Regional Population Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Local Context

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Content

Introduction

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The composition of the population in Europe will change significantly over the next 20 years. During this period, the last baby boomers will reach retirement age. Life expectancy will continue to rise, and more people than ever before will live to a ripe old age. However, the birth rate remains at a low level. Even immigration will not be able to fully compensate for the ageing of society for the time being. Consequently, by the middle of this century, there will probably already be more than 50 people over the age of 65 for every 100 people of working age in Europe. At the same time, mobility within the European Union and immigration from non-European countries are expected to increase; indeed, they will have to increase, as many European economies and social systems are already suffering from labour shortages. However, the social and economic consequences of demographic change are unevenly distributed across Europe, not only in spatial terms – from the European and regional levels to the local level of cities and municipalities – but also with regard to different groups in society. The population is becoming increasingly diverse, for example, in terms of migration background, educational level, forms of living, family types, mental and physical health, or age structure. Nevertheless, not all communities and social groups can harness changing conditions to their benefit. The long-term effects of national and European policies as well as demographic transitions result in territorial inequalities where entire regions can feel "left behind".

The COVID-19 pandemic is not quite behind us, yet Europe is facing its next challenge: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its aftermath on the global economic system. Globally, we are seeing the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers since World War II, not only from Ukraine, but also from other areas of conflict and emergency. A discernibly changing global climate and an economy still reeling from the effects of the pandemic are creating further burdens for many people in Europe and around the world. In the face of long-term economic decline and recent crises, the discontent – and sometimes rage fuelled by demagogic ruthlessness – can easily be targeted towards asylum seekers and refugees as scapegoats. How do decision makers from the municipal to the European level perceive these changes and how can we build an inclusive environment and social cohesion in the face of growing population diversity? In several meetings with experts from science, politics and society, the project Regional Population Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Local Context focused on reviewing recent population trends, the potential for policy changes, as well as possible best practices. The involvement of stakeholders throughout the project and a European comparative perspective led to substantial policy recommendations, particularly at the local level. We disseminated the results in the form of video recordings, event reviews summarising the results of these meetings, a policy brief in German and English, and finally in a discussion paper. The goal of this discussion paper is to address related measures in a more target group-specific way.

Our stakeholder discussions with municipalities, regional associations, and representatives of state and federal politics have repeatedly shown that politics, society and business must take greater account of the growing diversity of the population when planning infrastructure facilities, community-strengthening or integration measures. For example, an activity that requires a financial contribution or a time commitment from citizens will hardly have a sustainable impact if it does not consider the local age structure, the socio-economic situation of households, the time budget of families, especially those with children or commuters, the changing interests of younger people, or the health situation of older people – and how these factors will change in the coming decades (Lines, 2020; Edel and Thomas, 2022).

In the face of changes in the composition of local populations, "social spaces" become crucial for social cohesion, acting as meeting places that can be used by local residents of all generations to exchange ideas about local issues and the future of their community (Kersten et al., 2017; Neu, 2023). In rural areas, for instance, local residents of different generations want

to feel like they belong to their community. For one thing, events designed to create solidarity, such as seasonal and cultural festivals, as well as sporting events, would greatly contribute to building a sense of identity with one's community. For another, to establish a greater sense of local belonging, people from all generations should play an active role in rural communities and be included in the decision-making process (Lines, 2020).

The socio-demographic diversity, and simultaneously the spatial disparity, of the population can be experienced by people in their immediate living environment. Demographic diversity is part of the DNA of the urban lifestyle in bigger cities. However, in many regions where people feel marginalised as a result of decades of economic decline ("left behind"), we observe an overlap between anti-migration and anti-European sentiment (Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). In fact, anti-migration resentment is often particularly strong in regions with lower immigration rates where youth emigration to urban or industrial centres is prominent.

However, in recent years, we have observed an increase in labour migration to some rural European areas. For instance, the agriculture, forestry, construction and domestic care sectors attract more workers from eastern and central Europe to western and central Europe (Bock, Osti and Ventura, 2016). In addition, pensioners and younger people who can work remotely are leaving urban centres and moving to rural areas to pursue a new, healthier lifestyle or for lower living costs (Čipin, Klüsener et al., 2020). Newcomers can be a fresh source of economic growth and tax revenues for local communities and administrations. However, they can also be seen by long-term residents as pressuring the already dwindling services and increasing the costs of living, particularly in the housing market.

In addition to the people on the ground, decision makers in municipal and regional bodies as well as civil society institutions are most strongly confronted with the resulting challenges. They have to provide infrastructures for a population that is constantly changing due to natural population development as well as influx and outflow. This means creating attractive living conditions, for example, for different age groups, for families with and without children, for commuters and the self-employed, or for people from different areas of origin.

Especially in rural areas and structurally weak regions, there is often a "vicious circle" between population and regional development: the closure of an educational or leisure facility that is no longer sufficiently utilised as a result of population decline makes such an area even less attractive for families willing to move in. This in turn reduces the available resources of human capital and the financial scope of the local actors. At a certain point, the downward spiral can only be stopped with considerable investment.

Demographic diversity

The topic of immigration plays an important role in the discussion on regional development. First, many cities and municipalities are already unable to maintain their infrastructural facilities without immigration in view of the population decline. This is increasingly true for the labour market, especially because the labour shortage in many industries and service sectors is expected to intensify in the coming years. Second, immigrants, whether they move from a city to the countryside, from one federal state or EU member state to another, or migrate from abroad, also have different educational backgrounds, opportunities on the labour market, life plans or health risks, and thus increase the population diversity already prevailing on the spot.

In order to respond to these challenges, we should therefore expand our understanding of diversity, which is particularly sensitive to ethnic aspects for good reason, in the sense of population diversity: this means the diversity found individually, in social groups and in regional contexts according to educational level, socio-economic status, origin, religion, family, lifestyle, age, health or gender. The focus of the project was on social and ethnic diversity, while always keeping the other socio-demographic characteristics mentioned in mind.

The link between population diversity and aspects of social inequality and social cohesion is obvious. Individuals may face different challenges at different stages of the life course in order to succeed in life and may be exposed to vulnerability in different ways.

Access to early childhood education can play a crucial role in later educational success. For younger people, the phase of career transition in particular plays an important role in the later course of their lives – they are affected by considerable restrictions due to the current pandemic, especially in this crucial phase of life. Working parents need care for their children as close to home as possible, as well as an efficient transport infrastructure if they pursue a commuting activity. Support is also needed for older people who, due to their life situation, can no longer participate in activities or may live isolated and lonely lives, or for those who participate less and less in society due to longer periods of unemployment or low pay, or as a result of a chronic illness. Migration experiences can have a reinforcing effect here. Research shows that many immigrants tend to settle in areas and neighbourhoods with a high proportion of people with a migration background, not least because there is less fear of being subject to discrimination in such places. The principle practised in many European countries of organising primary education in school districts linked to the place of residence can reinforce a tendency towards segregation here. The likelihood that this can be broken, on the other hand, increases with the level of education acquired.

In light of increasing population diversity, socio-demographic evidence should contribute to the development of problem-solving strategies and support politics, business and civil society with a view to social cohesion. In addition, science can draw important impulses for new research questions from in-depth dialogue with practitioners and policymakers.

What is at stake?

These aspects of population diversity and social change concern many, as demographic changes and social challenges related to depopulation affect many European regions. Thus, a ministry has been established in Spain to fight demographic challenges, while in Germany, preserving regional equity (Gleichheit der Lebensverhältnisse) is a constitutional obligation. The EU's rural areas are home to 137 million people and cover 80 % of the EU territory.[1] While some rural areas have good population development prospects, many areas are actually experiencing population decline. Therefore, the European Commission has put forward a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, in which the commitment to "leave no one and no place behind" is underlined while highlighting the multi-layered impacts of demographic change on rural areas and communities.[2] Moreover, many cities, peripheral districts of urban centres, and industrial hubs in economic and structural transition face rapid population changes and demographic challenges (Aurambout, Schiavina et al., 2022). Accordingly, the European Commission highlights the demographic trends as a major trend impacting the EU greatly.[3]

In addition, the "8th Cohesion Report: Cohesion in Europe towards 2050" reminds us that "demographic transitions may create new disparities, increase demands on national and local authorities, feed popular discontent and put pressure on our democracies" (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, adaptation to a shrinking labour force by targeting inactive groups or groups with lower employment rates, such as youth, women and non-EU migrants, becomes vital for all member states. To ensure social cohesion and quality of life for EU citizens, the report addresses the necessary adjustment of school systems, public services and healthcare in connection with a growing number of older residents and depopulation.

Indeed, the appointment of Dubravka Šuica as Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography in 2019, shows the considerable significance attached to the demographic issues to be addressed at the pan-European policy level. The European policy challenges were brought to the fore by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council to combat inequalities and ensure that the European Union has a fair, sustainable, innovative and competitive economy that leaves no one behind. Correspondingly, the plenary proposal for the demographic transition at the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022 features demographic changes such as youth emigration, increasing life expectancy and population shrinkage as critical ingredients of Europe's overall resilience.[4]

In its current report on German demographic policy of 16 March 2021, the Federal Government of Germany also emphasises the need for a common European perspective: "Together, member states can exchange and redevelop strategies that ensure a high

level of prosperity, good quality of life, and equitable opportunities for participation as well as social cohesion across Europe. Striving for equal living conditions will be the key to this. A joint, successful management of demographic change will also contribute significantly to the positive development of Europe's role in the world."

Such an approach can help to delineate the structural preconditions and scope for action of political measures and thus provide more realistic policy recommendations. European regions are heterogenous, and demographic changes require place-based solutions. However, local and regional decision makers and communities can learn from each other without simply replicating the same solutions: Under which socio-demographic conditions and with which instruments can we mitigate the consequences of demographic changes and challenges? How can we overcome the vicious cycle of population decline, deficient infrastructure and economic regression? How can we strengthen social ties and the sense of local belonging within a region? What kinds of spaces can there be for people to meet, counteracting social isolation?

Common problems and shared lessons: Designing a transdisciplinary dialogue

In view of the great disciplinary breadth of the topics of "population diversity" and "social cohesion", which include questions of demography, epidemiology, political science, sociology or economics, Regional Population Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Local Context had a clear goal from the beginning: targeting decision makers and experts in science, politics, society and business who deal with questions of population diversity, social cohesion, integration and participation. The project aims to reach a variety of professionals who are interested in the corresponding practical knowledge or scientific evidence. The experts and participants of our online meetings reflected this variety: expert participants from 17 member states and various disciplines, as well as administrative professionals and civil society representatives at the European, national and municipal levels, met and exchanged experiences and ideas with online participants from all over Europe.

The project started with an agenda-setting workshop with representatives from science, politics and civil society. They exchanged ideas about recent demographic issues and evaluated the topics to be discussed at the next five workshops. In the spirit of a "co-creation" process, the experts at the agenda-setting workshop set the tone of the project, and their perspectives and practical experiences were incorporated into the selection of the thematic focus and format of the project events. In addition to regions experiencing population shrinkage, regions with higher population diversity and in a process of economic and structural transition were also considered in the project. Practitioners, civil society representatives and policymakers from these regions were invited to each thematic workshop as experts and participants to share their local know-how and views.

