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The Family: The Missing Ingredient in the Revitalisation of the EU's Rural Areas

A Joint FAFCE- Fundación Madrina Response to the European Commission's Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas



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Introduction

In response to the European Commission’s “Long Term Vision for Rural Areas”, this document aims to flesh out the European Commission’s strategy for arriving at the development of “vibrant, connected, and sustainable rural areas by 2040”.¹ A proper strategy must take account of a workable definition of “rural areas”, identify the trends that create challenges for rural areas, and propose solutions based both on proven successes and on overlooked ideas.

The underdevelopment of rural areas compared to urban areas in the European Union boils down to *isolation*, *stagnation*, and *depopulation*. *Isolation* comprises the lack of infrastructure—both physical and digital—and basic civil and medical services on which modern life largely depends. *Stagnation* describes the concentration of economic and educational activity around a small number of sectors and the lack of access to innovative practices that would improve performance therein. *Depopulation* refers to the demographic changes that compromise the sustainability of rural communities and reflect a fundamental crisis of confidence in the viability of life in rural areas. Taken together, these trends pose a critical threat not only to the vitality of rural areas, but also—due to the often-overlooked interdependence between rural and urban areas—to the stability of the European Union itself.

This paper aims to demonstrate how families and family associations are the first key actors that need to be involved in facing demographic challenges, as they are the first place where this interdependence becomes clear and the real antidote to loneliness.

What Are Rural Areas?

According to the European Commission, Europe’s rural areas constitute 83% of the EU’s territory and contain 30.6% of the EU’s population. Rural areas are regions fundamentally defined by low populations, low population densities, and economies centred on resource extraction or the production of primary goods. One further salient trait defining rural areas is the concentration of their economies in one or two industries. The OECD further distinguishes rural economies from urban economies across three dimensions as follows:

“The first dimension is physical distance from markets and the costs it imposes in terms of transport and connectivity. The second dimension is the importance of competitiveness in regions where the home market is small, the economy is highly specialised in the production of commodities, and transport costs particularly within countries, are absorbed by local firms. The third dimension is the “first-nature geography”, or how natural endowments and geographical conditions shape local economic opportunities.”²

Taken together, the physical distance of rural areas from major markets and their dependence on a small number of industries means that growth tends to be exogenous, i.e. caused by outside forces such as increased demand for a commodity. The distance of rural areas from major markets also means that rural areas usually have lower incomes and lower costs of living than urban areas. There also exists a symbiotic relationship between rural and urban areas: the

¹ "Long-term Vision for Rural Areas." European Commission. March 19, 2021.

² "Rural 3.0: People-Centred Rural Policy." OECD. 2019.

former depends on the latter for demand-driven income, while the latter depend on rural areas for the necessities of life, such as clean drinking water, food production, and energy.

The Challenges Facing Rural Areas

Globalisation and technological advancement have changed how businesses operate at the expense of rural areas, since the cheap cost of labour elsewhere makes the EU's rural areas less attractive destinations for capital investment. A global labour market means that large companies will tend to not hire European workers for jobs in resource extraction and manufacturing at the same scale as they once did. As a result, the European Union must not pin its hopes for the resurgence of rural areas on the mere revival of traditional industries.³ Technological innovations in the agricultural sector, for example, have caused the size of individual farms to grow while causing an ongoing decline in the number of people directly engaged in agriculture.⁴ Meanwhile, incentives for entrepreneurship lag in rural areas—despite varying by Member State—which means that urban areas remain most attractive as sites for new businesses to incorporate.

Since rural areas provide the raw materials of life, the socio-economic degradation of rural areas will impact the ability of a country's urban and suburban centres to sustain themselves and their activities. In an extreme scenario, the abandonment of rural areas by its inhabitants would hurt food production, resource extraction, and energy production as fewer workers would remain to staff these industries. Even those remaining would become less efficient due to the loss of relevant experience and human capital. Thus, rural depopulation has an economic impact not only at the local level, but at every level. (See Appendix A for a map of the population change occurring in the EU's rural regions.)

Demographic issues lie at the centre of the greatest challenges facing the European Union. The field of demography affects fields as diverse as public health, environmental policy, social exclusion and even security policy.⁵ Research has found that demographic imbalances contribute to civil conflicts, impact state stability, and affect the critical strengths and weaknesses of a state's capacity to address conflict.⁶ It is therefore clear that the persistence of demographic imbalances in the European Union's rural areas, aggravated by a deepening development gap between rural and urban regions, poses a potential threat to the stability of EU Member States and the European Union itself. The longer the EU and its Member States wait to address the demographic crisis festering in rural areas, the greater the odds that it boils over into a complete erosion of social cohesion as well as a collapse in social trust within and among communities.

