

FACTFILE

Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

The question of smart growth in small towns and rural communities.

Many rural communities and small towns are facing challenges: a declining rural population, loss of study and workplaces, budget means and at the same time rapid growth of metropolitan areas. What strategies can be used to protect and preserve the environment and at the same time create growth and development?

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2. The implementation of smart growth/ strategies for development in areas of rural life such as:
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1. Key Terms:

A. **Smart growth:** “Smart growth is originally a US term incorporating the American English meaning of the word smart to imply intelligent. When smart growth principles are applied to planning, new urban developments are designed so that shops and schools and places of work are within walking, or bicycling, distance of one another. The idea is to prevent huge areas of urban sprawl that have marred the suburbs of many western cities and to create sustainable communities instead.

The European Commission borrowed the term smart growth to describe a decade-long planning vision established in 2010 called Europe 2020. The EC determines that smart growth means improving the EU’s performance in education, research and innovation in the digital society as a whole.” (Financial Times Lexicon, URL: <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=smart%20growth>)

B. **Urbanization:** “the process by which more and more people leave the countryside to live in cities” (Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/urbanization>)

C. **Rural planning:** “social or economic activities or initiatives designed to improve the standard of living in areas far away from large towns or cities” (Collins Dictionary, URL: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/rural-development>)

D. **(Rural) Zoning:** “Legislative process that divides privately-owned urban areas into different zones (such as residential, commercial, industrial) according to the specified land use. Each zone is regulated as to density, location, size, and type of buildings permitted

therein.” (business dictionary, URL:

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/zoning.html>)

E. **Rural area:** “A rural area is an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, and not very many people.

A rural areas population density is very low. Many people live in a city, or urban area. Their homes and businesses are located very close to one another. In a rural area, there are fewer people, and their homes and businesses are located far away from one another.

Agriculture is the primary industry in most rural areas. Most people live or work on farms or ranches. Hamlets, villages, towns, and other small settlements are in or surrounded by rural areas.

Wildlife is more frequently found in rural areas than in cities because of the absence of people and buildings. In fact, rural areas are often called the country because residents can see and interact with the country's native wildlife.

Throughout the world, more people live in rural areas than in urban areas. This has been changing rapidly, however. Urbanization is happening all over the world. In Asia, for example, the United Nations estimates that the urban population will increase by almost 2 billion by 2050.” (National Geographic Society, URL: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/rural-area/>)

F. **Equitable development:** “Equitable development is an approach for meeting the needs of underserved communities through policies and programs that reduce disparities while fostering places that are healthy and vibrant. It is increasingly considered an effective placed-based action for creating strong and livable communities.” (United States Environmental Protection agency, URL:

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/equitable-development-and-environmental-justice>

<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-and-equitable-development>

→ Problems faced by rural areas:

- Proximity to polluting facilities
- Barriers to participating in decision-making processes
- Disproportionate levels of chronic disease
- Neighborhood disinvestment

- poor/no access to jobs and services as well as education

G. **Spatial planning:** “A 20–30 year strategy that sets the strategic direction for a community to form the basis for the coordination of decision-making, infrastructure, services and investment. It is a means of aligning other council plans, as well as providing a visual illustration of the intended future location, form and mix of residential, rural and business areas, along with the critical transport and infrastructure required to service those areas and any relevant environmental constraints (for example, natural hazards)” (Adapted from MfE (2010), Building Competitive Cities: Reform of the Urban and Infrastructure Planning System - A Discussion Document, p.72; Local Government Commission, URL:

<http://www.lgc.govt.nz/assets/Wellington-Spatial-Planning/Wellington-Region-Spatial-Plan-Report-May-2016.pdf>)

H. **Smart specialization:** “The Smart specialisation’ approach combines industrial, educational and innovation policies to suggest that countries or regions identify and select a limited number of priority areas for knowledge-based investments, focusing on their strengths and comparative advantages.” (OECD, URL:

<http://www.oecd.org/sti/inno/smartspecialisation.htm>)

I. **EU cohesion policy:** “The European Commission's Cohesion Policy aims to reduce differences between regions and to ensure growth across Europe. Structural Funds are among its main tools. Its efficient use and management is a crucial factor for many regions in Europe to overcome the economic crisis.” (European Commission, URL:

<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research-topic/smart-specialisation>)

