



# Intergroup Newsletter

MARCH 2021

## Overview

The Secretariat is very much looking forward to working with you this year! In this first-ever Newsletter of the Intergroup you will find relevant information concerning:

- 2021 Kick-off meeting
- [Press release](#) - Rural Areas should not be left behind in the Recovery Plans
- Events: Participation to Rural Connectivity Events with Ericsson & Vantage Towers
- New Publications on Smart Villages and Prospects for EU Rural Areas
- Plenary debate: Long term vision for rural areas
- Rural Vision Week
- Member's Corner
- Calendar

## Intergroup Activities

### □ 2021 Kick-off meeting

On Tuesday 23 February, the Intergroup's Civil Society, Members & Observers joined the Co-Chairs and Secretariat in a meeting to plan the activities of the Intergroup for 2021.

The Secretariat first explained the main events and activities of 2020. In October the **General Assembly** was held and an article on Smart Villages was published in the Parliament

Magazine. In November, a **meeting with Vice-President Šuica** took place, as well as an event at the Committee of the Regions with R.E.D. and Euromontana. The Intergroup also contributed to the Commission's Long Term Vision for Rural Areas.

Members now have access to a new **Communications toolbox** including visuals, banners and PowerPoint. It can be accessed through the [Teams group](#). Members were also encouraged to follow and share our the [new Twitter account](#) of the Intergroup.



Besides, coalition members and Secretariat discussed activity ideas for 2021: Roundtable on health access in rural areas with the [All Policies for a Healthy Europe](#) coalition for quarter two; webinar series hosted by the FREE Initiative on rural energy; SILVER SMEs Conference on 21 April; Webinars on entrepreneurship & migrations hosted by Euromontana in quarter two or three and a possible participation to Commission's thematic workshop & conference on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.

Finally, the meeting concluded with a final tour de table where coalition members introduced their organisations and presented their priorities for 2021.

- **Euromontana** is calling on the Commission to develop a specific strategy taking into account the characteristics of the highlands and mountain areas;
- **MEP Franc Bogovič** is organising a Conference on Smart Villages on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 in Slovenia, in the framework of the upcoming Slovenian Presidency;
- **MEP Hannes Heide** will organise an event on mobility and public transport in rural areas;
- **MEP Atidzhe Alieva-Veli** is planning to organise webinars with municipalities in Bulgaria;
- **R.E.D** will organise in June or September an European seminar entitled "Smart Village/Smart Rural territories and territorial innovation";
- **CEJA** is focusing on recovery and CAP strategic plans. For quarter two 2021, they will tackle youth and social policies in rural areas;
- **SSPA** issued a report on the contribution of sparsely populated areas to the environment, a video on the topic was aired. SSPA engaged with Spanish MPs and had great support in its efforts of granting rural areas a specific plan in the recovery funds. SSPA also worked on getting a definition of handicapped territory;

- **ELARD** informed that they will host an event on the week of the Conference on the Future of Europe and are planning an event on engaging citizens;
  - **LRF** will organize an event on Smart Villages in June and looks forward to cooperating with CEJA when working on youth;
  - **the University of Ljubljana** informed that they are working on digital and tech in rural areas, they will hold their final conference on 29 April. The University applied for new Horizon projects and plans events in partnership with the Forum members;
  - **EUMA** will organize in 2022 a workshop based in the results of their Erasmus programme on developing an innovative management of hiking infrastructures in the mountains;
  - **NSPA** is involved in public consultations related to regulations on the areas of interest of the organisation: Nordic areas and rural agricultural vision. NSPA informed that the 5G discussion will be a challenge for Nordic areas;
  - **CEMR** participated by the first time in a meeting of the Intergroup, they are conducting surveys in rural areas to get local stakeholders' views. CEMR will organise an event in the Week of Regions and Cities with focus on rural areas.
- **[Press Release](#) – Rural areas should not be left behind in the recovery plans**
- On March 23 the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the RUMRA & Smart Villages Intergroup issued a joint Press Release insisting that rural areas must not be left behind in plans to build a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe post-pandemic. In the statement they rejected any plan that does not follow the partnership principle and involve rural areas in the drafting of the recovery and resilience plans.
- Please don't hesitate to [share our Tweet!](#)



On the same page, in an [article](#) for a German regional newspaper, MEP Engin Eroglu (Renew, DE) expressed his [frustration](#) that the Commission has earmarked only 1% of the RRF for rural support, despite the fact that rural areas and SMEs in these areas are particularly

affected economically and socially by the consequences of the global pandemic. 'It is time for us to understand that the future of the EU is being made in the countryside!' he said.

