Underlines that the European Green Deal, including the farm to fork strategy and the digital transformation, can open up new opportunities in rural areas, a new dynamic for a more resilient future and possibilities for sustainable jobs; points out the need to ensure a just and inclusive transition, promoting rural economic vitality and territorial

and social cohesion, and to provide adequate support and resources to face the challenges in this regard, in particular in face of the current crisis;

28. Underlines the central role agriculture, the agri-food sector and sustainable forestry play in rural areas, in providing jobs and in ensuring high-quality, diverse food and sustainably produced biomass; insists that social, environmental and economically sustainable agriculture, including agroecology and organic farming, providing fair income to farmers, is crucial for the vitality of these territories;
29. Draws attention to the important role of small and medium-sized farms and family farms in maintaining rural populations and preserving land management and landscapes, and argues that they should benefit from support to ensure adequate living conditions and to mitigate the decline in farm numbers; highlights that farmers in remote and rural areas, particularly small farmers, still do not have sufficient access to technologies;
30. Recognises the importance of supporting cooperation initiatives in agriculture and the social economy as a tool for rural development; draws attention to the role of agri-food cooperatives in the environmental, economic and social sustainability of rural areas, adding value to products, creating employment and diversifying the local economy; urges the Commission and the Member States to encourage and promote cooperatives in rural areas;
31. Stresses the importance of promoting the EU quality schemes, notably geographical indications, as a means to improve the quality and fair distribution of economic value within food chains and, ultimately, to maintain rural populations in the EU's territory;
32. Stresses that unfair trading practices are still a serious problem in the agricultural sector and highlights the fact that further steps are needed to ensure better distribution of value along the chain; recalls the potential of short supply chains for bringing consumers and producers closer together, providing better remuneration for farmers and reducing greenhouse gases in the food production cycle; stresses that the impact in rural areas of free trade agreements should be taken into account;
33. Notes that a fair distribution of direct payments is needed in order to ensure the balanced development of regions and rural areas; underlines the importance of CAP payments for areas with natural constraints in preserving sustainable activities in those areas; calls on the Member States to nurture strong territorial CAP rural development networks for the coordination of all rural development stakeholders;
34. Points out that extensive permanent grassland-based, silvo-pastoral or extensive livestock breeding, often involving pastures of high environmental value and endangered farmed species and breeds, especially in remote mountainous areas, are key features of European rural areas, which must be supported and encouraged;
35. Points out the importance of access to tailored-made investments, research and innovation for sustainable agriculture; takes note of the success of the European Innovation Partnership on agricultural productivity and sustainability and calls for the continuation and expansion of this innovative and bottom-up approach to delivering tailored solutions designed by local stakeholders, as well as of other multi-actor-based rural innovation partnerships and innovation hubs; considers that innovation should be

compatible with traditional practices and knowledge, especially those adapted to the characteristics of each area;

36. Recalls that large carnivores, especially wolves, can have an impact on the viability of farming, particularly in some kinds of extensive managed farmland rich in biodiversity; notes that this highlights the need to ensure balanced coexistence between humans and these animals in rural areas; calls on the Commission and the Member States, in this regard, to take concrete action to ensuring this coexistence, so as not to compromise the sustainable development and dynamism of rural areas, and in particular to safeguard traditional agricultural practices such as pastoralism; recalls the responsibility of the Commission to assess progress in achieving conservation status and, where appropriate, to amend the protection status of species, if the desired conservation status is reached; urges the Commission to encourage a discussion on large carnivores with rural actors, to provide information on financing possibilities for preventive measures against attacks on livestock and to promote coordinated approaches across Member States;
37. Stresses that diversification of and innovation in the rural economy, with a more territorial approach based on local potential and characteristics, are crucial to drawing opportunities from the digital and green transitions; calls on the Member States to put in place measures to support the fair transition and diversification of the rural economy as well as to support quality job creation in rural areas; emphasises the potential of bio-districts, eco-regions, carbon farming and eco-tourism for rural economy diversification; recalls that sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishery can also offer opportunities for business diversification in rural areas;
38. Recognises that tourism can represent an important source of income for rural communities, highlighting the potential of diversified models of sustainable tourism; points out the often underexploited potential of recreational fisheries and angling tourism to attract tourists throughout the year; calls for efforts to strengthen the place of rural tourism, such as wine tourism, in strategies for diversifying the rural economy, hand in hand with the agricultural and food sectors;
39. Recognises the importance in social, economic, cultural and biodiversity conservation terms of sustainable game management for the future of rural areas;
40. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to take urgent action to design and implement measures to fight gender gaps, notably on pay and pensions; stresses that gender mainstreaming should be applied at every level of policymaking, ensuring the implementation of the EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025, notably in rural areas;
41. Regrets that the work of rural women is still not properly recognised, notably in agriculture; points out that women in rural areas are more affected by hidden unemployment and participation in the informal economy, which contributes to the more frequent outmigration of young women; stresses the need for targeted measures to overcome their specific challenges in the labour market and to improve their access to adequate services, including broad healthcare, with a special focus on the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups; reiterates the importance of a positive work-life balance, welcoming in this regard the forthcoming European care strategy;
42. Insists on the need to improve the participation of women in decision-making and political participation in rural areas; calls on the Member States to promote gender