The discussion paper presents the results of this transdisciplinary and transnational dialogue. Each chapter summarises the results of project meetings where participants discussed different policy approaches, in addition to their experiences with best practices and problems in the implementation of corresponding measures on the ground. Thanks to the valuable contributions of the experts sharing their perspectives during the project, we provide an overview of the challenges, potentials and successful examples for local decision makers and administrations, who can rely on the up-to-date scientific data and practical knowledge of Population Europe's Europe-wide network.

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[1] https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu/atlas-demography

[2] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, "A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040", Brussels, 30/6/2021.

[3] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight/2021-strategic-foresight-report_en

[4] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf

Common challenges requiring place-based solutions: Co-creation of the project[1]

Key messages

- **Population decline and ageing are two outstanding demographic issues affecting many rural areas and smaller urban areas in Europe.**

- **Economic structure and provision of services are core issues in adapting to demographic changes and challenges.**

- **In the face of common obstacles, the heterogeneity of European regions and their demographic diversity require place-based solutions for rural and underserved areas.**

Europe's population composition has been subject to and continues to experience many changes, and decision makers from the municipal to the European level and community leaders need scientific and practice-based knowledge in order to build an inclusive environment and foster social cohesion in the face of growing population diversity. In addition to long-term demographic trends, unexpected events, such as pandemics, natural disasters and wars, can cause sudden population changes and accelerate or stall those long-term tendencies. In light of COVID-19 and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, there is a growing need to review current demographic challenges and opportunities in Europe, with a special focus on regions feeling "left behind". What are the current key demographic and social issues for rural and underserved areas? And do all European regions experience the same challenges?

Key demographic issues and social challenges

Experts highlight the changing age structure and inequalities of ageing in rural and underserved areas. Due to youth emigration to urban and industrial centres, the percentage of the working population is decreasing in depopulating regions. This demographic trend heightens the inequalities between rural and urban areas, for example, in investment in infrastructure or access to care and health services. It also contributes to rural and smaller urban areas getting caught in a vicious cycle in regard to the provision of services and maintenance of infrastructure in general: as more working-age individuals leave an area, less revenue becomes available for public administrations to provide services and maintain infrastructure (schools, sport and care facilities, etc.), as the distribution of resources from central governments depends on the size of populations. In addition, in many cases, the private sector does not step into these depopulating underserved communities. This leads to the fact that local administration and the public sector are often the sole provider of transport, healthcare and childcare, with limited resources available. Due to the lesser number of customers, private banks tend not to operate in depopulating regions, and only local public banks are available in many rural areas. As a result, local policymakers and communities have to make difficult decisions, such as reducing the number and quality of essential services, which then makes the inequalities in access to services more acute.

How can communities overcome problems with the provision of services? Experts at the meeting emphasised three vital components: volunteering, digitalisation as well as cooperation and collaboration between municipalities and local administrations. For certain services, especially in care and in social and

cultural activities, volunteering can help communities to ease some difficulties. However, for a community to increase the rate of volunteering activities and members, the basic infrastructure enabling mobility is a necessity. Digitalisation can help to overcome some deficiencies in responding to diverse needs relating to administrative tasks, education and daily life. It is also seen as a means to meet the increasing demand for care and healthcare needs, as it can reduce the need for patients and health professionals to travel long distances and attend in-person appointments in many cases. Moreover, it can help senior citizens to live independently and continue to be active members of society. Nonetheless, digitalisation in healthcare should consider the existing digital divide between older and younger people as well as between rural and urban areas. In addition to the Internet and smartphone usage, adaptation to technological advancements is determined by socio-demographic factors like age and education. Furthermore, even in more prosperous central European regions, rural areas still face challenges in terms of digital infrastructure, making these areas less attractive for young people to settle in or migrate to.

Digital and physical accessibility: Keeping communities connected

In general, digitalisation is seen as a means to overcome further challenges that rural and underserved areas are facing: first, it can help in mitigating emigration while also attracting newcomers to depopulated areas. Second, it may help to intensify social networks in remote and rural regions. Having started as an emergency measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working can be a potential enabler for the development of rural areas and smaller cities losing population mostly because of limited employment and business opportunities. Digital working and learning opportunities can stop emigration, as they can open the door to higher education, training and quality jobs for younger residents without the need to leave their region.

Remote working conditions can also attract newcomers to these areas, which can play a positive role in the regional development process. In the opinion of participants, it is desirable for newcomers to truly

Statistics to consider

by Ruth Wilson
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- A recent survey by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in Scotland, which asked residents of the Highlands and Islands about their views and experiences of life in the area, found that almost half (47 %) of those aged 16–29 said they plan to move away from their local area in the next five years, compared to 14 % of all respondents.

- A similar percentage of respondents to the 2020 National Islands Plan Survey disagreed or strongly disagreed that younger people (under 40) are supported or encouraged to remain in, move to or return to the local area.

- An international survey by the Rural Youth Project in 2018 found that 72 % of younger people felt optimistic about the future, however only 13 % felt that they have a say in the future of their communities, suggesting that there is positivity among younger rural residents that is not being harnessed.

contribute to the development of these regions, for example, by bringing fresh ideas and initiatives for local economic development as well as for social cohesion. Besides the willingness of the newcomers to actively join the local community, policies in the field of social inclusion and openness by the local community are key factors in meeting the demographic diversity and heterogeneity of lifestyles that newcomers from urban areas can bring with them. How the digital style of working will affect commuting patterns is an open question, as many dwellers of rural and suburban areas depend on working in urban

centres. In other words, how should the local administrations and communities negotiate the social benefits of the changing working conditions?

Another key factor for depopulating areas is the need for cooperation and collaboration between municipalities and local administrations to secure services and infrastructure. Despite the geographic and spatial differences (level of centralisation, altitude, etc.), local administrations can work together in terms of service integration and service networks. To a great extent, the readiness for collaboration depends on a country's level of decentralisation, their culture of collaboration, and active policymaking. Moreover, tackling demographic challenges and their effects requires collaboration between multiple sectors of government at local, national and European levels, and it is imperative to bring actors from different fields and departments together to talk about the challenges and to work together. For stronger ties between community members and an enduring sense of belonging, local governments should be open to new ideas and new actors willing to take part in decision-making processes and designing solutions.

Economic structure: Bread and butter issue

Along with the provision of services and infrastructure, economic development and structure are at the top of the list in efforts to mitigate and adapt to demographic trends. The economy and provision of services are inseparable factors in peoples' decisions to settle down and live in rural areas and smaller urban areas, as economic activity lies at the heart of several interlinks between services: if a region is economically active and employment opportunities are high, there are childcare and health facilities, more investment in infrastructure, and social and cultural activities. To avoid territorial inequalities and socio-demographic divides within countries and regions, experts in the meeting agreed on the importance of boosting territorial capital and diversifying economic activity in regions. What is clear is that rural areas are more than just agriculture. In addition to new opportunities in tourism and green economies, targeting industries and companies to grow in rural areas can make these places demographically more resilient.

Figure 1: Population over 80 years old by degree of urbanization. 2021
Source: Luis Camarero, Professor of Sociology, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). Elaboration from Eurostat data. Population on 1 January by five-year age group, sex and other typologies. [URT_PJANGRP3]
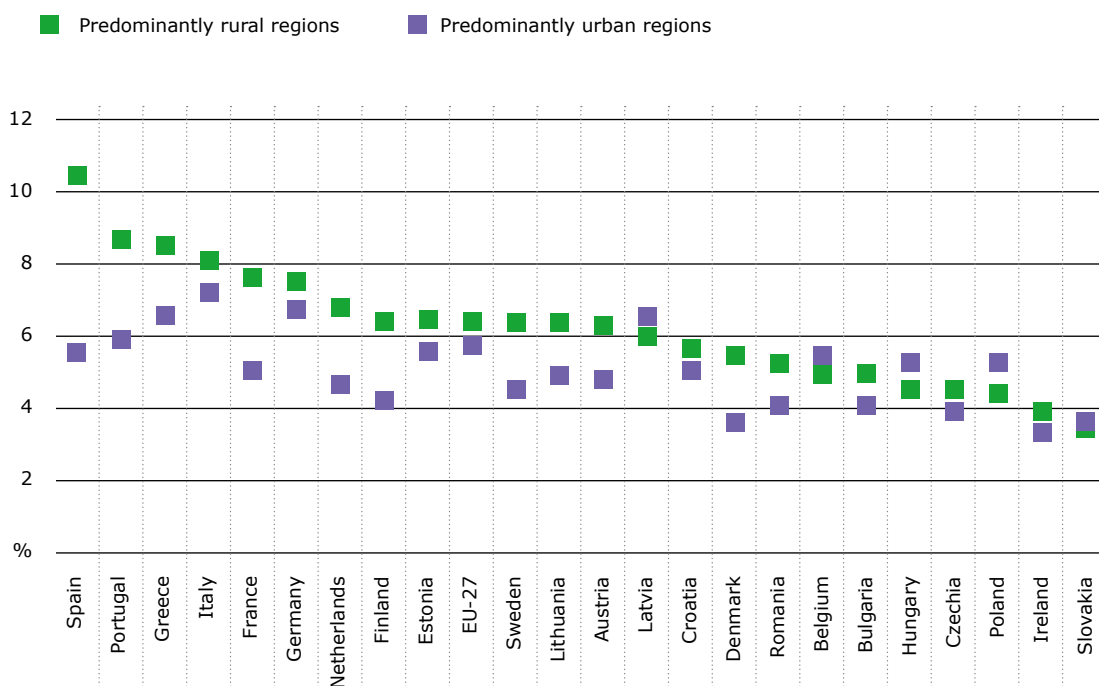
While labour and skill shortages are common problems for most member states, there are two main means to meet the labour demand and future skills needs: immigration and mobilising non-working residents. Depopulating rural and underserved areas are often hit hard by the emigration of the working-age population. Likewise, these regions are less attractive for a new workforce to move to when inactivity rates are higher. But for inactive groups to enter the labour market, one must consider both the needs of the labour market and social issues like gender inequalities as well as access to education and skill training. For instance, in regions where the economy is based on male-dominated industries like mining or agriculture, decision-making and the labour market tend to be led by men, which results in a less gender-inclusive decision-making process. In addition to promoting employment among inactive groups, industries should adopt measures to promote job stability among their employees, while local governments should help and promote small businesses and entrepreneurs from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups through mentorship opportunities, career guidance and diversity programmes. Also, public-private partnerships should support the education and school systems to develop further training opportunities in consideration of the specific needs of the local labour markets.

