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# INFORME A LIVING AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL ENVIRONMENT

## CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS



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SUSTAINABLE  
RURAL  
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AND PROPOSALS

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**CHAPTER I**  
**CONCLUSIONS**

The first conclusion of this report must inevitably be reaffirmation of the importance of the rural environment in Spain. As already stated in the first ESC report on this topic, it covers 85 per cent of the territory and about 20 per cent of the population. So, irrespective of any other considerations, the rural world must be included among the main variables to be taken into account in public policies.

The reality of the rural world varies, although generally speaking in the rural population there are visible gaps in terms of age, with children and young people holding less weight than the elderly, and in terms of gender among the middle-aged, with a larger proportion of males. Also, generally speaking, the rural population has a lower income level than the urban population, with less access to public and proximity services and a poorer provision of infrastructure and amenities. Public policies should therefore take these circumstances into account, with the aim of correcting them or mitigating their consequences, to ensure that the policies are in line with the specific reality of rural areas.

On the other hand, since the rural environment occupies about 85% of the territory, it is home to practically all of Spain's environmental heritage and a significant part of its historical and cultural heritage. Also, it is where primary sector activities take place, supplying the population with safe, quality food, playing an important role in environmental management and - together with other activities, such as those of the food industry - contributing to job creation, innovation and equilibrium in the economic trade balance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also reaffirmed the importance of the rural environment, for its capacity for preserving safe and quality supplies for the entire Spanish population, and also for its cross-cutting role in a more resilient and inclusive recovery. This role is based on the above-mentioned traditional consideration of its importance as a guarantor, among others, of the preservation of environmental and cultural heritage and of the proper functioning of the food chain. But also, now, on its potential to host innovative activities and services and, above all, to receive a new population seeking safer and more environmentally-friendly environments in the wake of the health crisis.

## 1. The rural environment, at the heart of the demographic challenge

From the point of view of socio-demographic evolution, the short period of time that has passed since the 1/2018 Report is sufficient to confirm the validity of the diagnosis made

in it and the continuation of trends after the updating of most of the indicators. Some of these even point to acceleration of the processes identified as problematic.

It is becoming increasingly clear that depopulation is not a phenomenon exclusive to small municipalities in rural areas, but is also visible, and to an important extent, in administrative centres (i.e. the functional nuclei around which rural areas are articulated), in small and medium-sized towns and even in provincial capitals. However, the greatest loss continues to be in rural areas.

The structure of the rural population continues to show the imbalances already detected, such as the lower proportion of children and young people compared to urban areas, and an older population. Masculinisation in the 20-60 age bracket is clear. This is one of the main problems for the survival of many small population centres, due to the scarcity of women of reproductive age and, in general, to imbalance in the so-called support generation. At the same time, the feminisation of the elderly population is visible, in rural areas and elsewhere. All this, moreover, is much more pronounced in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, while in larger ones the population structure is more similar to that found in urban areas.

Immigration beyond coastal areas and the large cities is a reality that has gained momentum since the recovery from the previous economic crisis. The slowdown resulting from the pandemic should gradually fade with the recovery of economic activity and the reopening of borders as the evolution of the epidemic improves. This will be a challenge for rural development policies as cultural diversity implies new needs, starting with education and training, which should be addressed taking into account the special characteristics of rural areas.

However, all these population trends become more complicated when certain long-standing patterns, such as demographic inertia, converge with the new dynamics of emerging lifestyles. This makes it especially important to consider rural cohesion and sustainability policies from the perspective of services for people, complementing the strict concept of the resident population in each specific nucleus with that of the related population (people who have some kind of link with a specific municipality, either because they live, work or study there, or because they spend time there) and paying attention to the framework made up by the functional areas on which rural life is based.

The pandemic, which has caused crises in all social structures making it necessary to establish new equilibria, also offers the opportunity to tackle long-standing challenges, like the demographic challenge, with more resources. These challenges involve, on the one hand, guaranteeing essential matters, from gender equality in all areas to full access to infrastructures and public and proximity services for the rural population and, on the other, generating opportunities for entrepreneurship, diversification and promotion of economic activities and employment in order to halt and reverse the current trends of ageing, imbalance and disappearance of many small rural villages.

Socio-demographic dynamics are the expression of social and economic processes and phenomena that are the real drivers of transformation, so demographic policy must necessarily cut across different areas. For this reason, too, proposals for socio-demographic rebalancing must stem from different aspects of the analysis of the rural environment and its structuring.

## 2. The economy and employment in the rural environment

One of the defining characteristics of the rural economy is the centrality of the physical environment in production activities, especially primary sector activities (agriculture, forestry and fishing) and the food industries, in terms of added value and employment generated and because of their role as a driving force, via demand, for other industries and services, such as transport and logistics, or because of diversification in production units.

To a certain extent, due to the lower productivity of primary sector activities, less diversification of production or the smaller size of the business fabric, this leads to a lower level of income per inhabitant, although all this is also influenced by the lower provision of infrastructure and equipment, which affects the efficiency of production processes and value generation. The latest data also show that in recent years rural areas have been lagging further behind urban and intermediate areas in terms of economic growth, thus widening the income gap.