J. **Smart villages:** are “rural areas and communities which build on their existing strengths and assets as well as on developing new opportunities”, where “traditional and new networks and services are enhanced by means of digital, telecommunication technologies, innovations and the better use of knowledge”. (Bled Slovenia Declaration for a smarter future of the Rural Areas of the EU)

2. The implementation of smart growth in areas of rural life such as:

a. Education

In rural areas there is often poor access to schools or educational facilities due to the lack of people, especially the younger generation. Whilst kindergartens and elementary schools are more likely to be found in a reachable perimeter, advanced educational facilities are often more difficult to reach from the countryside. Secondary schools can be over 50 kilometers away, depending on the starting point. As the lack of public transportation is another problem, it can become a challenge to access secondary schools. Sometimes carpooling becomes necessary as working parents cannot drive their children to school every day, in most cases. What can be done to ensure access to education in areas of low population?

b. Industry

At its 70th General Assembly in 2015, the United Nations adopted a new comprehensive global strategy of sustainable development for the next 15 years, the "Agenda 2030". It comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 sub-targets altogether. Target 2 of Goal 9 ("Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation") promotes "inclusive and sustainable industrialization", to be applied both in developed and developing countries. For Europe a sustainable (re)-industrialization, especially of rural areas, has become a huge challenge, as the trends of continued urbanization on the one hand and depopulation of the countryside on the other have to be halted or at least significantly slowed down. The scope of measures to take is very broad. Tax incentives for small businesses which create employment for local youth, a fast digitalization of rural areas via a state of the art broadband network, aiding small shops/restaurants in the centers of villages or small cities are just some possible areas of needed support and action by authorities on the local, regional, federal and in the broader sense, European level. According to UNDP figures 98 per cent of agricultural production undergoes industrial processing (in developing countries only 30 per cent!) in high income countries. At the same time, European countries can certainly still refine the existing processing of agricultural production towards greater sustainability, with special focus on organic farming and responsible forestry.

c. Transportation

A common problem on the countryside is the lack of public transportation. Since there are fewer resources in rural areas - it could very well be that there is not even a grocery store in very small communities - inhabitants are required to travel in order to buy what they need. As only about half of Europe's population owns a car, public transportation is necessary, especially in rural areas where the distances are greater than in large cities. If public transportation is already established, the timetables are often not very well elaborated. Most of the time this results in the transportation not being frequent enough. What measures can the EU take to provide sufficient public transportation in rural communities?

d. Agriculture

Depending on the location and therefore the natural environment, agriculture is very important in rural areas. Whilst a part of smart growth is the "upgrade" of small communities it is crucial to preserve the landscape not only to maintain culture and traditions but also to ensure the retention of agriculture as a large field of work. How can the EU implement smart growth in rural areas and assure the ongoing importance of agriculture at the same time?

e. Infrastructure

As already mentioned under 2.b.) industry Sustainable Development Goal 9 speaks of "building a resilient infrastructure". Like the "Agenda 2030" in its totality, this particular goal pertains to all the countries in the world, both developing and developed. Developed countries will have to heavily invest in the improvement of their infrastructure, with special regard to environmental friendliness. The transport sector, both individual and public, is certainly in the need of refinement and must foresee major changes. Individual transport will orient itself towards very substantial emission reductions, public transport must much more effectively include the periphery and rural areas in a target oriented manner, the latter within and among themselves. Bringing Europe's infrastructure in all the member countries to worldwide high standards also demands a dramatic breakthrough and desperate improvement of the digitalization of both urban and rural areas. Investing into infrastructure advancements also encompasses vast support for targeted research on related future technical and digital developments.

f. Economy and tourism

The unmistakable disparities -particularly the economic ones- between rural regions in Europe, have been even more so accentuated by the 2008 financial crisis. With the rapid growth of long-term development in globalization, information technology and climate change, it seems rural economies have been left in the lurch, unable to get back on their feet. Other factors, to name a few, include: depopulation, demographic ageing, poverty, land abandonment, a heavy reliance on small-scale agricultural production, limited basic service provision and severe infrastructure challenges. With the introduction of new marketing strategies for organically produced agricultural products ("slow food") rural areas could also attract small scale tourism. Farm stays for customers who want to taste fresh local products have developed in wine growing regions but could be extended to different sectors of agricultural production. Many creative ideas are floating at present, oriented also at rapidly growing the sector of outdoor sports activities in rural areas. Support of the political institutions of all levels is undoubtedly needed.