Tailor-made solutions: Common challenges and diverse approaches

When it comes to solutions to the previously mentioned challenges, the experts at our meeting agreed that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. Instead, they tended to agree on the need for tailor-made and place-based solutions. Even when regions face the same problems (population decline, ageing, deindustrialisation), similar challenges hit different communities in different ways and at different levels. In addition, within the same regions or areas, one can discover hidden inequalities in accessing services, differences in productivity rates, opposite demographic changes and ageing structures or youth emigration percentages when comparing neighbourhoods. In the example of emigration, the nature of population movements can have diverse effects on the sending communities. In contrast with perma-

nent migration and emigration, circular migration can contribute to local development in the form of investments in housing, the local economy and active participation in local politics thanks to the circularity of skills and economic, human and social capital. In the case of circular migration, the initiatives of local administrations and municipalities play a central role if sending communities can benefit from the economic and social potential that migrants can bring.

As a practical conclusion, one can always learn from success stories, but should always reflect on the reproducibility of policies and initiatives in their own context and include the local community in this exercise.

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[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the high-level expert meeting in April 2022. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 38.

Further reading

Bock, A. and Krzysztofowicz, M. (2021). *Scenarios for EU Rural Areas 2040*, Joint Research Centre.

Euromontana (2022). *Being young in a mountain area: mountain youth's needs in 2022 and aspirations for the future*, Report.

European Commission (2022). *Cohesion in Europe towards 2050: Eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*, European Commission.

European Commission – Eurostat and DG for Regional and Urban Policy – ILO, FAO, OECD, UN-Habitat, World Bank (2020). *A recommendation on the method to delineate cities, urban and rural areas for international statistical comparisons.*

European Network for Rural Development (2020). *Access to Services*. Factsheet.

Redlich, S. and Scholze, J. (2022). *Implementation of the Territorial Agenda 2030 Pilot action "A future for lagging regions: Fostering the implementation of spatial strategies"*, Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building (BMWSB).

More than target groups: The needs and contributions of older and younger people[1]

Key messages

- **Despite the structural constraints they face, older and younger persons make valuable contributions to their local communities that remain, for the most part, informal and unacknowledged.**

- **Promoting gender equality is of crucial importance for the well-being of older and younger persons, and this needs to be properly addressed in local policies.**

- **It is vital to obtain data at a local level about the diverse needs and motivations of heterogeneous communities.**

European rural and island communities experience considerable youth outmigration, although many younger people enjoy life in rural and island areas and seek a future in those regions. However, as a recent survey in Scotland shows, younger people often experience structural constraints in access to employment, services and affordable housing, as well as in participation in local decision-making and solution-designing processes.[2] Youth outmigration from rural and island areas has a significant impact on age structure, whereby the percentage of older residents increases. This change also underlines the inequalities in ageing in rural and island communities, as the local administrations have to maintain the necessary health and care services with lower tax revenue.

On the other side, older persons in rural and underserved areas are a heterogenous group with diverse characteristics and abilities. They contribute to the local communities greatly in terms of social and economic entrepreneurship, volunteer work, mentoring, and care work for family and community members. Yet, most of their contributions remain informal and unacknowledged, for instance in childcare, the local economy or daily life. To rectify and recognise their contributions to local communities, a fundamental narrative shift is needed: older persons are active members of their communities, keep them vital and ensure their continuation.

Having older *and* younger persons as equal partners in designing and implementing local policies as well as including them through councils and appropriate methods of engagement is key to maintaining social cohesion and mitigating youth outmigration. Ongoing civil society initiatives and the experiences of practitioners show that older and younger persons are willing to exchange ideas and work together.[3] No doubt, intergenerational and interregional cooperation can create more resilient and coherent communities: ensuring the meaningful participation of citizens of all ages, strengthening local ties and the intergenerational exchange of ideas and skills, reducing the isolation and loneliness of older people, etc.

"Think global – act local": Experts suggest that adopting a human rights-based approach at a national level with a focus on autonomy, independence and participation can encourage the inclusion and engagement of older persons at a local level. It can assist and guide decision makers to address age discrimination, gender inequalities and social integration in policy-making at the local level. To secure the rights of everyone and foster opportunities for everyone, a national human rights framework should include guarantees against ageism and its discriminatory results.

Nevertheless, access to culture is essential for a sense of belonging and for tackling the problems of loneliness and social isolation. In addition to phys-

ical infrastructures such as housing, transport or schools, cultural aspects of life are determining factors when people decide to stay in or return to rural or depopulating areas. It is equally important to support and invest in less tangible aspects of rural and island life, such as social and cultural activities, local traditions, language and heritage. These can contribute to a community's vitality by strengthening its identity, widening and deepening social bonds, and inspiring civic engagement. Initiatives creating resilience should be supported through long-term funding as part of national policies.

Mobility and social cohesion: A question of social justice and equality

Internal migration is a key driver of regional demographic change, and these movements tend to occur in concert with other life events. For instance, young adults often move away when starting higher education, entering the labour market, forming a family or dissolving a union. The internal migration of young adults also has implications for regional population changes and social cohesion. The COVID-19 pandemic had the greatest impact on this age group in terms of migration behaviour, decreasing overall internal migration but increasing the movement to the suburban or hinterland areas of larger cities.

Rural regions need more policymaking addressing gender equality, as they are becoming less attractive for women in terms of employment and opportunities for social and political participation. Indeed, gender roles, norms and policies influence where and how people live, as well as social integration and cohesion. Gender inequalities and the social norms and practices producing them affect all aspects of people's lives, including the decision to move, relocate or return to an area, for example, when they start a family. Throughout the course of people's lives, the opportunities available depending on one's gender are an intrinsic part of their decisions and the choices available to them.

Internal migration can increase existing territorial inequalities, and the inequalities between rural and urban areas must be understood in terms of citizen-

Enabling meaningful participation

by Silvia Perel-Levin
Main representative to the UN, Geneva, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA)

• In Austria, the Senior Citizens' Council (as the federation of all senior citizens' organisations) and Federal Youth Representation (the umbrella of youth organisations) have the status of social partners and have the right to make comments on every law concerning young or older persons.[3]

• In Ireland, there is an Older People's Council in each of the 31 local authority areas. This is a representative group of older people, established by local authorities as part of the development of the Irish Age Friendly City/County programme. The group of older people identify priority areas of need, raise issues of importance, and inform and influence the decision-making process of the city or county's Age Friendly initiative. Representatives of Older People's Councils participate, alongside representatives of the relevant member agencies, on the Age Friendly City/County Alliance.

• Countries in which youth and senior councils are only mandated to comment on policies that directly affect them should consider involving them in all policymaking processes, to invite their perspectives on policies that may also have an indirect impact on them, now or in the future.

ship. One decisive aspect leading to disadvantages for those living in rural areas is the accessibility to services, opportunities and good welfare conditions. Accessibility can be understood as the population's right to live wherever they choose with equal conditions and opportunities to fulfil their life expectations as the rest of society. However, cooperation between local administrations, volunteers and mediators might help people with poor digital skills and reduced mobility, such as older persons and immigrants, to access administrative services.

When it comes to emigration and immigration, more data is needed to better understand who lives in rural areas, and which characteristics of these places make people leave or stay. Local communities can adopt better strategies, for instance, if the social motivations behind return migration or more recent movements to the urban centres are known. More data is also needed to facilitate awareness of new dynamics in social cohesion. For instance, newcomers from urban areas might actually cause tension and friction in rural areas if there is a lack of housing and services.

Means and structures of social cohesion: More cooperation instead of competition

Local ties and identity can be a key factor in ensuring local communities enjoy a high quality of life in a resilient environment. First and foremost, members of a local community need an inclusive place to meet that can infuse public life with activities and action. Social places can meet that need, as they are not short-term projects, but processes designed to remain active on a permanent basis. They provide a base where committed members can exchange ideas and work together. In such spaces, daily social gatherings can be organised, where people get to know each other and learn about each other's needs and opinions. Through contact with decision makers, they can also start overcoming mistrust and build relationships with them that may pay off in future cooperation.

Municipalities should promote volunteering and participation opportunities to involve citizens in municipal development. More cooperation and communication between local authorities and citizens of all ages

can help rural and depopulating areas to generate a change in the narrative as well: vibrant regions with active citizens. For that reason, municipalities need sufficient financial resources to be able to provide services of general interest on site and to maintain social places in order to ensure social participation. If there is a lack of social infrastructure and public services, then there will also be a lack of social places for communication and participation in public space.

To strengthen the ties between residents and administrations, local authorities should not be afraid of risks, new players and new methods for citizen participation: open meetings, workshops, written consultation, working group meetings, advisory boards, foresight workshops and citizens' panels/assemblies. The testing of new local negotiation processes about the future goals of a community creates cohesion and identification. Similarly, neighbouring villages should also work together to tackle population changes and challenges, instead of competing for residents. Rural offices and national agencies can act as moderators between these municipalities to promote permanent cooperation.

People with the necessary skills to mobilise, activate and communicate with the community can also serve as facilitators of participative processes for designing and implementing solutions. Usually, social and cultural workers carry the experience and knowledge to undertake local and social actions and tend to be well recognised by their communities.

Where is the hope?

Processes instead of solutionist thinking: Places and communities need tailored strategies to create social cohesion and engagement. There is no single policy that can tackle all the problems for every region. Instead, prioritising the needs of each community and enabling processes for intergenerational and intercommunal exchange are fundamental steps to increasing the quality of life for all members of local communities.

Local dynamics on the ground don't match the "one-size-fits-all" approach. Collecting more data at the local level can help empower local authorities to un-

derstand their communities and their needs better. Informing local communities about their rights and opportunities is equally important. Local authorities play a crucial role in increasing trust in institutions, democracy and democratic values. Similarly, connecting local, national and global frameworks can increase trust in institutions and democracy.

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[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the workshop in October 2022. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 38.

[2] https://www.hie.co.uk/research-and-reports/our-reports/2022/october/13/myliferesearch/

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No place like home?
Depopulation and local ties[1]

Key messages

- **Local administrations should be open to support local initiatives with long-term funding and to work with new actors in economic, cultural and green transition processes.**

- **The more the merrier: Both the inclusion of newcomers and younger people, and the gathering of additional perspectives are important in strengthening the sense of belonging at the local level and maintaining strong local ties.**

- **Local communities are not alone: Regional and wider European networks can help local communities to exchange ideas, experiences and funding opportunities.**

Local identity and cultural heritage are fundamental in keeping local communities vibrant and regions attractive for newcomers as well as returnees. However, top-down approaches to cultural policies that do not pay attention to the particularities of a place may alienate local inhabitants, as they usually aim to attract tourists. Policies applying general formulas and disregarding the local culture and traditions might end up promoting the commodification of local practices and their performative display. For instance, festivals and fabricated tourist attractions not initiated or supported by locals might disenfranchise them. They might feel not represented or else have no say in them.