equality and foster equal participation in all rural organisations, associations and public institutions, in decision-making positions, business ownership and access to quality jobs; stresses the need for targeted training and skills development, as well as for an enabling environment, facilitated access to financial resources and the promotion of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas;

43. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to promote the inclusion of women in farming, in particular by exploring the possibility of supporting co-ownership of European farms; asks for the work of women in farming activities, especially the work of assisting spouses and partners in agriculture, to be fully recognised through the granting of legal recognition and full access to social security rights; underlines the role of women in rural areas in moving towards sustainable agriculture and in the green transition;
44. Highlights the central role of rural areas in the transition to a carbon-neutral and circular economy, including a sustainable bio-economy and forestry; calls on the Commission and the Member States to enable the uptake of initiatives by local actors, such as the creation of rural energy communities, contributing to local acceptance of renewables;
45. Stresses that initiatives in rural areas, such as the development of renewable energy infrastructure, must contribute effectively to the economic, social and environmental vitality of these areas and take into account the need for local social acceptance; insists that the objectives of food production and the protection of high environmental value areas, such as Natura 2000 areas, should be a priority;
46. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to further support rural areas in expanding sustainable renewable energy production, including by removing existing barriers, decentralising production and storage systems, reinforcing energy grids and training qualified professionals, as well as to promote the use of renewables as a means to contribute to energy autonomy, income diversification, and the fight against energy poverty and climate change; notes the importance of increasing farm circularity;
47. Notes the importance of microgeneration on farms; stresses that farmers must not be disadvantaged when supplying electricity into the grid as a result of the use of public grants, including the CAP;
48. Highlights that rural areas suffer higher risks of social exclusion and energy poverty owing to longer distances to be covered and mobility constraints in many rural areas; highlights furthermore that these risks are related to both infrastructures and services; points out that accessible, public, green and innovative rural mobility solutions and investments are needed to achieve equitable growth and territorial cohesion, in harmony with a sustainable energy transition;
49. Calls for inclusive infrastructure planning that leaves no region behind, namely by reinforcing public investment and by swiftly implementing the EU and national funds that contribute to connectivity in rural areas, supporting and developing integrated and intermodal transportation systems and prioritising isolated and disconnected areas in the trans-European transport network;
50. Stresses that the digital transition raises new opportunities for rural areas, which are only accessible if there is adequate, stable, high-speed and accessible broadband

coverage, which is not completed in all rural areas; highlights that digital development increases the attractiveness of rural areas, reduces problems related to remoteness, improves access to services and facilitates digitalisation in agriculture; calls for the creation of locally-based high-speed ‘digital hubs’ tailored for remote working;

51. Warns of the risks of the widening of the rural digital gap as a result of the lack of 5G coverage, and calls on the Member States to mobilise all available instruments to improve the full roll-out of 5G networks and remove administrative barriers, with the particular support of EU cohesion policy funds and Member States’ Recovery and Resilience Facility plans, but also of private investments; stresses the need for a timely revision of the relevant State aid guidelines for rural areas not served by the market;
52. Draws attention to the fact that the comparative lack of digital skills in rural areas can preclude rural communities from benefiting from the opportunities of digitalisation and hamper the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);
53. Calls for measures at the EU, national, regional and local levels that ensure digital inclusion, especially in a context of population ageing, and promote adapted digital skills while supporting an enabling environment for innovation and the development of tailor-made digital solutions; points out the potential of digital tools for sustainable agriculture and smart farming, for local, short supply chain development and for increasing the attractiveness of the agricultural sector to young farmers;
54. Believes that smart villages should be considered as a flagship project of the EU rural action plan, to better promote its development post-2020; underlines the importance of balanced public-private partnerships in this context; points out the potential of smart city technologies, which should be adequately funded, and believes that the Smart Cities Marketplace<sup>1</sup> digital platform could serve as a model for further development of the smart villages ecosystem; stresses that the LEADER rural economy and development method and community-led local development (CLLD) funding tools should also be used for further development of smart villages;
55. Notes that rural communities are still faced with challenges related to access to basic services and economic opportunities, and encounter some degree of incoherence with regard to planning related to the rural-urban divide; stresses that investments in environmental protection, rural infrastructure and rural health and education are critical to sustainable rural development; calls on the Commission and the Member States to establish minimum welfare criteria that should be ensured in relation to the populations of certain areas;