□ **Ericsson event: Road to recovery – How 5G can power smart rural development**

Ericsson and the Intergroup partnered together to organise the [event](#), which took place on 25 February. It gathered Pekka Pesonen (Copa-Cogeca), MEP Franc Bogovic, Juan Manuel Velasco León (DG AGRI), Marie Hogan (Ericsson) and Stephen Adams (Global Counsel).



Panellists discussed how 5G can drive more sustainable and productive agriculture and strengthen economic and social inclusion in rural areas. MEP Bogovic stressed that to ensure resilient rural areas and quality of life, connectivity (including 5G) is needed. He also signalled that access to broadband internet is as necessary for EU citizens as access to water. "A resilient EU also needs resilient rural areas" he added.

Marie Hogan kicked off the discussion by outlining that 5G brings new opportunities to rural areas beyond agriculture and business, Juan Manuel Velasco then pointed out that there has been a massive improvement despite the 40% of EU population not having equal access to broadband. He announced the Commission's goal for 2025 to finance investment in high speed networks to cover more rural areas. Pekka Pesonen then welcomed the Smart Villages initiative by MEP Bogovic and warned that the EU will not be any longer a source of modern agriculture in the next 5 years if large private businesses do not engage. Their commitment is a precondition to make the Green Deal a success. The discussion finalised with the remarks by MEPs Kelly and Kympouropoulos who both see a great potential in 5G as a driver of growth in rural areas.

□ **Vantage Towers event: Rural Areas & Smart Villages 2040: Bridging Europe's Digital Divide through Mobile Connectivity**

The [event](#), organised in partnership with Vantage Towers, was held on 4 March. MEP Bogovic and Vivek Badrinath (Vantage Towers) issued introductory remarks. The panellists were Tobias Miethane (German Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure), Jean-Luc Lemmens (IDATE DigiWorld), Rita Wezenbeek (DG CONNECT) and Jorge Pinto (Member of Commissioner Wojciechowski's Cabinet). Besides, guest MEPs Franc Bogovič, Tsvetelina Penkova, Niklas Nienaß and Juozas Olekas took part in the discussion.



Tobias Miethane stressed that mobile connectivity is a top priority in Germany. He showed optimism about closing the numerous white spots. Jean-Luc Lemmens explained the European paradox: The level of investment by operators in the EU into connectivity is 25% higher than by US or Asian Telekom providers. Nevertheless, there are many white and grey zones of non-connectivity in the EU. Rita Wezenbeek then pointed out that digital

connectivity for a long-lasting recovery is essential for citizens and businesses. She also announced an upcoming European project on people's digital skills. Finally, Jorge Pinto acknowledged that policies linking digitalisation and sustainability are challenging, and for them to fully succeed, investments in infrastructures to have full 5G coverage are needed.

MEP Bogovic concluded the discussion with a clear statement: "we cannot have a green and resilient Europe, without having green, smart and resilient rural areas".

#### □ **New Publications on Smart Villages and Prospects for EU Rural Areas**

On February 4, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering of University of Ljubljana published an article on [Smart Villages Policies: Past, Present and Future](#). It features contributions of several authors from different institutions, including Ms Emilija Stojmenova Duh and outlines the important role of rural development while reviewing rural policies. More information is available on our [website](#).

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, the European Parliament Research Services (EPRS), the EP think tank, published a briefing on [Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas](#). The paper explores the meaning and implications behind the concept of 'smart villages', which touches upon the use of digital technologies and smart solutions as well as local participation. The ongoing CAP reform is presented as an example of the development and relevance of the 'smart villages' concept. More information is available on our [website](#).

## **EU Policy Update**

#### □ **Plenary debate: Long term vision for rural areas**

At the [Plenary debate](#) on 11 March, MEPs discussed with Commissioner Wojciechowski the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas on the basis of an [oral question](#) submitted on 29/01/2021 to the Commission by AGRI Chair Norbert Lins (EPP, DE). The question touched upon the degree of coherence between the CAP and other policies involved in developing the long-term vision. It also referred to how to ensure a maximum involvement of regional and local rural authorities in the preparation, analysis, design and implementation of the long-term vision. It also mentioned whether the Commission intended to draw a proper distinction between funding for rural areas under the CAP and cohesion policy, taking into account the objectives of each policy as described in Articles 39 and 174 of the Treaty.