Conversely, bottom-up initiatives to encourage cultural activities and increase the attractiveness of a place can be valuable in uniting communities around shared development visions. More locals will feel represented and embrace the cultural activities and initiatives when more people are involved in designing and implementing them. It is equally important that local authorities support initiatives and participatory processes to involve residents in cultural policies decisions. Yet, even if a bottom-up initiative or an idea was successful in one place, it doesn't mean the same initiative or idea will work for another. However, if a region comes up with successful examples, their neighbours will be encouraged to initiate cultural processes. Therefore, the success of cultural actions and policies must be considered in the long term.

Local authorities and communities should be open to new ideas and collaborations: initiatives and activities should include and stimulate discussion about the local identity and heritage, as well as how to shape and portray them. Local administrations, long-existing associations and local actors should not be afraid of innovative initiatives and new players in the cultural sphere to review the priorities and needs of the community. Discussions and conflicts about the local identity and heritage are signs of a vibrant community including more perspectives and groups.

Similarly, local administrations and cultural programmes should consider and allow newcomers and younger people to be part of local identity and cultural heritage. This is crucial for strengthening the ties between former residents and newcomers, and supporting intergenerational cooperation and exchange to keep local life dynamic and attractive.

To this end, municipalities and regions should develop or maintain social places and socio-cultural structures where locals can meet and talk: old and abandoned or new cultural centres, libraries, bars, cafes, schools, etc. Long-term funding for projects aiming at social cohesion and creating social places can nurture intergenerational cooperation and exchange at the local level (Neu, 2023). For this purpose, public authorities and communities can take advantage of available national and European funds to maintain these spaces.

Good practices

by Camila Del Mármol
Associate Professor in Social Anthropology,
University of Barcelona

• **The Accordion Festival of the Pyrenees**: An annual celebration that brings together experts from around the world specialised in the diatonic accordion as well as folk and traditional music. It was prompted by a newcomer during the late 70s and was initially met with some concerns by the local population. Administrative authorities supported the project, both at a national level in recognising the work of the organiser as a researcher of local musical traditions through prizes, subsidies and grants, and at a local level by supporting the project in different ways. Two main projects with booster effects in terms of local identity and cultural heritage arose from the original initiative: the Folk School of the Pyrenees, spreading and popularising folk and traditional music within younger generations of Pyrenean people (https://escolafolkdelpirineu.tradicionarius.cat/inici/qui-som) and the Accordion Museum in Arsèguel, a small local museum recovering all kinds of instruments and local musical traditions (https://www.catalunya.com/trobada-dacordionistes-dels-pirineus-1-6-508491?language=ca).

• **LGBTQI+ Festival in A Ulloa, Galicia**: The Agrocuir Festival was born as a local initiative in 2015. Starting as an almost a private celebration on the occasion of Pride Day, it has since become a showcase for rural diversity. Staging folk music and the avant-garde, the festival is attended by residents and foreigners. The festival also functions as a gathering point for alternative projects beyond sexual and gender identities, ranging from the commons, food sovereignty and protection, to local heritage. https://festivalagrocuir.wordpress.com

Shaping transformation: Green transition, de-industrialisation and population change

Many European regions face population challenges when undertaking socio-economic and structural transitions such as green transition and de-industrialisation. Cooperation with scientific institutions, regional and international collaboration, strategic planning and innovation are key factors for a successful transition process. New or existing structures to meet and talk can attract new ideas, visitors and collaboration. In the example of the Klimatorium building in Lemvig, the architecture and a new physical location draw people in.[2]

Collaboration among regional and local authorities as well as civil society is an excellent means by which communities can tackle the social, climate and population-related challenges they face while learning from one another. Through interregional and international networks, based on concrete projects, knowledge can be shared and new projects formed. Likewise, the cooperation with research institutes can strengthen the innovative capacity of a region. Local authorities, research, technology centres and communities can benefit from existing European platforms and major transition programmes such as the European Green Deal.

Supporting a more recent local identity by adapting to the needs of those who don't have a direct connection to the regional past is a difficult but necessary task. Professionals in policymaking, education and economy can work together to promote openness, innovation and inclusion, which are vital for encouraging more people to feel connected to a place and its history. Involving schools and universities and targeting younger and older students can help to achieve these goals. In this way, younger people can play an active role in (re)shaping the common values and interpreting the history and image of the region anew, even though they might not, for instance, be able to identify with or feel represented in the industrial heritage.

By all means, the transdisciplinary research and exchange can be seen as a promising response for advancing social innovation and overcoming sustain-

ability challenges (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008; Lang et al., 2012). With regard to population changes and environmental challenges, the consequences and

policymaking are not always convincing for everyone. And the policymakers, scientists and affected parties must find the best options for the solutions in a cooperative framework, while considering opposing views in a balanced manner. A transdisciplinary approach can ensure that new insights are gained from the participation of practitioners or the involvement of different agents or parties with varying focuses and innovative ideas (Kluge, 2022).

Place-based innovation through smart specialisation

by Daniela Kretz
Expert on Innovation, Competitiveness & Sustainability, IDEA Consult

Place-based innovation strategies can benefit local authorities, research, and technology centres, but also local communities while at the same time addressing major transitions such as those associated with addressing the European Green Deal. Opportunities such as those presented in European-scale projects, especially networking opportunities, can help boost regions in their efforts in contributing to the green and digital transition. Notable opportunities include the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3 CoP)[3], Interregional Innovation Investments (I3)[4] and the Regional Innovation Valleys (RIV)[5]. In addition, a recent project brought together a total of 18 European Entrepreneurial Regions (EER)[6] to foster collaboration targeting peer learning on innovative practices in particular to support start-ups and scale-ups. Specifically, regions came together to jointly address common challenges in the area of agri-food, in particular in the green/circular transition, which included regular scoping interactions in the search for common needs among the regions to address the transitions and challenges they are facing. With regions including North Brabant (NL) and Flanders (BE) to Asturias (ES) and Central Macedonia (GR), common challenges include access to finance, as well as the need to create the necessary ecosystem and framework to retain companies and thus employment in the respective regions.

Cooperation matters: Regions and communities are not alone

European cities and towns are connected to each other through a long tradition of "town twinning".[7] Towns and rural areas can also develop "cultural twinning" programmes in order to promote closer cultural and social ties, especially if they embrace similar cultural characteristics, values and heritage. Local administrations and communities can highlight cultural characteristics and "unique selling points". The key is to increase the attractiveness for both locals and visitors. The local profile can sometimes be very specific, such as in the successful case of Gabrovo in Bulgaria, which is known as a centre of satire and humour.[8]

Local and regional administrations should see the initiatives as long-term investments and develop risk management strategies, including longer-term funding instead of excessive short-term and unsustainable projects. Most cultural actions as well as innovative centres only have an impact in the long run and increase their influence over time, even if at the end of the project they might not have met the clear-cut outputs and expectations defined from the start. Most inspirational examples have been driven by passionate people with ideas and the ambition to make a difference, not to be overly restricted by a business plan or strict short-term expectations. Encouraging and including residents is key for successful local initiatives. Connecting local ambitions to wider regional and international networks will help communities to share and grow their potential and resources.

Local policymakers need improved access to recent information about how younger people feel about the cultural activities and public services available in

Social ties are key to demographic transitions

by Blandine Camus
Communication & Policy Officer,
European Association of Mountain Areas
(Euromontana)

• The Innovangsjon cooperative in the Innlandet region (Norway) works to increase the attractiveness of the village of Vang I Valdres and encourage people to settle there. Innovangsjon started as a music festival in 2006 and its activities have now expanded to include improving access to housing and employment.

• Fjellnettverket, the Norwegian Mountain Network, created an attractiveness indicator based on the number of new residents and new businesses in municipalities and regions. According to this indicator, the overall attractiveness of Vang I Valdres increased from -2.18 in 2006 to 2.17 in 2021. The attractiveness of the municipality has improved in all respects, both in terms of settlement of residents (from -2.12 in 2006 to 0.96 in 2021) and of businesses (from -0.06 in 2006 to 1.22 in 2021). To make Vang a vibrant place to live, the cooperative also worked to strengthen social ties between former residents, new inhabitants and workers. To this end, social events were organised, such as "Cosy Fridays", where all the local community can meet and get to know each other over a drink, a quiz or some live music.

• These meeting places, whether they are ambitious initiatives such as the rural street art festival in Villangómez, or simply a cafe or bar, are essential for maintaining social life in mountain villages: https://pollogomez.com/ruta-de-murales/murales

their regions. Neither policymaking nor campaigns and projects can be shaped based on restricted pictures of younger people and insufficient conclusions about their needs and wishes. Surveys and participatory methods are always more effective than considering social media trends and posts.

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[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the workshop in November 2022. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 39.

[2] https://www.visitnordvestkysten.de/nordvestkysten/planen/klimatorium-daenemarks-internationales-klimazentrum-gdk1122658

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/smart-specialisation-community

[4] https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en

[5] https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/news/regional-innovation-valleys-calls-proposals-are-now-open-2023-05-17_en

[6] https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes/sme-strategy/european-sme-week/sme-regional-policies_en

[7] http://www.twinning.org/en/page/a-quick-overview#.ZF-4PunZByUk

[8] https://biennial.humorhouse.bg/en

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Breaking the vicious cycle? Depopulation and provision of public services[1]

Key messages

- **A shrinking population and ageing mean a challenge for the provision of public services because of the increasing costs and lacking funding and staff.**

- **Municipalities can work together and share responsibilities with civil society to enhance their respective capacities and extend their reach.**

- **Digitalisation can only achieve its promises if everyone is included: remote and digital solutions can improve access to certain services and their reach if the necessary infrastructure is provided.**

With regard to the provision of services and maintenance of infrastructure, many rural and smaller urban areas are getting caught in a vicious cycle: as more working-age individuals leave an area or retire, fewer resources become available for public administrations to provide services and maintain infrastructure (schools, sport and care facilities, etc.). As a consequence, these areas become less attractive for newcomers, are less appealing as potential locations to start new businesses, and mostly tend to lose (sub)groups due to outmigration, such as young families and younger women. Of course, we must consider the heterogeneity of European rural areas and how they are affected by population changes: mountainous regions are significantly impacted by emigration, as a significant proportion of people born in mountain villages or towns reside in other municipalities (Recaño, 2017).

