

## **LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS**

### **A position paper by the SSPA network**

The Southern Sparsely Populated Areas network (EU Transparency Register No. 478256433575-07) considers that in the post 2020 scenario the EU should articulate measures seeking to achieve true cohesion, integration, inclusiveness and sustainability for these territories, bearing in mind the social and political responsibility that the European Union and its Member States hold in order to guarantee that all their citizens may enjoy adequate services and infrastructures while preventing the depopulation of large swathes of territory. With that goal in mind, we propose an array of measures to successfully address the demographic challenge for rural areas, in particular the sparsely populated areas and territories with severe and permanent demographic handicaps.

#### **1. A legal and operational definition of depopulating areas**

SSPA calls for a legally elaborated and politically binding definition of what has to be understood as areas with severe and permanent demographic handicaps and sparsely populated areas in the light of article 174 TFEU with a view to implement its mandatory provisions by means of its actual application during the next programming period. In order to assess the structural nature of these handicaps, these definitions must respond to negative demographic trends over a long period of time (at least three or four decades) and of considerable intensity (at least 30% or 40% loss of population). As for the sparsely populated areas recognised by the EU territorial cohesion policy, these should no longer be kept limited to the only case of the northernmost sparsely populated areas of Finland and Sweden but should include as well at least these other already recognised as such by the Guidelines on regional State aid at NUTS3 level.

Likewise, we propose a mandatory modulation of all co-financing rates for the projects developed in areas as well as in the Sparsely Populated Areas in accordance with the new definitions set. We propose that those sparsely populated areas with fewer than 12.5 h/km<sup>2</sup> may also benefit from the specific budgetary allocation, as it exists for the outermost regions and the sparsely populated regions of Northern Europe. Furthermore, SSPA reckons that such funds should be of a targeted nature in order to ensure its effective use on projects specifically conceived to tackle the demographic challenge in these areas.

#### **2. New thematic focus for diversification of economic activities**

In line with all mentioned above, SSPA strongly advocates the introduction in the ESI Funds a new objective for the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, through the investment in infrastructure, retention of businesses and strengthening local communities. The aim of this objective is to end with the disparities between these areas and the rest of Europe. This thematic focus should include key elements such as growth and smart, inclusive and sustainable territories.

This new objective would strengthen the foundations of the chapter dealing with the economic diversification in rural areas currently present in the EAFRD. As in the proposal of the EP, it would make compulsory to allocate a percentage of the ERDF and the SEF to those actions. This way, such funds would have a higher impact out of the bigger populations than at present.

### **3. Better coordination: multi-level governance and territorial agencies**

The implementation of this diversification should be achieved by means of a policy of economic and demographic development, horizontally coordinated by all stakeholders. Thus, public administrations and local actors alike must work on the creation and implementation of shared strategies adapted to local realities, based on the principles of citizen participation and multi-level governance. The Scottish Highlands and Islands experience proves how efficient and results-driven the work of specialized agencies involved in the development of the territory in economically and demographically fragile areas can be.

Given the diversity of administrative competences within each of the member states, SSPA believes that each particular case will require evaluating the adaptation of the best formula to implement with an integrated approach. Notwithstanding, the characteristics of this agency or body should be in line with the ones found in the Highland and Islands Enterprise, not only enjoying a high degree of organisational autonomy but also in all that regards its everyday functioning as presented in our report “*Successfully combatting rural depopulation through a new model of rural development. The Highlands and Islands Enterprise Experience<sup>1</sup>*”. It has been demonstrated its effectiveness in management, planning, execution and monitoring of the strategies and actions implemented, as well as its role of integrating and coordinating the activities of social and economic agents working in the rural areas of these territories.

### **4. Connectivity and telecommunications**

One of the priority objectives to be achieved in terms of connectivity is the universal access. SSPA considers essential that the different administrations involved in the design and implementation of policies in the field of connectivity acquire the commitment to set it as a priority objective. Only in this way, it is possible to guarantee universal and quality access, available to all citizens, regardless of where they live or where they are on time. This access to a decent telecommunication should be comparable to the one of the urban areas, that is to say an access to an updated connectivity (5G).

Without this condition, research and implementation of new formulas for providing services to the population cannot be promoted. In fact, these areas do not have a good provision of basic services. That is why tools such as e-health or telecare can be the way

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<sup>1</sup> Link to the report: <http://sspa-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/HIE-SSPA-Report-complete-document-1.pdf>

to guarantee sufficient and quality educational, health or social services. Housing, basic infrastructures, support for rural business and entrepreneurship and creation and attraction of human capital are some of the targets the new rural development policies should also aim at.

## **5. Rural proofing**

One of the problems for the recovery of the most fragile rural areas due to their economic and demographic handicaps is the inadequacy of many of the legislative and regulatory measures adopted for their reality. A rural impact assessment for all existing regulations and those to be adopted in the future should ensure that they do not impose particularly onerous conditions or procedures on those who do not operate within the parameters of well-developed urban or rural areas.

## **6. Change of the image of the rural areas**

The rural and sparsely populated environment is often described as a territory without opportunities. This image makes people in big cities think that these areas are not a lifestyle option. In addition, this vision weakens the trust and self-confidence of the rural population on their prospects for living and prosper in their homeland.

For this reason, it is important to transmit the reality and advantages offered by rural areas differently, promoting the treatment of this matter in the classroom, as well as its image in the media. This type of action is necessary to influence the self-esteem of the members of the rural communities, as well as to boost economic activity and social commitment.

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