In other words, there are no simple and universal solutions to the struggles of rural areas to retain their working-age populations and remain vibrant economic sectors. The European Union's approach to revitalising rural areas will have to include investment in areas as divergent as industry, education, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, public services, medical services, and legal consultations. Above all else, the European Union would benefit from a bottom-up approach in

³ Belson, Neil A. "Promoting Rural Entrepreneurship and Rural Economic Development – Third Way." *Third Way*. January 7, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Allen, Heather, and Rebecca Katz. "Demography and Public Health Emergency Preparedness: Making the Connection." *Population Research and Policy Review* 29, no. 4 (August 21, 2010): 527-39. doi:10.1007/s11113-009-9158-1.

⁶ Ibid.

term of innovative solutions: grassroots actors, such as families and family associations are key partners to make rural areas attractive places to live: the family, as the basic cell of every community, is the natural crossroad of all these different aspects and the hub of every primary interaction within the society.

Poor Digital Access and Skills

A major obstacle to the fuller integration and development of rural areas is the dearth of digital skills and limited digital integration of rural areas into the fabric of society itself. As the European Commission notes, “*In 2019, only 48% of the EU’s rural residents had at least basic digital skills (compared to 62% in cities)*” and “*only 59% of EU rural households have high-speed internet access, compared to 86% for all EU households.*”⁷ In Germany, students in rural schools have fallen behind their urban peers during the Covid-19 pandemic due to inadequate internet services.⁸ The problem of inequalities in internet connectivity exists in every EU Member State and these urban-rural disparities will deepen as remote learning continues and intensifies. Furthermore, the problem of unequal digital access extends to professionals as well as teleworking becomes more common.

Insufficient Infrastructure and Inadequate Social Services

Rural areas are made remote, and thus disconnected from the broader life of their nations and regions, by the absence or insufficiency of infrastructure. The most fundamental manifestation of infrastructure is public transportation in all its forms, which includes the creation and maintenance of bus stops, train lines, airports, and access to other methods of transportation, as well as the upkeep of public roads.

The European Commission launched a public consultation on the most pressing needs of rural areas and identified the need to invest more in basic services. As the report notes, “*Over 50% of respondents stated that infrastructure is the most pressing need for rural areas. Access to basic services and amenities, such as water and electricity as well as banks and post offices, was also cited as an urgent need for 43% of respondents.*”⁹ For rural areas to remain an integral element of European and local life, they must remain connected to the financial and civic institutions and health and social services that underpin life in society.

Lack of Economic Diversity and Development

Rural areas across Europe align with Europe’s agricultural areas. In fact, rural areas constitute 83% of the EU’s land areas while agricultural land, forest, and natural areas constitute 80% of its land area.¹⁰ Thus, most of the EU’s rural areas share one key unifying trait: they all rely

⁷ "A Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas." European Commission. July 01, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_ga.

⁸ Rundel, Christina, and Koen Saleminck. "Bridging Digital Inequalities in Rural Schools in Germany: A Geographical Lottery?" *Education Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2021): 181. doi:10.3390/educsci11040181.

⁹ "Long-term Vision for Rural Areas: Europeans Share Their Views on Rural Areas." European Commission. March 12, 2021.

¹⁰ "EU Rural Areas in Numbers." European Commission - European Commission. April 21, 2021.

on agriculture for a significant amount of their economic activity. However, a local economy that is based on one or two industries, such as agriculture or forestry or resource extraction, is shallow and vulnerable to outside harm resulting from a downturn in a key sector. Thus, a shallow local economy is overconcentrated in a narrow range of activities and is thus less resilient in the face of a bad harvest or the drying up of resources than a more diversified economy with greater depth.¹¹ The avoidance of overconcentration is an animating idea of resilient economies. As stated in a report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, “*key elements of its economy must be varied, flexible, and readily applicable to a variety of economic opportunities, and areas of overconcentration must continually be identified and mitigated. Policymakers should work to achieve greater economic diversification, in order to reduce the impact of external events and foster more robust, resilient growth over the long term.*”¹² Diversification is mentioned in the EU Commission’s 2020 Communication on “A New Industrial Strategy for Europe” in the context of supply.¹³ On a smaller scale, this imperative applies to local economies: overconcentration leads to weaker supply chains that are more exposed to risk from external and internal influences. Rural development must thus make regional economic diversification a key priority, because a resilient economy creates resilient communities: workers become less susceptible to emigration knowing that their employment and way of life depends on the success of just one or two industries.