Figure 2: Promoting factors and obstacles to municipal cooperation
Source: Mario Hesse, Research Fellow and Deputy Managing Director of the Competence Centre for Municipal Infrastructure Saxony, University of Leipzig. Own depiction, own calculation, data excerpt from Kratzmann (2020).
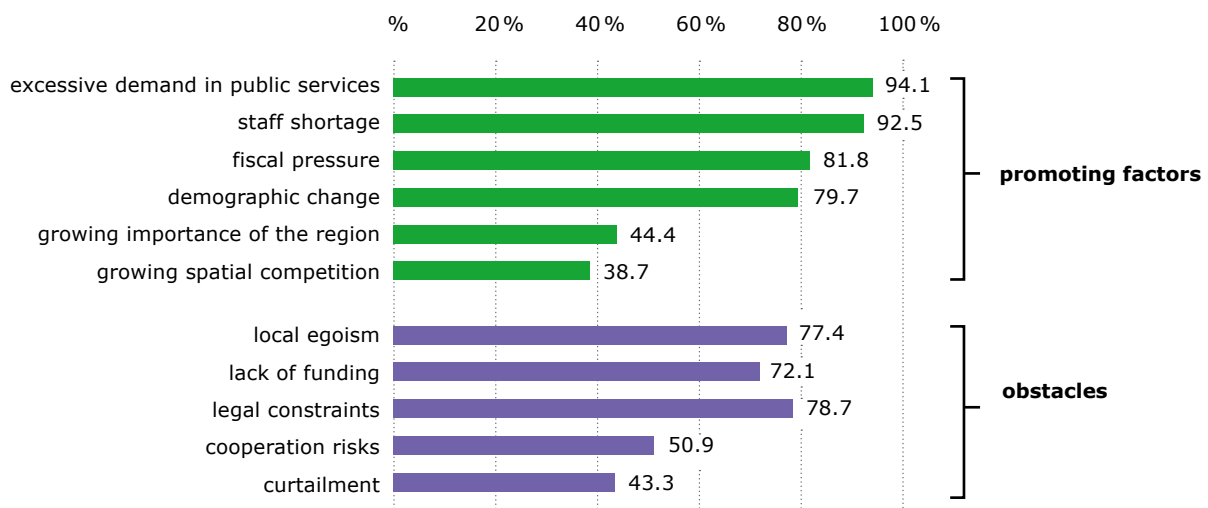
For all depopulating and rural areas, providing services and the maintenance of infrastructure present the greatest challenges of our time in securing viable and sustainable living conditions. In addition to geographical challenges causing territorial isolation and restricting human activities and mobility, the accessibility of services relies on multiple key factors, such as access to information on the existing services, their proximity and travel time to them, the opening hours or costs, as well as cultural and social barriers, i.e. in the case of digitalization.

Areas for improvement

by Johanna Jokinen
Senior Research Fellow, Nordregio

Based on the case study conducted in Eksote (Lundgren et al. 2020), the main challenges include the reluctance of professionals to start using digital solutions instead of sticking to more traditional ones. It was also pointed out that it is easy to blame technology if something is not working properly. Therefore, it is important to find ways to overcome this cultural challenge.

It has also been difficult to make comprehensive cost estimates regarding the digital solutions. Staff are often told by management that the use of digital tools assists economic efficiency, even if they have never seen any concrete calculations as to how much Eksote[2] might save in the long run by using distance-spanning technologies instead of more traditional solutions. When using digital technologies, it is often said that laws accommodating them change too slowly, and that current laws are not applicable to the latest technology. Eksote's management is trying to find ways to get around legal obstacles, for instance by finding customers who are willing to give permission for the use of digital solutions. Artificial intelligence, for instance, could be used more widely in the region if its use was not restricted by current laws (Lundgren et al., 2020).

Can collaboration break the vicious cycle?

Administrative collaboration and cooperation between local authorities and civil society can be a key factor in overcoming these challenges: municipalities can work together and share responsibilities with civil society to enhance their respective capacities and extend their reach. In this way, municipalities can counter the rising costs of services caused by demographic changes, like increases in the need for care services and infrastructure supply. Regional cooperation can also be a way for local administrations in shrinking regions to expand public services beyond their municipal capacities and overcome the lack of financial and human resources.

Indeed, as a recent study in Germany shows (Kratzmann, 2020), municipalities are more willing to cooperate in areas defined by high fixed costs and repetitive processes like IT and digitalisation, but also in areas like fire departments or maintenance yards, as storage areas for machines and materials require an extremely high level of personnel and equipment and could easily be shared by institutions. To keep the local life vibrant and make the area more attractive, municipalities should also cooperate in the promotion of tourism, business development and culture. As experts highlight, in all these spheres, trust between partners is a must, and this can be achieved with small-scale collaborative initiatives making quick successes visible before moving to large-scale cooperation.

EU and national funding programmes can promote collaborative work effectively by targeting the areas in which local municipalities and administrations are open for more cooperation. The development and structural funds can be designed and offered in inter-regional and inter-municipal frameworks to foster collaboration between local administrations in maintaining or improving infrastructure. This would help to avoid municipalities competing for the same funding, for instance, as is currently the case with funds for digital and green transition or local development.

The role of national and European backing is not limited to funding: to support local municipalities and communities, legal assistance and non-financial backing provided by regional and national entities are particularly important. Collaboration as well as national and EU funding programmes might require complex regulations and constraining legislation, which can discourage municipalities with limited resources and personnel for collaborative work. Funding programmes might require more time to be spent on managing the projects rather than delivering results. The removal of legal hurdles and the provision of consulting services and templates for agreements and contracts can ease the workload of local administrations.

Digitalisation of public services: How to avoid digital divides?

Digitalisation certainly offers advanced solutions for maintaining public services and improving their reach and access. Technological advancements in digital healthcare and social care can enhance the quality of life, for instance, in mountainous and sparsely populated regions with reduced possibility of physical access to these services. Remote health and care services can replace some of the tasks done by health and care staff in person, which can help older citizens to continue to live in their homes for longer while maintaining a better level of health.

Digital tools can also promote new and better communication between local community members and administrations. Locally or regionally hosted exchange platforms and apps can help the residents to be better informed about public, private or communal services (meetings, events, new places, changing service hours, job offers or offers of help, etc.) and bolster the feeling of belonging and mutual support.

However, digitalisation can only achieve its promises if everyone is included: remote and digital solutions can improve access to certain services and their reach if the necessary infrastructure is provided (for instance a reliable internet connection). Local citizens must be informed about the existence of digital services and how to use them confidently. In addition to older generations, the digital expertise of younger

Examples of local collaboration and place-based solutions

by Céline Dacy
Project Manager, ADRETS – Association pour le Développement en Réseau des Territoires et des Services

• Partnerships between different levels of local administrations or territorial authorities: the PETR Sud Lozère, which includes 35 municipalities and 11,878 residents, has carried out important networking and awareness-raising work among elected officials to encourage the reception of new residents. This work led to the creation of a commitment charter co-signed by the municipality, the PETR and the Departmental Council in 2018. Each municipality is then expected to develop its own action plan to facilitate the reception of new residents and initiatives for them: a welcome guide listing the services available, or the creation of local committees, made up of elected officials, associations and residents, to support new arrivals as they settle in.

• Local collaboration is more successful when it is the subject of a partnership between the municipality and its residents. The municipality of Ancelle (916 inhabitants), a village resort, has undertaken the process of revitalising its village centre, in connection with the development of a "four-season" tourist offering. At the end of 2020, a public consultation was launched to gather the opinions of local residents, highlighting the need to rethink the village centre for pedestrians and make room for soft mobility. One of the objectives was also to develop the attractiveness of the shops for the year-round population, but also for tourists. Other projects are under consideration: the creation of paramedical offices, the development of an association centre, and co-working spaces.

people should not be taken for granted: there are a substantial number of young individuals with poor digital skills or confidence who must be considered and supported by training on digital services.

Technological advancements can help improve the overall attractiveness of depopulating regions by facilitating remote work, offering access to online education and training, and improving life satisfaction and access to services. Implementing digital solutions at the local level often requires substantial changes in legal regulations as well as in the concrete responsibilities of public and private actors. Local administrations and communities can be key actors in providing digital solutions if adequate legal regulations are in place.

Simply reproducing digital solutions in different places is not good practice: the success of a digital tool in one place can be a model for other places, but it needs to be adapted to local needs. Co-creation, participatory development and readiness of multiple actors are important steps in defining and meeting local/context-specific needs.

Public services and trust in the democratic system

E-technologies can mitigate the lack of infrastructure and resources in depopulating and underserved regions, but it is equally important that citizens have access to local administration and the government in person. The visibility and reachability of state institutions can build legitimacy for the democratic system as a whole. Regardless of the numerous benefits of remote services, citizens need physical structures to meet and talk in person and take collective decisions.

In the face of population changes, municipalities and local administrations have to take critical decisions about the existing infrastructure or changes in the provision of services. The decision-making process should involve the local community. Citizens should be informed about the present and future needs and challenges and have a say in the next steps: How should health and care services be structured? Do we need to relocate our educational facilities? Citizen participation in projects related to infrastructure and

the provision of services can reinforce social cohesion and the well-being of residents.

As a final suggestion: where privacy protection and the reliability and safety of data are concerned, municipalities, local administrations and state institutions are often perceived as more credible and trustworthy than market actors. The involvement of local and national administrative actors can improve trust among citizens in digital solutions and help to define the responsibilities of all actors involved more clearly.

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[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the workshop in January 2023. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 40.

[2] *South Karelia Social and Health Care District* (Eksote), which was approved in 2010. Eksote became the first hospital district in Finland in which both health and social care services are provided in an integrated and centralised manner across the region.

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Planning for the future: How can local communities adapt to population changes?[1]

Key messages

- **Accepting depopulation as a long-term process is the first step in the necessary adaptation of public services and infrastructure.**

- **Don't need to reinvent the wheel: local administrations and initiatives can learn from each other and avoid repeating the same mistakes.**

- **Boosting the territorial capital, improving the regional image and collaborative modes of action and financing can help local and regional actors to overcome territorial disparities and enhance social cohesion.**

Many rural and underserved communities in Europe are currently experiencing depopulation trends and ageing of their inhabitants. In the light of increasing demographic diversity, local governments and administrations have to meet the diverse needs of the residents and economic actors. They must ensure the quality of life and services while adapting to the shrinking and ageing population. What capacities do they have to plan for the future and the growing demographic diversity? And how can we support local decision-making with more access to data and scientific knowledge?

Demographic data and spatial planning

by Jana Hoymann and Steffen Maretzke
German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR)

• As part of a research project, the BBSR is attempting to determine which regions in Germany are particularly affected by the mandate of shaping the shrinking processes. An indicator was developed based on the population grid of the 2011 census and other data, which shows regions that face particular challenges with their demographic development, settlement structure and infrastructure provision. With such knowledge, regions can be supported in a targeted manner, for example, in spatial planning demonstration projects (MORO),[2] enabling them to develop rights approaches and solutions.

• One successful demonstration project in spatial planning is the action programme for regional services of general interest. In a multi-stage process, regions were invited to deal with the adaptation of their public service infrastructure against the background of declining population figures. Based on an inventory and small-scale population forecasts, strategies were developed for the further development or adaptation of regional services of general interest. Strategies like the improvement of the daytime readiness of the volunteer fire brigade were implemented in initial projects.

Regional and European networks: Exchanging local experiences and localising future goals

Youth emigration resulting in population shrinkage and rapid ageing is mostly associated with rural or remote areas, despite the fact that some urban areas can lose population because of steady economic decline, or that rural areas can attract young adults during the course of their lives. Although the conversation about depopulation is unpleasant for decision makers and communities, policymakers should not turn a blind eye to understanding the reasons for outmigration and to policies aimed at attracting return migrants (Brzozowska, Kuhn et al., 2021). Still, for many shrinking regions, the greatest challenge might be to accept the demographic change. As experts highlight, accepting depopulation as a long-term process is the first step in the necessary adaptation of public services and infrastructure.