Commissioner Wojciechowski acknowledged that despite art. 174 TFUE calls for special attention to rural areas, citizens living there feel left behind. He stressed that the purpose of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas is to get the EU closer to its rural citizens. He announced that his team is enhancing synergies and supporting the development of rural areas in a coherent manner.



To complete his answer, he explained the latest developments carried out by the Commission: on June 2020 Commissioners Wojciechowski, Suica and Ferreira signed a letter to Member States to ensure that specific needs are fully taken into account. On December 2020, the Commission issued recommendations to mobilize financial resources. Finally, he informed that the ongoing assessment of Member States plans is positive. European countries are following the Commissions' recommendations on bioeconomy, environment, forestry, broadband and rural transport accessibility. On the CAP, he recognised that though the CAP strategic plans help, they are not enough and the Long Term Vision goes beyond. As per the last point on the distinction between funding, he stated that rather than focusing on such a distinction, the Commission is working on synergies. Farmers should be supported by the CAP and resilience funds to tackle demography and related challenges of rural areas.

□ **Rural Vision Week: Imagining the future of Europe's rural areas**



The [European Network for Rural Development \(ENRD\)](#), in cooperation with the European Commission, organised a virtual event - '[Rural Vision Week](#)': Imagining the future of Europe's rural areas' between 22 and 26 March 2021. This interactive event included high level presentations and discussions, a marketplace, workshops and 'fringe' activities. These involved European stakeholder participants in working together to contribute to the preparation of a long term Vision for the future of EU rural areas in relation to which the Commission is scheduled to adopt a Communication later this summer.

The event included 'virtual stalls' in the '[RURAL](#) Marketplace' everyday between 22 and 26 March 2021. Throughout Rural Vision Week, the ENRD Contact Point provided space on their website for rural stakeholders, local communities, EU organisations, research projects and others to present aspects of their rural vision. 'Fringe' Workshop events were held on the morning of Thursday 25 March 2021. They provided a space for various stakeholders and organisations with an interest in rural areas to present their perspectives and messages within their own rural vision session. Our coalition member, ELARD, ran one on [Resilient rural communities for a viable Europe](#). And CEJA provided a [summary of a couple of workshops](#).

## Members' Corner

□ **CEMR – Long-term vision for rural areas. Making “no one left behind” a reality**

*At a time when the European Commission is elaborating the EU's long term vision for rural areas, and Member States are adopting the [Territorial Agenda 2030](#), the Council of European*

*Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) wishes to broaden the discussion and propose a long term vision for European rural areas, from the perspective of municipalities and regions. Read the full article [here](#).*

□ **CEMR – Sustainable territorial and local development**

*It's a common pattern: many of Europe's rural areas are in demographic decline as a result of aging and youth emigration towards urban centres. In many cases, the desertification of the countryside and the decline of public services are driving alienation and [political discontent](#) across our continent. Read the full article [here](#).*

□ **ELARD – Successful Fringe-workshop 25th of March**

At the occasion of the [Rural Vision Week](#) earlier mentioned, ELARD organised a [Fringeworkshop](#) on "Resilient rural communities for a viable Europe - A viable Europe through local democracy and participatory approaches in all rural areas and beyond". Among other topics, ELARD discussed with Ms Wallis Goelen-Vanderbrock (DG REGIO), Ms María Gafo (DG AGRI), Mr Radim Srsen (NAT committee of CoR), and Mr Stefan Niedermoser (Austrian LEADER-forum) how the LTVRA can become a reality and how to engage at local level.

□ **LEADER turned 30 years old!**



On 15 March 2021, LEADER turned 30 years old. As our colleagues from ELARD [explain](#), on 15 March 1991 the (at the time) Commission of the European Communities, acting pursuant to Article 11 of Regulation (EEC) No 4253/88 decided to establish the LEADER initiative to serve as a model for rural development.

□ **SSPA Network – Project: 5 FOR RURAL. Smart Rural Societies**

The founding entities of the [SSPA Network](#), the Confederations of businessmen of Cuenca, Soria and Teruel (CEOEs) propose the **project '5 FOR RURAL'** as a part of the Spanish Recovery Plan, that includes a strategic transformation of the most unpopulated territories and an increase of their economic and social competitiveness. The project seeks to advantage sparsely populated areas, focusing on the enterprises, both in existing and future companies, in their employees, in local administrations, in the population linked to these

territories (like tourists) and, of course, all the citizens residing in these areas. The benefits would reach the society of the whole country. Read the full project in our [website](#).