Insufficient Access to Education

Students from Europe’s rural areas underperform their peers in urban areas.¹⁴ Although the European Union has committed resources to ensuring that rural schools have adequate teaching materials, equipment, and facilities, these efforts have not resolved the most persistent disparity between rural and urban schools: access to high-quality education. This disparity takes two forms: the training of high-quality educators and the placement of high-quality educators in schools that need them. With regard to the former, the tendency of teaching institutes and schools to conduct their operations in major cities—where they both pass on proven teaching techniques and develop innovative methods of instruction—causes cities to train and employ a much higher number of excellent educators than do rural areas. With regard to the latter disparity, high-quality educators often resist relocation to rural areas, or choose to relocate urban areas, for various reasons, including salary.

Depopulation and Demographic Imbalances

The population is shrinking in 59% of the EU’s rural areas.¹⁵ This population decline is driven not by higher death rates but by the exodus of youth and working-age inhabitants. The European Commission’s Report on The Impact of Demographic Change published in June 2020 stressed that increased life expectancy, coupled with a low birth rate and increased intra-EU

¹¹ Booz & Company. "Resilient, Stable, Sustainable: The Benefits of Economic Diversification." PricewaterhouseCoopers. 2011.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "A New Industrial Strategy for Europe." European Commission. March 10, 2020.

¹⁴ Van Maarseveen, Raoul. "Erratum To: The Urban–rural Education Gap: Do Cities Indeed Make Us Smarter?" *Journal of Economic Geography*, November 23, 2020, 1-32. doi:10.1093/jeg/lbab020.

¹⁵ Copus, Andrew. "What Do We Mean by “shrinking” and How Widespread Is This across Rural Europe?" European Commission - Europe Week Brussels 7-10 October 2019. October 7, 2019.

mobility, is causing age-based segregation, with older people predominating in certain, mostly rural areas as young people flock to more urban areas.¹⁶ Such segregation is unsustainable—if the process continues as described in the Commission’s report, many rural areas will find themselves on the trajectory toward total depopulation by 2100.

Furthermore, demographic imbalances driven by age-based segregation generate huge economic inefficiencies. Member State, regional, and local welfare systems depend on working-age taxpayers to fund social security services for the elderly and disabled population, who are by nature more rooted in their living habits than their younger, able-bodied counterparts. As articulated in a joint paper by FAFCE and the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU (COMECE), the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragilities of European healthcare systems, especially the rampant discrimination in providing adequate healthcare and access to the elderly.¹⁷ As the elderly remain in rural areas, often experiencing loneliness and social exclusion, the congregation of educated youth in a cluster of urban centres depresses wages while increasing the costs of living affecting all people. This leads to the undervaluing of certain skills and of labour in general, which prevents national markets from setting appropriate wages and national governments ensuring that higher education and more specialised skills add the maximum expected value.

Case Studies in Rural Depopulation

Croatia

Legrad, a Croatian village on the border with Hungary, recently made headlines for offering to sell homes to financially solvent buyers under forty years of age for just €0.13 if they committed to live in the home for at least fifteen years. Legrad was once the second-largest population centre in Croatia but has suffered a steady decline in terms of economic importance and demography since 1918, with its population decreasing by one half over the last seventy years.¹⁸ The village points to its natural beauty and strong job prospects in food production, metal processing, and wood processing as selling points for choosing to live there.

Ireland

Ireland is suffering from the depopulation of towns in rural and suburban areas as people flock to the major urban centres of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway. According to an analysis by Future Analytics Consulting, the greatest obstacles to the revitalisation of Irish towns are a lack of commercial viability, underdeveloped infrastructure, and weak local governance.¹⁹ The most important ingredient for rural revitalisation is thriving commerce. As reported in the Irish times, *“The traditional model of the functioning rural town or village saw a locally-owned department store draw the community to visit the town centre. This gave smaller businesses a viable customer*

¹⁶ European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change. June 17, 2020.

¹⁷ "The Elderly and the Future of Europe: Intergenerational Solidarity and Care in Times of Demographic Change." FAFCE. December 03, 2020. Available at <https://www.fafce.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20201203-The-Elderly-and-the-Future-of-Europe.pdf>

¹⁸ Syed, Armani. "A Town in Croatia Is Selling Homes for 16 Cents to Attract New Residents." Insider. June 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Purcell, Stephen. "The Stark Problem for Irish Towns Is Simple: They Need People." The Irish Times. June 29, 2019.