Cooperation and shared access to demographic tools, data and good practices are the key factors for local and regional administrations in meeting the changing needs of their residents. National associations of local and regional authorities and European networks can play a key role in the coordination of efforts of local and regional actors and resources made available by national governments and the EU. The coordination and effective dissemination of information is valuable to avoid "reinventing the wheel": local administrations and initiatives can learn from each other and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Municipalities should play a stronger role in coordinating local and regional efforts to adapt to demographic change. They can cooperate with civil society and the scientific community to identify new target groups, such as recent rural newcomers after the pandemic and their needs. They can inform the newcomers about the local conditions – existing services, infrastructure, cultural activities and daily life – and help them to integrate into the community.

One common challenge for rural and underserved areas is the lack of housing available for newcomers. Even when local administrations are willing to direct their attention to existing or potential newcomers, they need legislative and administrative

support from national authorities, such as clear restoration and property rules or the provision of loans for young families. Yet, local initiatives can contribute

Demographic data and spatial planning

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• One example of a very successful demonstration project in spatial planning is the action programme for regional services of general interest. In a multi-stage process, regions were invited to deal with the adaptation of their public service infrastructure against the background of declining population figures. Based on an inventory and small-scale population forecasts, strategies were developed for the further development or adaptation of regional services of general interest. These strategies were implemented in initial projects. One example is the improvement of the daytime readiness of the volunteer fire brigade.

Cooperation and shared access to tools, data and good practices

by Francesco Pala

Officer – Young Elected Officials and Partners Engagement,
Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

• The strategy by Local Government Denmark (KL) "At the forefront of the welfare of the future" guides digitalisation, data and new technology in the Danish municipalities and provides a strategic framework for the joint municipal digitalisation programme for 2021–2025 and KL's participation in the digitalisation cooperation across the public sector. The central principles of the strategy are: to focus efforts on identifying and disseminating solutions that are technologically mature and that have the greatest potential for the municipalities; to support the participation of all municipalities in the technological development; to ensure that some municipalities can take the lead and gain experience that others can benefit from.

• In the Netherlands, the COVID-19 crisis has shown how crucial data is for policy and society. From a multilevel government point of view, there was consequently a significant need for the next, even more ambitious step with regard to data. This prompted an acceleration and intensification of the data policy, and the drawing up of an Intergovernmental Data Strategy. This strategy has been drawn up by the various departments on a national level, implementing organisations and umbrella organisations of co-governments, such as the Association of Dutch Provinces (Interprovincial Overleg, IPO) and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, VNG). The data strategy argues for more control over responsible data sharing and the development of a number of data system functions available to all levels of government in the Netherlands.

to the solution of the housing problem in rural and remote places: municipalities as independent stakeholders can search for available houses and apartments and mediate between newcomers and local property owners. A greater availability of accommodation can reduce the high costs of housing, i.e. a sudden increase in rents and living costs for all residents.

Cooperation between science and policymaking: How can we support the local administrations?

Knowledge of regional population forecasts can be a useful instrument for local and regional administrations in short-term planning, e.g. in the areas of schools, nurseries and care facilities. Local stakeholders should have access to information about their current demographic situation through national and regional institutions providing the necessary data and knowledge. However, when analysing population projections for policy planning, deterministic conclusions about demographic trends should be avoided, as they can easily depict a pessimistic future and hinder investments in infrastructure.

The cooperation between communities and municipalities and researchers and research institutions can be enhanced by rural proofing at a local, national and European level, assessing the impacts of certain policies on rural communities. The Rural Observatory by EU and national agencies for rural proofing can support local authorities with data and suggestions for adaptation strategies. The data availability at the local level and analysis of local conditions can be safeguarded by rural observatory programmes in coordination with scientific institutions and local stakeholders.

Scientific forecasts and local adaptation strategies

by Ugis Zanders
Adviser for the Priority Area
"Sustainable and Prosperous Region",
Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat

• The CBSS leads "The Climate Mainstreaming Locally in the Baltic Sea Region (CliMaLoc)" project, supporting the local authorities in the Baltic Sea Region countries in mainstreaming climate change and establishing partnerships for cooperation in this field in the future. The outcome of the project, the "Handbook for Local Climate Change Adaptation Planning in the Baltic Sea Region", guides the local authorities in the BSR countries on how to address the above-mentioned adaptation challenges by making use of the existing knowledge, tools and resources. Learning from the experiences of the neighbours in the BSR, who share similar climate-related challenges, will hopefully help municipalities increase the effectiveness of their adaptation actions and target them to their specific challenges and needs.

• There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach for communities to anticipate, plan and adapt to the changing climate. Projected climate impacts are not expected to be the same in every region or country. Furthermore, the availability of financial, technical and human resources to assess and adapt to climate change varies from one country to another. However, by making use of the presented 10-step approach, municipalities will be able to rely on a robust and tangible framework that will help them to assess local climate risks and to prepare well-tailored adaptation actions suited to their local needs.

Planning for a collaborative and new future

Development models based on territorial competition and growth of cities led to uneven city-regional dynamics, generating territorial inequalities and imbalances. The uneven growth in the dominant urban cores can result in the disadvantage of rural regions and smaller cities facing imbalanced growth in population size, economic activities and human capital. National public finance regulations can lead local municipalities to compete for population, as local public resources heavily depend on the size of the population and tax revenues. Boosting the territorial capital, improving the regional image and collaborative modes of action and financing can help actors at different levels and regions to overcome territorial disparities and enhance social cohesion in the local and regional context.

[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the workshop in March 2023. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 40.

[2] https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/forschung/programme/moro/moro-node.html

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Welcoming newcomers:
What works at the local level?[1]

Key messages

- **Newcomers can be a source of improvement to the quality of life as long as the structural problems in the region are addressed properly.**

- **They can make a place more attractive and more welcoming for others, as their active participation in daily life and local development can help all residents identify more strongly with the region.**

- **Projects supporting migration work and inclusion of newcomers should be funded in the long term to build sustainable structures and networks.**

Migration is an essential part of the discussion when we talk about shrinking regions: while younger people emigrate from rural and underserved regions to urban centres, local administrations try to attract newcomers to ensure the quality of life and investment in infrastructure in their regions. Meanwhile, crises like wars and natural disasters increase the role of local communities and administrations in receiving and settling people who take refuge in a new country or continent. To implement better inclusion and integration policies, local governments and administrations have to meet the diverse needs of the residents and economic actors and find successful ways to cooperate with local and national actors. What are the capacities at the local level to welcome newcomers? How can we achieve structures and instruments of sustainable inclusion at the local level?

Population changes and local communities: Who are the newcomers?

In the face of common obstacles, the heterogeneity of European regions and their demographic diversity require place-based solutions for local communities. We observe a heterogeneity of approaches in addressing the inclusion of newcomers in rural and depopulating places: central and permanent programmes funded by national governments or the EU, as well as temporary programmes and projects or grassroots initiatives to attract newcomers. Better structured projects funded permanently or temporarily by national and European funding programmes mostly target refugees and displaced people. Initiatives by local municipalities and communities to receive and welcome displaced families and individuals are impactful for the initial phase of integration and social inclusion of this target group in the receiving country, even if they move towards urban centres later.

In recent years, some rural areas within the EU have experienced an increase in migration due to labour immigration from eastern and central Europe for work in agriculture, forestry, construction and domestic care (Bock, Osti and Ventura, 2016). However, in many rural and peripheral regions where migrant workers live or commute to industrial centres, there is a need for local initiatives to increase the interaction between long-term residents and newcomers. A good example is the Sicilian town of Capani in Italy, where a buddy programme matches newcomers and long-term residents to participate in cultural and social activities together.

Some shrinking regions, especially rural areas, also attract lifestyle-related inflows of pensioners or middle-class individuals pursuing a (more affordable) life in rural areas while working in nearby urban centres (Čipin, Klüsener et al., 2020). In most cases,

pensioners from western and central Europe settle in rural regions of southern and central-eastern Europe for a higher standard and lower cost of living and to pursue a healthier lifestyle. While local businesses, service providers and administrations can perceive these older newcomers as a potential for investment, income and tax revenues, conflicts might arise due to a lack of housing, care and health infrastructure and interpersonal exchange with long-term residents. Targeting the need for more investment in infrastructure and housing, national and regional policies and programmes can help to integrate the lifestyle-related newcomers into rural communities.

Although it is not yet clear if it will result in permanent changes in the population structures of rural areas, the COVID-19 pandemic and changing working conditions brought about a new type of newcomer group in many rural and peripheral regions: shrinking communities are welcoming new residents who can work remotely and digitally while settling in rural and remote areas. More investment in infrastructure and housing can help local communities to attract more "digital nomads", while local municipalities can provide more information about their regions and their infrastructure for the newcomers who might have a "more romantic" picture of the rural lifestyle. It is equally important for local municipalities and initiatives to increase the interaction between long-term residents and newcomers, as in the previous example of "commuters".

Demographic challenges and local strategies: Creating welcoming structures

Participation and inclusion of all residents in daily life and decision-making processes are key factors for social cohesion at the local level. This gives them the chance to shape the future of their localities and to create a sense of belonging. The involvement of multiple local actors and the collaboration of administrations and residents can help achieve meaningful participation and inclusion of newcomers in rural and shrinking communities. Newcomers can support and sustain economic development and the overall quality of life. And more importantly, newcomers can make a place more attractive and more welcoming

Current challenges in the field of migration work in the local context

by Tülay Ates-Brunner
Managing Director, Tür an Tür-Integrations-projekte gGmbH

• Firstly, the digitalisation craze that municipalities are currently experiencing, although useful as a support, is rarely the solution in the field of migration. Personal contact with an advisor is crucial in situations where complicated circumstances do not allow for standard answers.

• Secondly, despite the fact that the involvement of migrant organisations is now required in all funding announcements and programmes, in practice, this is still too rare. Structural challenges and the heterogeneity within communities that do not allow for representation or substitution are among the reasons for this.

• Finally, the working conditions under which NGOs operate in the migration sector are a pressing issue. The standard funding for migration work is very low, and projects typically only have a duration of one to three years, which is often too short to build sustainable structures and networks. Administrative requirements are also extensive, and almost all major programmes require a contribution of up to 10 %, which poses an existential threat to non-profit organisations. In a competitive job market, NGOs are becoming less attractive as employers, with limited resources and poor working conditions, raising questions about whether they will be able to continue their work in the future, despite its social significance and necessity.

Welcoming spaces and practices

by Maggi W.H. Leung,
Professor in International Development-
Studies, University of Amsterdam

• The municipality of Camini in Italy had been affected by outmigration, depopulation and abandonment for years. This trend was reversed after a reception centre by EUROCOOP for asylum seekers in 2011. Practising principles of sustainable development, the community renewal programme features the creation of workshops for ceramics, carpentry, music (lutherie), local and Syrian cooking classes, crèches and after-school services and the recovery of abandoned land through production of organic oil, wine and wheat. The success story has also attracted tourists, who bring additional income and jobs to the community.