### ***First steps for defining a vision and strategy for rural areas***

56. Regrets the late publication of the Commission’s communication, which has precluded its full integration into the legislative instruments and planning of the current programming framework; calls on the Commission to ensure that the integrated and Community-led rural territorial dimension is properly addressed by all Member States and to assess its implementation and impact in the common agricultural policy strategic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://smart-cities-marketplace.ec.europa.eu/>

plans, the cohesion policy programmes, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund programmes and the Recovery and Resilience Plans;

57. Urges Member States to address the specific challenges of rural territories and their communities during the implementation of the current multiannual financial framework programmes, providing and facilitating access to the investments needed for social inclusion, economic and environmental performance and job creation, in order to foster competitiveness, enable a just digital and green transition, and increase the attractiveness of and quality of life in rural areas; calls on the Commission to monitor the indicators in the EU programmes and evaluate their alignment with the objectives of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas;
58. Welcomes the REPowerEU plan which can play a key role in reducing dependence on fossil fuels, in particular of Russian origin, and highlights the possible numerous opportunities for rural areas in this regard, but is strongly concerned with the proposals to increase significantly the possibility to transfer resources from shared management funds, with potentially detrimental implications for medium- and long-term policy planning towards a fair green and digital transition, including for rural areas;
59. Calls on the Member States to make effective use of the various funding opportunities with a view also to improving the prospects of SMEs, given their major role in generating employment in rural areas, and calls on the Commission to monitor and assess whether its support reaches rural areas and benefits their communities; stresses the importance of supporting entrepreneurship, social economy and social innovation, including the silver economy, especially when contributing to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights;
60. Calls on the Member States to make better use of all available tools to support rural areas, including tax incentives for individuals and businesses looking to settle in rural areas, aimed at facilitating job creation and incentivising the establishment of new residents, as well as to encourage private companies to promote remote working, aiming at actively combating depopulation; invites the Commission to consider other support possibilities in the framework of State aid in rural areas with very low population density;
61. Regrets the persistent obstacles to the multi-fund approach, despite its value, which hamper the deployment of integrative approaches in rural areas, and asks for clear guidelines for its implementation; calls on the Commission to put forward a legislative proposal in early 2023 extending the possibility of the 'lead fund' approach to interventions co-financed by more than one shared management fund, as well as to further simplifying it by specifying that the rules of the lead fund must apply in their entirety; invites the Commission, in parallel, to explore alternatives to multi-fund approaches for integrated territorial development;
62. Calls on the Commission to improve synergies and coordination between EU funding instruments such as cohesion policy, the CAP and the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument, as well as with national instruments, for successful rural development in the EU; urges the Commission to put forward in early 2023 with a targeted legislative proposal for enabling the transfer of resources between all shared management funds when supporting rural territorial strategies and enhancing synergies between funds and programmes;

63. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to pursue further simplification and reduce administrative burdens, namely by coordinating their internal administrations to avoid duplication of tasks, in particular for smaller projects and microfinancing, which are key for rural areas; notes that some rural areas are not able to benefit from the funding opportunities available owing to a lack of information and capacity issues, and require support to rectify this; considers the application of simplified cost options to be an effective measure to achieve administrative simplification;
64. Stresses the role that all EU policies and funds, both shared and those under direct management, must play in supporting rural areas, by incorporating a rural dimension in the design of their measures and interventions, and underlines the need for policy coherence; calls on the Commission to develop a mechanism to assess and monitor the contribution each fund makes to rural areas;
65. Asks the Commission to pay particular attention to the implementation of Article 174 TFEU and ensure that all EU policies apply the ‘do no harm to cohesion’ principle, particularly in rural areas;
66. Recalls that EU cohesion policy, which seeks to promote the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the Union, is vitally important to rural areas, especially those requiring particular attention; notes that in accordance with the provisions of the cohesion policy, the EU must pay special attention to addressing the challenges of disadvantaged regions and areas;
67. Highlights the Commission study’s conclusions on LEADER’s effectiveness in delivering solutions to address economic, social and development challenges and opportunities at local level and in contributing to solutions for sustainable rural development;
68. Calls on the Member States to support CLLD, including LEADER, encouraging participation in local action groups while facilitating and promoting multi-fund approaches and ensuring effective autonomy for local action groups in terms of their composition and decision-making; considers that the meaningful earmarking of assistance for CLLD under all relevant funds at EU level, similar to that in the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), would contribute to stronger integrated strategies and more sustainable, resilient territorial development;