*base through passing footfall. Social infrastructure – banks, post offices, medical care, community facilities – were actively used and accessible to all.*²⁰ The success of one business thus creates conditions for the success of others, all of which provide mutual reinforcement to the others. The modern trend that sees commercial centres such as shopping malls shift to the edges of towns or out of towns altogether has removed the commercial nerve centre from towns, thus giving people fewer reasons to spend time in the town and to partake of its services. Since rural towns tend to be older, they tend to have narrow streets and less room for more people to engage in commerce. In some regions, municipal governments are unable to take decisive action, such as granting building permits for homes or shops, as regional governments have weakened their power by invoking outdated local government measures.²¹ Following the principle of subsidiarity, the empowerment of local governments is an additional solution to support tailored demographic policies.

Romania

Romania provides an important case study for how disparities can undermine the vitality not only of rural areas within an EU Member State, but also of EU Member States with significant rural populations. The percentage of Romanians living in rural areas is 43.6%, the third-highest in the EU after Slovakia and Slovenia.²² While the common market and the freedom of movement provided by the EU can have positive impacts, such as rapid economic growth, they can also suffer negative impacts. For instance, after joining the EU in 2007, Romania's economy has fared well. Its *"GDP growth in 2017 was 6.9 percent...GDP per capita rose from 30 percent of the EU average in 1995 to 60 percent in 2017."*²³ These are some of the highest rates of growth in the EU.

However, integration into the European Union also accelerated Romania's depopulation. According to a report by the Brookings Institution, *"Romania's population shrank from 22.8 to 19.6 million since 2000, and is expected to keep falling. Between 3 and 5 million Romanians—most of them of prime working age—live and work in other parts of the European Union. Meanwhile, labor force participation is just 66 percent... way too low to offset aging and emigration."* Part of Romania's depopulation is thus driven by comparatively low salaries. Further, *"Just as Romania availed of the EU's markets and institutions to accelerate economic growth during the last two decades, it will now have to use them to bridge the growing divide between those who are prospering and those left behind. The country needs more qualified workers, more effective investments, and a much more efficient allocation of resources."*²⁴ This means part of Romania's allocation of resources must involve the training of workers and investment in lagging industries, regions, and services, such as infrastructure and social support services.

Remittances contribute to the difficulties of living in rural areas by raising the cost of living. According to World Bank Data, remittances—i.e. the non-commercial transfers of money sent to

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ferriter, Diarmaid. "Diarmaid Ferriter: Why Irish Local Government Is so Useless." The Irish Times. November 23, 2019. [origin=https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/diarmaid-ferriter-why-irish-local-government-is-so-useless-1.4092165](https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/diarmaid-ferriter-why-irish-local-government-is-so-useless-1.4092165).

²² "Populația După Domiciliu* La 1 Ianuarie 2020 a Ajuns La 22 175 Mii Persoane." IIS: Comunicat De Presa. March 2020.

²³ Rosa, Donato De, and Yeon Soo Kim. "Romania: Thriving Cities, Rural Poverty, and a Trust Deficit." Brookings Institution. Brookings, June 5, 2018.

²⁴ Ibid.

Romanians from abroad, usually by family members—constitute 3% of the Romanian economy, again the third-highest rate in the EU, after 7% in Croatia and 3.3% in Latvia.²⁵ The high rate of remittances causes increased consumption and inflation without creating any underlying economic growth that can allow people to afford the rising prices. This in turn incentivises people to move out of rural areas in search of employment. The high rate of remittances could be one possible explanation for Romania’s low labour force participation rate, as such payments coming in from abroad both disincentivise labour force participation and incentivise emigration, neither of which is sustainable. The importance of remittances to the Romanian economy demonstrates the need for decisive action on the EU’s part.

Solutions for Rural Integration and Development

Proven Strategies: The Activities of Fundación Madrina in Spain

In addressing the many challenges abounding in rural areas, the activities of *Fundación Madrina* (English: The Godmother Foundation), a Spanish organisation, provide useful examples of good practices that can be disseminated across the EU. The key to these good practices is a commitment to human dignity and a focus on correcting the undervaluation of skills and the overvaluation of services in glutted markets, often in urban areas, by moving skilled workers and providing services in markets defined by scarcity, often in more rural areas. The Foundation describes itself as “*acting on the social risks that befall mothers and which are consequently borne by their children*”.²⁶