□ **CEJA – [Opinion] Recommendations on CAP National Strategic Plans: bringing the young farmers’ perspective forward**

On 18 March, an [opinion piece](#) on the importance of CAP National Strategic Plans for young farmers was published by CEJA’s Board. CEJA recalls that in December 2020, the European Commission formulated recommendations to Member States to elaborate their CAP National Strategic Plans. These plans are of utmost importance for Europe’s young farmers as they will determine their collective capacity to answer the generational renewal challenge at stake in the sector. Drawing on the Commission’s assessments, young farmers believe that some important aspects need to be better acknowledged and further addressed in the development of the Strategic Plans.

□ **EP Think Tank underlines Euromontana’s contribution to the Smart Villages concept**

The European Parliament’s Think Tank recently published a briefing on Smart Villages to show how the concept has evolved and to take stock of the work carried out by institutions and civil society. Read the full article published on 15 March by Euromontana [here](#).



□ **Euromontana, CPMR and NSPA call for a European strategy for islands, mountainous and sparsely populated areas**

Euromontana, CPMR and NSPA sent last December 2020 joint letters to Mrs Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, and to MEP Omarjee, Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee for Regional Development to support a European strategy for our regions and to engage a dialogue between the European Parliament and the European Commission. Read the full post published on 7 January by Euromontana [here](#).

## Events



We are always keen to share your news and actions, so feel free to reach out should you have anything to share! **Please let us know your events related to the Intergroup topics for the next newsletter!**

#### Past Events

- **14 January:** [Smart mountains: how can biosphere reserves contribute to the Green Deal?](#)

Euromontana held its second webinar on Smart Mountains on 14 January 2021 to discuss the possible contribution of Biosphere Reserves in achieving the EU Green Deal objectives. Co-organised by Euromontana, the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme, the Perth College of the University of the Highlands and Islands and Chefs4thePlanet, this webinar gave the floor to European decision-makers, UNESCO representatives, biosphere reserve stakeholders and chefs to collectively reflect on the links between Man, nature, biodiversity and food in mountain biosphere reserves. Relive the event through our report and recording!



- **25 February:** [Road to recovery – How 5G can power smart rural development](#), by Ericsson.

- **4 March:** [Webinar on Rural Areas & Smart Villages 2040:](#) Bridging Europe's Digital Divide through Mobile Connectivity, in partnership with Vantage Towers.



- **8 March:** [Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural & urban development](#), by EESC.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a thematic debate on the importance of a holistic strategy for the sustainable development of rural and urban areas. The event



brought together representatives of European institutions, the academic world and other civil society organisations to engage in a conversation with NAT Section Members.

- 25 March: [How to improve mobility and air quality in rural and mountain areas?](#), by Euromontana.

Mobility is a crucial topic for rural and mountainous areas, Euromontana therefore organised on 25th March 2021, the workshop [“Improved mobility, improved air quality in rural and mountain areas”](#) in the framework of the [EU Rural Vision Week](#) to contribute to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.



#### Upcoming Events – **SAVE THE DATE!**

- EUROMONTANA – Conference "Challenges and solutions to cope with ageing in rural Europe: the role of the Silver Economy" on 21 April 2021



Euromontana presents the online conference "Challenges and solutions to cope with ageing in rural Europe: the role of the Silver Economy" organised by their Interreg Europe project [SILVER SMEs](#) on 21 April 2021. They will be discussing how European and regional policies can help rural and mountainous areas in coping with ageing and in improving the quality of life of older adults. You can consult the programme and register [here](#)!

- Cortina Digital Forum – 22 & 23 April 2021. The digital revolution in the era of uncertainty and global reset



The [Cortina Digital Forum \(CDF\)](#) is an initiative that takes into account new and pressing digital trends at all levels. With the aspiration of becoming the European annual event on digital, it is a point of reference for institutions and stakeholders at various levels. **MEP Franc Bogovič will sign the Cortina Declaration on behalf of the Intergroup**, which is based on the legacy of the Cork Declaration on Rural Development and Agriculture and the Bled Declaration for a Smarter Future of the Rural Areas in EU.

- **FREE webinars:** The FREE initiative will host a series of Webinars along the year, focusing on rural energy challenges:
  1. Rural Energy Mix & Challenges in April/May
  2. Transport & Mobility in Rural Areas in July
  3. SMEs in rural areas in September
  4. Agriculture with CEJA in November

## Twitter

- We kindly invite you to follow our [Twitter handle](#) and to interact with our publications.



- We are proud as well to share with you the **most successful tweet of the month**. The tweet on the occasion of the Press Release generated 8,700 impressions and 136 total engagements.