***Partnership principle, governance and empowerment of rural areas***

69. Stresses that empowering rural communities, particularly in the most remote, island and sparsely and less populated areas, will promote greater social cohesion, innovation, entrepreneurship and a stronger sense of belonging and identity, and that it will require stronger capacity building efforts to set up and implement projects; emphasises that rural communities are crucial for EU cohesion and should thus be supported to encourage balanced socio-economic development; recalls the specific nature of the outermost regions as laid down in Article 349 TFEU and stresses that rural areas in the outermost regions are subject to additional constraints, also in this regard;
70. Calls for the effective application of the principle of subsidiarity, with more community-based, decentralised and bottom-up policies and support measures involving local actors including farmers and local organisations, authorities and civil society, and

insists therefore that they must play an active role from decision-making to policy development, implementation and evaluation, in order to best identify the needs of each territory;

71. Notes that while EU legislation envisages multilevel governance approaches and partnerships, there is resistance to their application in a meaningful way, in some Member States; calls on Member States to support these approaches by allocating responsibility at the appropriate local level of governance and ensuring political ownership and strong coordination of policies and investments across all levels of governance; calls on the Commission to maintain a direct and structured dialogue with the different levels of governance involved in the management of EU policies with a strong impact on rural areas;

### ***Shaping the future beyond 2027***

72. Takes note of the Commission's intention to take stock by mid-2023 of the actions taken by the EU and Member States for rural areas and to produce a public report on that basis in early 2024; considers that this evaluation could play a pivotal role, notably by identifying the areas where enhanced support and finance are still needed, and could pave the way to a rural strategy from the mid-term review and a rural action plan in the 2028-2034 programming period; invites the Commission, therefore, to directly involve all relevant stakeholders and managing authorities in this evaluation;
73. Invites the Commission to explore alternative policy strategies and approaches for funding articulation in the next programming period, including examining the option of one national strategy, in coordination with the regional and local authorities, and one regulation for all shared management funds, as well as of new ways of strengthening the partnership principle and multilevel governance approaches, promoting truly integrated territorial development in rural areas;
74. Calls for a strong rural dimension in future cohesion policy regulations, which should include dedicated funding to that end; suggests that the Commission launch a study, following a public consultation, on the possibility of earmarking a share of the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund to rural areas, in addition to other beneficial investments, with special attention to regions with specific geographical characteristics such as mountains, remote areas, islands and outermost regions;
75. Recalls that the future and prosperity of rural areas is of paramount importance for Europe's food security, autonomy and resilience, as well as for a sustainable energy mix which contributes to the EU's energy independence, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have clearly demonstrated; highlights that agri-food systems have enabled continuous access to quality food during these crises, while opening new opportunities to shorten food supply chains and for local food and feed production, notably of protein crops;
76. Calls for the long-term vision to be developed into a concrete and measurable true rural strategy at EU level, including a strategic dialogue of cooperation with urban areas, and for the coordination of the contribution of all EU funds and policies to rural areas; stresses that this strategy must be fully integrated into future programming periods; calls



on all Member States to develop rural strategies at national and regional level, defining the ways and means needed to address the issues faced by rural areas;

77. Calls on the Commission to assess in a timely manner the potential impact of the EAFRD's detachment from the common provisions for shared management funds laid down in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, in the development of integrated territorial approaches in rural areas, and to assess the needed holistic approaches for rural development and draw lessons for the next programming periods as regards their possible incorporation;

***Rural areas beyond the EU***

78. Believes that the EU has a strong interest in building not only cross-border partnerships but also partnerships beyond its own borders –in order to promote more prosperous rural societies and economies with long-term mutual benefits; stresses that not only are cooperation and knowledge-sharing important in this process, but that a level playing field must also be ensured;
79. Highlights the importance of the strategic cooperation links between Africa, Latin America and Europe, building on the progress made in the Africa-Europe rural transformation action agenda, which sets out initiatives designed to sustainably strengthen Africa's agri-food sector and rural territories; underscores, in this connection, the fact that it will remain vigilant in the face of China's changing role and increasing strategic influence on the African continent, in line with its resolution of 16 September 2021 on a new EU-China strategy<sup>1</sup>;
80. Underlines the importance of learning from each other and harnessing the potential of the success stories of some rural areas; calls, to that end, for further exchange possibilities and the establishment of platforms in and among rural areas to promote cohesion, solidarity and EU-wide exchanges;

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81. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 117, 11.3.2022, p. 40.