One of the *Fundación Madrina*’s initiatives, *Pueblos Madrina* (English: Godmother Towns), which has been in place for seven years, aims simultaneously to resolve two problems the foundation sees as especially deleterious for Spanish society: rural depopulation and difficult living conditions for families in cities.²⁷ This programme stems from an important insight: that many families find it increasingly difficult to live in cities but lack the financial means to relocate. The *Fundación Madrina* developed the *Pueblos Madrina* programme in response to some of the problems plaguing families that it observed while carrying out its social support programmes.²⁸ Such problems, from evictions to high costs of transportation, can often be alleviated by relocation to rural areas, where the costs of living are lower and the sense of community is greater.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also led many families, following their experiences of lockdowns and restrictions on movement, to contemplate moving to less congested areas. Some of these have reached out to the foundation in the hopes of participating in the *Pueblos Madrina* program, revealing that there exists a widespread latent interest in relocation that is activated either by difficulties in the cities or incentives from rural areas. Other families have not had the choice, especially during the pandemic, as lockdown measures have led to job losses, evictions, and an

²⁶ Admin. "Pueblos Madrina." Fundación Madrina. December 27, 2020. <https://madrina.org/pueblos-madrina/>.

²⁷ "Pueblos Madrina." Fundación Madrina. December 27, 2020. <https://madrina.org/pueblos-madrina/>.

²⁸ "Information Regarding Programs." E-mail to Resarch Department Fundación Madrina, Quality Department Social Fundación Madrina, and Social Department Fundación Madrina. January 2020.

increase in child poverty and family homelessness.²⁹ The European Union can work through these incentive structures and respond to exigent economic pressures by allocating funds to subsidise the costs of moving, to invest in digital infrastructure to allow for more remote work possibilities, and to build out public services in rural areas that will serve to create more vibrant communities capable of retaining those families.

Fundación Madrina has also partnered with local universities, such as the *University of Ávila* and the *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*, to find and create jobs for the relocated families. Oftentimes this takes the form of projects to improve the rural town in some way, through engineering projects or the establishment of social services such as psychological counselling. This partnership with universities follows the logic of the *Pueblos Madrina* project: to train people, especially women and members of families, in situations of vulnerability to gain skills so they may be inserted into the jobs in rural areas for the benefit of both the vulnerable person and the rural community. This approach, formulated with *La Asociación de Familias y Mujeres del Medio Rural (AFAMMER)*, seeks to generate hope for the people and places in situations that seem hopeless. The European Union could have a role not only in alleviating the conditions of material poverty in rural areas but also in helping people build up a sense of community and hope through greater connectedness to themselves and to others, thereby realising a fruitful investment in the future.

Another aspect of *Pueblos Madrina* that merits attention is its establishment of partnerships between universities and towns in rural areas. Through such partnerships, university students design and implement programs to revitalise the town while the town provides data and real-world experience. *Fundación Madrina* promotes the involvement of universities (ref. Appendix B) and their students in projects that help to develop social value, through the consolidation of public-private alliances in favour of the support of the most vulnerable children and of motherhood. In this way, the foundation favours a culture of service and solidarity in all the entities involved, from universities and students to rural towns and their inhabitants to the participants of the *Pueblos Madrina* project. Such relationships are essential for deepening social cohesion.

In 2020, for example, thanks to the engagement of volunteers and citizens, people associated with *Fundación Madrina* projects coordinated a network of 1,500 volunteers assisting more than 25,000 families suffering from the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, mainly with regard to food insecurity, lack of access to health services, and unemployment. This on-the-ground presence keeps *Fundación Madrina* attuned to the needs of the people whom it serves and facilitates the development and implementation of new programmes.³⁰ Thus, in response to the challenges of COVID-19, *Fundación Madrina* has transformed and adapted. The success of this good practice affirms the need to invest in projects where there is an exchange of expertise, so that the funding can kickstart communities and relationships that will endure and create value for themselves after the money is depleted. This usually occurs at the margins of society, as in the cases of depopulated rural areas, people in situations of vulnerability, and families seeking to establish or re-establish themselves in better living conditions.

²⁹"Aumenta La Pobreza Infantil Y La Tasa De Abandono De La Mujer Madre." *Fundación Madrina*. December 27, 2020. <https://madrina.org/aumenta-la-pobreza-infantil-y-la-tasa-de-abandono-de-la-mujer-madre/>.

³⁰"Informe Madrina "IMV": El IMV Aumenta." *Fundación Madrina*. December 27, 2020. <https://madrina.org/13159-2/>.

Fundación Madrina's various projects have been in place for twenty years and continue to expand in terms of partnerships and impact. This applies to the lives of individual families, the communities in which they live, and entire regions, such as La Rioja.