• Also a depopulated village, Arenillas in Spain has made efforts to attract medium-term stayers (longer than 2 to 5, but shorter than 20 years) with children, as a key factor in maintaining services (e.g. school). Mobility is seen as something accepted; there is no expectation for people to stay "forever". With a participative approach, all residents perform an active role in the community. The municipality and a cultural organisation work together to arrange housing and work for newcomers. The village organises "Boina Fest", a summer festival, to raise awareness about depopulation and funding for activities.

• As we underline the potential of hopeful futures, challenges should not be ignored. Besides the welcoming spaces and successful stories identified, we have also found cases of hostility, persistent structural divestments, unsustainable practices and inequalities.

for others, as their active participation in daily life and local development can help all residents identify more strongly with the region.

Communities can support and learn from each other: not just local municipalities, but also local initiatives and community leaders can exchange experiences, ideas and practices to attract newcomers and to include them in social and daily life. Regional and European programmes and platforms are crucial to the adoption of place-based strategies, assisted by a wider network and supported by practical and scientific knowledge and action plans for inclusion and participation. Indeed, the experiences of local municipalities and communities are fundamental in upscaling inclusion and development practices at the regional and national levels. Additionally, regional and European alliances can back smaller communities lacking resources for sustainable inclusion policies to receive more funding and legal assurances. Finally, migrant and civil society initiatives and organisations can uphold the design and implementation of inclusion policies by bringing more perspectives and securing public support.

Meaningful and durable participation of newcomers is fundamental: projects supporting migration work and inclusion of newcomers should be funded in the long term to build sustainable structures and networks. Changes in local and national administrations can also interrupt ongoing efforts and project results if they are not committed to inclusion policies. To achieve resilience and persistence in policymaking on and inclusion of newcomers, local municipalities and local councils can adopt binding resolutions to ensure the participation of newcomers and permanent local structures for inclusion and social cohesion.

In light of the recent crises where local communities receive a bigger number of newcomers, local and regional authorities should be supported by non-recurring and flexible sector funds directly accessible to them when they need fast backing. In this way, local administrations can respond to crises quickly by assuring local inclusion of newcomers and maintaining the overall quality of life of all residents. This can also help national and regional governments and European authorities to ensure that the roles and responsibilities are shared in countering multiple challenges in times of crisis.

Can mobility be a reliable source to improve the quality of life of residents?

Mobility of residents can be part of the solution: in most cases, policy interventions and local initiatives are considered to have failed if they can't ensure the long-term or permanent settlement of newcomers. Many rural and remote areas can successfully attract newcomers to stay in these regions for the short or medium term and still benefit from the ongoing mobility of people as well as investments, ideas and resources. Motivations behind movement away from peripheral regions can be numerous (work or educational opportunities, starting a family, being closer to family or ethnic networks, etc.), yet mobility can contribute to the vitality of local life and quality of life of residents if a region sustains an inflow of people who can make the region attractive for others as well.

Depopulation and ageing are demographic and infrastructural challenges: newcomers can be a source of improvement to the quality of life in regions feeling "left behind" as long as the structural problems in the region are addressed properly. Newcomers will make the need for improvements to healthcare and school systems, transportation, digital infrastructure and housing more visible and vital. To ensure the successful inclusion and integration of newcomers, the mobility of people must be accompanied by state and private investment in infrastructure. However, the investment in infrastructure and targeted policies should avoid creating gaps and a dichotomy between "locals" and "newcomers". Inclusion is a holistic process in which the design of services and policies should target all residents and their needs. Co-creation of policies through different formats of exchange and encounter between most members of the community can ensure success in designing and implementing local actions.

[1] The chapter summarizes the results of the workshop in April 2023. The list of the participating experts can be found on page 40.

[2] How do female migration and gender discrimination in social institutions mutually influence each other?, OECD

From project actions to policy recommendations

by Maria Grazia Montella
Officer – Integration & Migration, Inclu-Cities, Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

• Women's participation is essential to see an improvement in the overall participation of migrant communities in the socio-cultural and political life of a city or a region. Amongst all the actions implemented in the different Action Plans in the four mentee cities (given support and advice by "mentor" cities), and in best practices presented by the mentor cities, at least a third were clearly and specifically addressed to migrant women and girls. This was the result of a combined approach between the first needs analysis conducted in the mentee cities and the political will of the local councils that recognised the multiplier role of women in the diaspora communities.

• This is also backed up by several studies[2] and emphasised in the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, where the mainstreaming of gender and anti-discrimination priorities is underlined in the entire document. The European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life offers guidance for local governments to promote gender equality in their territories, including in terms of balanced political representation (Art. 2), participation in political and civic life (Art. 3), tackling multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage (Art. 10) as well as social inclusion (Art. 18).

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Demographic change and the future of the regions: An outlook

Andreas Edel, Population Europe, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research
Öndercan Muti, Population Europe, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research
Claudia Neu, Georg August University of Göttingen

For many years, rural areas have lost inhabitants to large cities and their surrounding areas. Now this migration trend seems to have been interrupted: in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, the populations of almost all major European metropolises decreased. Overall, almost three quarters of European cities experienced the same phenomenon (Wolff, Mykhnenko, 2023). Conversely, this means that many villages and small towns, especially those in the hinterlands close to urban centres, are benefiting from immigration. In addition to the sharp rise in property prices in the cities, people have been attracted to "rural life" by the opportunity for other forms of living and working after the COVID-19 pandemic. The desire for more living space and a healthy environment outside metropolitan areas is much easier to pursue for many people today than it was a few years ago, thanks to the increased options for remote work (Dolls, Lay, 2023). However, the growth of rural areas that neighbour cities can at best slow down the ageing of such places: ageing and low birth rates mean that peripheral areas in particular, will continue to shrink in the future. Securing regional and social cohesion therefore remains a central challenge for politics and society in Germany (in the context of the constitutionally required "equality of living conditions" for the entire country) and Europe (for example, through its "cohesion policy"; European Commission, 2022).

The contributions in this discussion paper show that neither fatalism, nor naive optimism, are appropriate when developing strategies for the future vitality of regions in Europe. Regions are heterogenous, and they all have resources and potential – even if not the same ones nor in the same amount. Examples in structurally weak or peripheral regions of Europe, some of which are presented here, tell of this potential. The past few years of regional policy and development have shown that funding must be more flexible, more process-orientated, and more strongly geared to local needs. While the efforts of civil society in regions are strong, one cannot rely on their capacities alone; government investment in sustainable and "demographically resistant" infrastructure remains indispensable for maintaining and shaping attractive living conditions. Furthermore, more focus must be given to countering the already entrenched narrative that rural areas are "left behind", which is being used by right-wing populist actors throughout Europe to gain support.

From an ageing to a more diverse society

Along with climate change and digitalisation, demographic change is one of the "mega-trends" of our time and is a starting point for all regional policies. Moreover, the focus should no longer solely be on the ageing of populations resulting from low birth rates and the simultaneous increase in life expectancy, but rather on the composition of those populations according to socio-demographic characteristics. The population of Europe (including in its regions) is getting more and more diverse, including in terms of age and health, marital status and number of children, educational attainment and access to the labour market, ethnicity and gender identity. Consequently, planning activities in policy, economy and society must consider the implications of this growing population diversity and what hierarchies of need will look like in the coming decades.

This starts with individual lifestyles, which have changed considerably compared to previous generations. New family types and forms of partner relationships, people who are physically separated from their relatives or who are divorced or are living alone,

smaller families, single-parent families and childless households are shaping the way we live together much more than ever before. Ensuring the reconciliation of family life and work, and a fair distribution of the care tasks associated with children and relatives in need of support is not solely related to expectations of partners in a relationship. In this respect, socio-political support for all types of families and living arrangements is also fundamental for a society's capacity to provide optimal living conditions for the next generations as well as vulnerable individuals in need of support. It is also crucial for fair labour market opportunities for those who take on care-related tasks within families.

Furthermore, different levels of educational attainment and opportunities for further education throughout one's life course are associated with less straightforward employment biographies. An applicant pool today is more diverse than in times when linear CVs were expected in human resource departments. "Lifelong learning" is becoming an increasingly indispensable aspect of working life in the face of greater occupational mobility, especially when the demands on employees are changing rapidly in the process of digitalisation.

Ultimately, migration and mobility increase population diversity, regardless of whether the immigrants come from a city or another region in the country, from a member state of the European Union, from further abroad, or from a place at war or crisis. This is because all newcomers can differ in terms of age, gender, health, family type, educational attainment and access to the labour market, even if they come from a culturally similar context and speak a language of the region.

Regional development, as in other policy fields, must therefore deal with the fact that the composition of populations will change significantly in the next two decades, and the demand for goods and services will increasingly diversify. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that we are, in several respects, at a '*Zeitenwende*', in which the effects of global crises are increasingly noticeable in our immediate living environments. This will require us to make changes in our consumption patterns, for example to mitigate and manage the impacts of climate change or the war in Ukraine. The long-predicted effects of demographic

change are becoming more evident with the retirement of the baby boomers. Considerable changes in the age structure of the European population pose new challenges to politics, the economy and society. For example, there will be challenges related to the sustainable financing of the welfare state and to overcoming shortages in the labour force (which is already being experienced in an increasing number of economic sectors). These could result in the need for people to stay until an older age in the workforce, which in turn raises the questions of which population groups are able to do so or can be trained to do so.

An often-discussed facet of this topic concerns the question of how the consequences of demographic change can also be fairly shaped for future generations. Here too, growing population diversity must be considered. Often, the discussion does not take into account the fact that the "elderly" do not exist as a homogenous group, especially as reaching a certain age does not go hand-in-hand with similar living conditions for all in the same age group. This is true across generations – people today are healthier on average, even at an older age, and have more and higher education chances and broader employment and engagement opportunities than the generation before. But these advantages are distributed very unevenly in society, and not everyone benefits from a healthy, active and productive older age. On the other hand, the "youth" are also not a homogeneous group: from "Generation Greta" to "Generation Corona" or "Generation Social Media", today's 15 – 25-year olds are characterised by different interests, concerns and expectations for the future, depending on their age-specific experiences. Projects to increase cross-generational cooperation should therefore be orientated less towards stereotypes about age groups, and rather towards cross-generational interests, such as attractive living conditions for families, or opportunities for joint leisure activities in the natural environment (Neu, 2023).

New work – new mobility – new opportunities?

Fundamental changes to working lives have been emerging for some time, yet their advantages and disadvantages for regional policy are not yet suffi-

ciently understood. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged perceived certainties that have determined our working lives until now. This applies in particular to the ability to work from one's "home office", which before the lockdowns was considered incompatible with requirements of organisations in many sectors. Remote work now appears to be an effective means of allowing individuals as well as families more flexibility in organising their working hours and to live outside the metropolitan centres.