Proposals for Rural Revitalisation

The European Union's response to the development of rural areas should take place across four dimensions:

- **integration and connectedness**, encompassing everything from digital connection to adequate access to public transportation networks;
- **economic prosperity**, with an emphasis on investment to create jobs in accordance with the green transition; Ensuring that the incomes in both urban and rural better reflect the respective value added in production processes;
- **attractiveness**; financing of projects, social services and public utilities, and markets for goods and labour. At minimum, this means abundant access to institutions such as banks, post offices, and hospitals as well as public utilities such as electricity, roads or rails, and adequate access to vehicles for navigating infrastructure at an affordable price;
- **sustainability**, in both an environmental and economic sense, since rural areas are acutely sensitive to changes in the local environment and economy due to the relative shallowness of their economies and the dependence of locals' lifestyles on stable conditions therein.

Challenge-Specific Proposals

Lack of Economic Diversity and Development. Higher levels of economic diversity make a community more resilient against economic downturns. As noted, economic pressures exert a deleterious effect on rural areas across many dimensions as they reduce access to services, cause couples to delay having children, and precipitate a brain drain of professionals in search of better job prospects. The EU's follow-up action to its Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas should incorporate measures to help rural areas build immunity to the demographic, social, and economic struggles that can sweep across a town or region and result in an economic monoculture.

The *Pueblos Madrina* programme operated by *Fundación Madrina* in Spain provides an instructive case study in how to approach this problem and would deserve to be promoted as a good practice in EU Member-States and at the EU level.

Furthermore, increased teleworking has two benefits: it allows workers to settle in rural areas, thereby bringing their incomes and expertise to the new area, and it creates space for those new residents to engage with their families and communities in the time they save by abolishing their commute. Teleworking could also make manifest the value of residents' free time for rural communities. Yet, one of the greatest dangers of teleworking is the blurring of the line between work time and free time and the consequent damage to employees' work-life balance.³¹ Thus, investments in digital infrastructure should be made with the needs of families in mind. With

³¹ "Family and Teleworking: FAFCE Stresses the Commitment and Struggles of Parents." FAFCE. April 01, 2021. Accessed April 01, 2021.

regard to industries with limited possibilities of teleworking, such as agriculture, healthcare, and resource extraction, the EU can step up labour protections to ensure adequate work-life balance.

Insufficient Access to Education. To correct the education gap between urban and rural areas, the EU ought to pivot toward personnel. At present, the EU's approach to funding for rural education hinges on subsidies and investment in teaching materials and facilities. From now on, as part of its Vision for Rural Areas, the EU also ought to increase investment in the recruitment and retention of high-quality educators. Since many such educators prefer to live and work in cities because they can earn high wages in cities, educational institutions in rural areas should be supported by subsidising wages at parity with wages in urban areas.

Insufficient Access to Health and Care Services. In June 2021, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution that affirms the importance of the elderly to European society and outlines measures to ensure their needs are provided for in old age.³² The EU should build on its new public health instrument, the "EU4health" programme, developed in response to the COVID-19 crisis and in the context of its Recovery Plan. As called for in the FAFCE-COMECE joint paper on "The Elderly and the Future of Europe, *"In order to support families when ensuring long-term care, the European Commission should encourage Member-States to implement flexible work-life balance arrangements for carers, propose housing benefits for households welcoming an elderly relative and create a tax-free system for modifications regarding access and accommodation for elderly people."*³³ This will incentivise rural areas to retain young and middle-aged people while also creating tax incentives that will take full advantage of the growth potential of the silver economy.

Underdeveloped public-private partnerships. Following the example of Fundación Madrina's *Pueblos Madrina* project and its engagement with universities, the European strategy for rural areas could include investment in relationships where an exchange of expertise occurs. Such an exchange should be predicated on the physical movement of people, so that participants may gain exposure to the life experiences of people outside their immediate environments and learn to empathise through direct practice. *Fundación Madrina's* networking consists of the promotion of the strength of volunteering in universities and the establishment of relationships with certain formative allies, united in pursuit of a common good. This common good is also the protection of the most vulnerable children and of motherhood, especially in situations of precarity. FAFCE has already highlighted, in a recent Board Resolution, the need to recognise and support family associations, which *"create effective activities of solidarity, education, and training" that also stabilise interpersonal relationships.*³⁴ Support for and investment in family associations, be they religious, as in church groups, or of a local and civil society nature, such as school boards, can generate cheap yet impactful effects in terms of social cohesion and public-private partnerships.