However, these new forms of working mobility also have their downsides. The emigration of people from the metropolitan areas can be linked to shortages of housing, and thus rising property costs, in rural areas. The processes of rural gentrification, i.e. exposing long-time residents to more competition in the housing market, must be considered by policy makers. Furthermore, newcomers and long-time residents often struggle to interact and exchange – even after years. Different lifestyles, but also incompatible ideas of tranquillity, garden design or successful community building can be points of contention within a village. It is not uncommon for people part of the "urban exodus" to remain connected to their old places of life and work as commuters and, to a certain extent, live in both "worlds" without "settling" in their new place of residence in the way that longer-term residents of rural areas might expect.

Following decades of infrastructure decline in rural communities, the influx of new people and families might create new demands, for example for local services, day-care centres, schools, hospitals, and nursing and senior care homes, which often cannot be met by the municipalities in the short-term or only to a limited extent. Meanwhile, longer-term residents may prefer other policy and planning priorities, such as the development of better transport and mobility options. There is a current lack of suitable public transport services (in terms of frequency, connections, transitions between means of transport, etc.) that forces people who live in regions that are not on main public transport routes to use a great amount of personal time and resources to move around. For instance, many inhabitants of rural areas remain dependent on owning a car to remain connected to important "lifelines". According to a recent study in Germany, rural residents (76 %) fear that they will be less able to benefit from new mobility services than

urban residents (61 %) (Maier et al., 2021). They worry significantly more than urban dwellers about not having access to health infrastructure in the future – 82 % in rural areas have such fears, compared to 66 % in the city.

On the other hand, the "triumph" of home office in the wake of the pandemic has demonstrated the great and unrealised potential of digitalisation to increase the participation of local regional populations and to help them to shape their living environment. The fact that most people in Europe now have mobile devices and are increasingly using digital information services creates new opportunities to stay connected and to promote joint initiatives. In addition to the notice board at the mayor's office, the church, the supermarket, or in the local newspaper, social media and apps for local communication have emerged that have potential for expanding regional marketing and citizen activation. It goes without saying that regionwide broadband connections, which are not yet available throughout Europe, are perquisite for this. Younger people in particular will no longer feel "at home" in places with poor network connections and may move away.

However, digital information does not replace social interaction, and this still takes place mainly in analogue spaces. When restaurants, clubhouses, community centres or youth clubs close, other "social places" (Kersten, Neu, Vogel, 2022) must be created or revived where people can come together. This could be in the form of a community centre, which is a meeting place for training courses, citizens' initiatives or other leisure activities. Cultural activities – from local community festivals and history workshops to cultural institutions in the form of local museums or amateur theatres – make community and regional identity a tangible experience. Citizens' projects to safeguard or to restore old buildings, to beautify marketplaces or to maintain green spaces and local recreation areas complement the responsibility of municipalities and can increase the feeling of self-empowerment.

The desire for communication and encounters with others brings enjoyment. However, civic participation is not a self-perpetuating process. It needs resources – in the form of people, time, money, support and recognition. Furthermore, people only get

involved locally when activities are relevant to them. Increasingly, local groups of actors from civil society, government administrations and businesses are getting involved in making concrete contributions to their communities and their sustainable development (such as through setting up energy cooperatives, village shops, pubs, etc.). Much more than in the past, such local activities are an opportunity to strengthen the social participation and interaction between longer-term and newer community members.

Sharing best practices

Success stories of cross-local and cross-regional cooperation presented in the workshops demonstrate ways in which regions that are affected by economic decline, social transition and population loss can explore opportunities for change by pooling resources for joint initiatives and alliances. Such examples of cooperation are not only based on geography, they are also cross-sectoral, i.e. they involve people from politics, business, civil society and science, and use different forms of citizen engagement.

Such a process can include: training local administration for the acquisition and implementation of such projects and, if necessary, equipping them with more staff; having the local and regional businesses as partners that strengthen projects and possibly financially support them; linking with civil society, which can bring corresponding initiatives into the community. Science can inform dialogue about long-term changes in the population structure and evaluate examples of best practices, and how they function in specific socio-cultural contexts. For such projects to work, changes in mindset (and structure) is required on the part of regional funding: instead of short-term programmes to start new projects from scratch, preference should be given to longer-term project funding, which makes the investment of time and money more attractive and sustainable for all involved and that encourages the networking of stakeholders.

Accessible "learning factories", run by scientific and civic stakeholders, could collect and evaluate "best" and "worst" practices to help governments and communities better prepare for future challenges posed by demographic changes across regions. For example,

labour and skills shortages in the tourism and gastronomy sectors have been apparent for some years. The health and care sectors across regions are also starting to experience the same thing, and until now, some of the gaps have been filled through seasonal and circular migration or via the informal labour market. However, the recruitment of workers from abroad might not achieve the desired effects in a sustainable way. Under current migration laws, many of those recruited do not have long-term prospects to remain in the recruiting region or country, and/or may later want to migrate to the large centres with more ethnically diverse populations and communities, to English-speaking countries or, in the long-term, back to the country of origin. For regional policy, best practices could be shared for filling labour shortages in a sustainable way, for example through developing more of a "welcoming culture" and investing in integration services.

Best practices could also be shared amongst regions regarding education planning. Regions across Germany, for example, have significant shortage of teachers, and the management of this is a major challenge, especially for areas located outside urban centres. With the closure of primary and secondary education facilities, places automatically become less attractive for families to settle, even if there are sufficient employment and career opportunities locally. Ways to close this vicious cycle, such as through enhanced e-learning, could highlight new approaches here, for example through how the Nordic countries navigated the management of pandemic-related constraints in the school system.

Ultimately, there needs to be a shift in certain patterns of thinking so that regions can adjust to population changes. Peripheral areas must not be lumped together, and considered "all the same" by policy makers and funders, but must be differentiated and better targeted according to their respective resources and opportunities for securing skilled labour, attracting young families and supporting older people. We also must not assume that settling in one place forever represents the "success" of regional development. To a certain extent, it is inevitable that regions undergoing demographic change will experience population fluctuations. Furthermore, affordable rents, plenty of space and fresh air are not sufficient in the long-run to attract and retain everyone

who moves to a rural area. Among other factors, mobility is particularly associated with different stages of the life-course. In certain periods of life, people may need more flexibility, and in others, stability. It is common for people to move places where they expect to find more social contacts, better educational opportunities, and employment prospects.

In summary, in the face of the diversifying and constantly changing populations across Europe, the vitality of regions will depend on better analysing and taking advantage of their potential. Much depends on changing our perception of the problems ahead, including our willingness to cooperate, ability to learn from the experiences of others without simplistically duplicating, and the creativity to use new and old opportunities and tools of regional development. Above all, instead of talking about regions that are "left behind", we should talk about "demographic change and the future of the regions". This discussion paper presents some aspects of this to consider. It is based on examples from all over Europe which demonstrate that the continent's regions have a great wealth of practical experience that could be better utilised in the future.

List of experts
attending the online discussions and workshops

High-level expert and kick-off meeting
April 2022

Daria Akhutina
Senior Adviser for Sustainable & Prosperous Region,
The Council of the Baltic Sea States

Federico Benassi
Researcher and expert on Spatial Demography

Blandine Camus
Communication & Policy Officer, European Association
of Mountain Areas (Euromontana)

Mags Currie
Senior Researcher at Social, Economic and Geographical
Sciences Department, James Hutton Institute

Sebastian Klüsener
Research Director on Demographic Change and Longevity,
German Federal Institute for Population Research

Veronika Korčeková
Policy Analyst, The European Network for Rural Develop-
ment (ENRD)

Anna Kwiatkiewicz-Mory
Senior Adviser at Social Affairs Department, Business
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Daniel Meltzian
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Sylwia Michalska
Senior Researcher at Institute of Rural and Agricultural
Development, Polish Academy of Sciences

Marina Monaco
Policy Advisor, European Trade Unions Confederation (ETUC)

Ana Isabel Moreno Monroy
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Deša Srsen
Deputy Head of Cabinet, Cabinet of Vice-President
Dubravka Šuica, European Commission

Dario Tarchi
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ance", Joint Research Center (JRC)

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**More than target groups: Depopulation
and agency of local communities**
October 2022

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Nikola Sander
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Yanina Taneva
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Ruth Wilson
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Online Discussion: Overwhelmed families – overwhelmed local communities?
October 2022

Elizabeth Gosme
Director, COFACE Families Europe

Francisco Javier Montes
Mayor, Molina de Aragon, Spain

Josefina Syssner
Senior Associate Professor in Cultural Geography at the Center for Municipality Studies, Linköping University

Willem Adema
Senior Economist in the Social Policy Division, OECD

No place like home?
Depopulation and local ties
November 2022

Blandine Camus
Communication & Policy Officer, European Association of Mountain Areas (Euromontana)

Camila Del Mármol
Associate Professor in Social Anthropology, University of Barcelona

Margarita Dorovska
Director, House of Humour and Satire (Gabrovo, Bulgaria)

Daniela Kretz
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Sarah Lund
Project Manager, Klimatorium (Lemvig, Sweden)

Christina Noble
Qualitative Social Scientist in the Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences Group, James Hutton Institute

Bianca Momo Skowron
Industrial Heritage Team, Ruhr Regional Association (RVR)

Online discussion:
European regions in transition:
Lessons and perspectives
December 2022

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Karola Geiß-Netthöfel
Director, Regionalverband Ruhr

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Breaking the vicious cycle? Depopulation and provision of public services
January 2023

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Javier Sancho Royo
Lead Project Manager, SARGA – Sociedad Aragonesa de Gestión Agroambiental S.L.U.

Louise Skoog
Post Doctoral Researcher in Political Science, Umeå University

Planning for the future: How can local communities adapt to population changes?
March 2023

Federico Benassi
Senior Researcher in Demography, University of Naples Federico II

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Steffen Maretzke
Project Manager at the Department "Spatial Development", Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR)

Francesco Pala
Officer – Young Elected Officials and Partners Engagement, Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

Anita Seļicka
Executive Director, Latvian Rural Forum

Ugis Zanders
Adviser for the Priority Area "Sustainable and Prosperous Region", Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat

Welcoming newcomers: What works at the local level?
April 2023

Tülay Ates-Brunner
Managing Director, Tür an Tür-Integrationsprojekte gGmbH

Tiziana Caponio
Research Fellow and Professor of Dynamics and Policies of Migration, Collegio Carlo Alberto and University of Turin

András Kováts
Director, Hungarian Association for Migrants (Menedék)

Maggi W.H. Leung
Professor in International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam

Maria Grazia Montella

Officer – Integration & Migration, IncluCities, Council
of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

Closing Event:
Population diversity: How does social cohesion
work at the local level?
June 2023

Eter Hachmann

Deputy for Social Affairs, Education, Youth and Senior
Citizens, City of Dessau-Roßlau

Jaimie Just

Citizenship Team Coordinator, The Council of European
Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

Katja Lenz

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Theresa Schmidt

Federal Chairwoman, Federation of German Rural Youth
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