³² European Union. European Parliament, *Report on an old continent growing older – possibilities and challenges related to ageing policy post-2020, 4 June 2021.* (2020/2008(INI)),

³³ "The Elderly And the Future of Europe Intergenerational Solidarity and Care in Times of Demographic Change." FAFCE. December 03, 2020.

³⁴ "FAFCE Board Resolution: Family Is the Heart of the Post-pandemic Recovery." FAFCE. November 11, 2020.

Weak local authorities and civil society. In creating the conditions for a satisfying life for the inhabitants of rural areas—a life replete with adequate infrastructure, social services, and cultural amenities—the EU will have to enlist the help of local authorities and organisations to midwife the success of its investments and initiatives. Families are the most fundamental unit of social cohesion and family associations the optimal means of leveraging the unique capacities of families.³⁵ Family networks—for example in the form of school boards, religious communities, and municipal advisory committees— help create the resilient communities that rural areas need.

Women’s needs. Oftentimes, in environments where families and communities do not have adequate social and financial support, it is women who step up to fill in the gaps, especially in providing unpaid domestic and care work. Their work is crucial for the sustainability and vitality of communities. The most direct means by which the European Union can recognise this fact and unlock the value that women add is by supporting and encouraging at the national level to update national pension schemes to count care work as employment. It was highlighted by a 2016 European Parliament report on "The Gender Pension Gap: Differences between Mothers and Women without Children."³⁶ Indeed, providing care often requires the interruption of employment which in turn causes gaps in pension contributions and lower retirement income.³⁷ A solution is providing a carer credit that can be redeemed in pension systems.

Conclusion

As the Commission’s Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas states, “*the role and importance of rural areas is under-appreciated and insufficiently rewarded.*”³⁸ The European Union can begin to fix this by including in its approach coalitions that bring together people from every sector of society. Such outreach will allow more people to become better stakeholders in the future of rural areas by gaining insights and experience in the work of deepening social cohesion in the EU’s rural areas. Presented in this way, such a template for initiatives will allow the European Commission and its partners to reach more beneficiaries and raise awareness of more pressing challenges—such as the demographic deficit, the exclusion of mothers from the labour market, and the alienation of families, especially large families—to a greater number of stakeholders, through long-standing, mutually-beneficial agreements. Such an approach, its effectiveness attested to by the work of *Fundación Madrina* and other experiences, will result in solid networks of social responsibility that provide for all parties the promotion of collective and integral values, the exchange of expertise, lasting economic development and lifelong relationships. Such networks bolster the flourishing of communities and the enrichment of economies.

Family associations are a necessity for the flourishing of every community. Just as families are the foundation of any community, so too are family associations an essential ingredient of

³⁵ "FAFCE WEBINAR on the EU Recovery and Its Investment in the Family: "Without Families and Family Associations There Is No Future for Europe". FAFCE. January 07, 2021.

³⁶ Ludovici, Manuela Samek, Serena Druifuca, Monica Patrizio, and Flavia Pesce. "The Gender Pension Gap: Differences between Mothers and Women without Children." Directorate-General for Internal Policies. July 2016. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571363/IPOL_STU\(2016\)571363_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571363/IPOL_STU(2016)571363_EN.pdf).

³⁷ Hamilton, Myra, and Cathy Thomson. "Recognising Unpaid Care in Private Pension Schemes." *Social Policy and Society* 16, no. 4 (2017): 517–34. doi:10.1017/S1474746416000312.

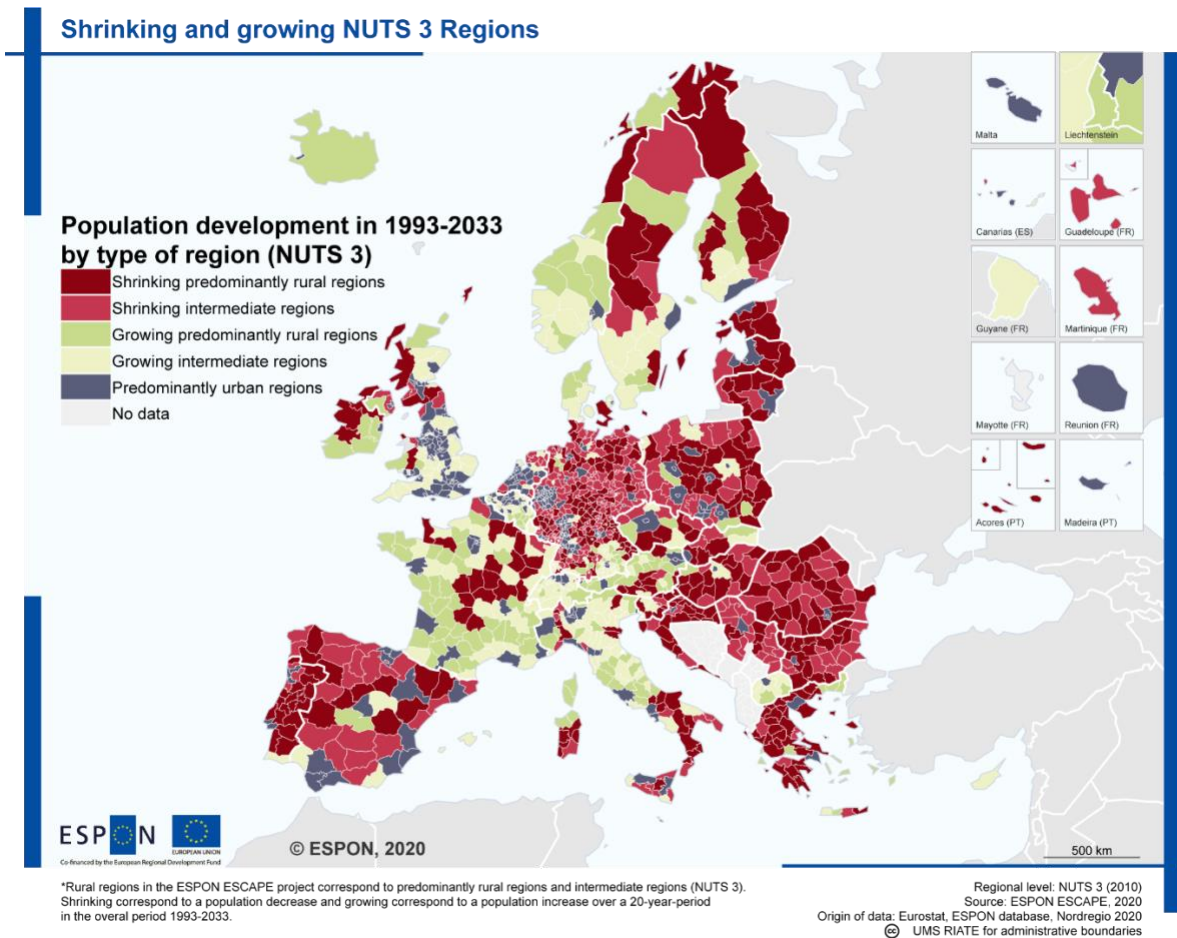
³⁸ "Long-term Vision for Rural Areas." European Commission. March 19, 2021. Accessed May 03, 2021.

sustainable communities. Every policy and vision for Europe must reckon with this fact. Above all, they are the antidote to loneliness, the greatest and most dangerous pandemic affecting Europe today. FAFCE's President, Vincenzo Bassi, has written that "Loneliness is a deep disease of our era...it seems as if the current pandemic is simply laying bare all our relational poverty and the deep loneliness that is experienced by many families."³⁹ Despite the immense weight of responsibility that families bear, as accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, they are all too often abandoned by policymakers and left to fend for themselves. Family associations lighten the load of these responsibilities. If families are the bricks of which communities are composed, then family associations are the mortar that binds them together. For this function, families should be recognized and rewarded. In the same way, loneliness is a corrosive force that dissolves these bonds and puts the community at risk. Therefore, the EU's rural development policy must prioritise the formation and preservation of family associations.

In the final analysis, the disparity in development between rural and urban areas comes down to two factors: loneliness, which the EU can fend off by supporting family associations, and market inefficiencies, which the EU can correct also by considering family and demographic policies as an investment and not a cost. In fact, rural revitalisation requires focus on these factors, as well as the will to invest in the unique contributions that families and family associations make in beautifying, enriching, and strengthening their communities.

³⁹ Bassi, Vincenzo, Ph.D. "Families That Help Families. Antidote to Loneliness, beyond the Pandemic." Family International. December 10, 2020.

Appendix A: A Map of The EU's Shrinking and Growing Region, Courtesy of ESPON



Appendix B: The Universities Participating in the Pueblos Madrina Project

Complutense University of Madrid
Francisco de Vitoria University
Implika Training Center
King Juan Carlos University
La Salle University
Mascisa S.A.U. Business Institute
National University of Distance Education (UNED)
San Román Training Center
University of Salamanca
University of Seville
Valencian International University (VIU)

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