On the other hand, it is not only a question of the current figures for activities, employment and companies in rural areas, because the marked ageing of the population means that pensions carry great weight as the main source of income. They largely reflect the economic structure that existed many decades ago, with the most frequent pensions being those generated by agricultural activity, which are lower, and with a high presence of women with pension entitlements.

However, recent trends may be different. Although there is not yet sufficient data to be sure of the situation after the pandemic, it probably had a less negative impact in rural areas, both because of the weight of agri-food activities (which were considered essential during the first state of alarm and maintained a high rate of production), and because of possible changes - for the time being at least - in preferences, towards greater consumption of local products and rural tourism. In addition, the increase in teleworking may have resulted in increased population of rural areas, mainly on the part of people with second homes there, which might be reflected in a certain increase in consumer demand, that serves to boost local economies, although also in greater pressure on services, infrastructure and amenities.

### 2.1. ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND BUSINESS FABRIC: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

The primary sector is a strategic element in rural areas from the economic point of view. It mainly covers agricultural activities in a broad sense (agriculture, livestock and forestry). However, this group is currently highly vulnerable due to factors related to the

food chain, demand rigidity, market seasonality and the heterogeneity and asymmetry of its internal characteristics. Moreover, it is facing important challenges from changing consumption habits and patterns and the ageing of workers in such activities – most of whom are self-employed, with very low numbers of young people taking such jobs and limited farm ownership for women.

In this context, the diversification of activities and the strengthening of the food industry are strategic necessities and essential conditions for combining economic growth and employment with environmental sustainability, social cohesion and territorial structuring. The agri-food industry is key to rural economies, as it complements and strengthens the primary sector, generating synergies that increase productivity and rural income. It is widely established in rural and intermediate regions and has strong roots, due to the organisation of value chains, especially in processing activities, with many cases of local artisanal processing and canning. It is also the leading industrial manufacturing sector in terms of employment in Spain, making a significant contribution to gross value added and the trade balance, and having a highly fragmented business structure, with a predominance of micro-SMEs.

For its part, rural tourism could become a lever for sustainable development of the territory, helping to halt the depopulation of rural areas, by favouring economic growth and job creation, redistributing prosperity and wealth, and protecting and promoting heritage and the natural environment. In addition to contributing to the diversification of economic activity in rural areas, the dynamization of tourism promotes the development of other activities such as commerce, personal services or industrial or craft activities, among others.

Local businesses have been favoured during the pandemic by changes in preferences towards the consumption of local products. If such changes become consolidated, they might contribute to maintaining such businesses, which are essential not only because they supply the rural population, but also because of their important role in the marketing of local products and their contribution to the development of other activities such as tourism.

The Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan places territorial cohesion among its main transversal axes, with the aim, in the short term, of ensuring that the economic crisis generated by COVID-19 does not end up widening the existing gaps, and in the medium term, once the pandemic has been overcome, of boosting the economic reactivation of areas facing depopulation and ageing. Given the strategic position of rural areas in the territory and the lower pressure on their natural resources, the Plan considers that they can turn into areas of opportunity for new activities, generating economic activity, diversifying and modernising their economies.

## **2.2. MORE VULNERABLE EMPLOYMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND WOMEN**

The employment situation in rural areas has hardly changed with respect to that described in the 2018 Report, with relatively low levels of employment remaining in relation to the rest of the country, as a consequence of depopulation and ageing.

Moreover, it is still more difficult for young people and women to find and keep jobs, which helps explain why these groups tend to leave the rural environment.

The greater vulnerability of young people is related to factors ranging from the fact that those who achieve a higher level of education do not stay in rural areas, to the poor diversification of economic activities. Moreover, the greater weight of micro-enterprises and the relevance of family businesses restrict their employment opportunities, forcing them to leave rural areas. There are also specific problems associated with farm succession which are of great importance in the type of employment available for young people. At the same time, there is a serious generational change problem in the agricultural sector, which requires a firm commitment to support the incorporation of young people into agricultural activity.

In addition, the employment situation of rural women shows significant differences with respect to women in other territories, with lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates in practically all age groups, as well as greater negative differentials with respect to men in rural areas. Therefore, despite various actions taken to close the gender gap, the data continue to show significant inequalities with respect to productive work, in addition to reproductive work, which explain the high levels of female emigration, especially among young women, and the consequent processes of masculinisation, ageing and depopulation of the rural environment.

### **2.3 DIGITALISATION OF PRODUCTION ACTIVITY IN RURAL AREAS**

Digitalisation is key for reactivating and consolidating economic activity in rural areas and, especially, for digitally transforming the agri-food sector, due to its strategic role and its role as a vector for rural development. Moreover, the digitalisation of this sector enables it to respond to the environmental challenges of adaptation to climate change, food safety and animal and plant health, and to respond more directly and accurately to the demands of society and consumers and to a globalised market.

The Digitalisation Strategy for the agri-food and forestry sectors and the rural environment is aimed at eliminating or at least reducing the existing technical, legislative, economic and training barriers, contributing to the leadership of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable agri-food sector, and to active settlement in rural areas. The aim is to make it a more attractive, lively, dynamic and diversified place, generating wealth and quality employment, and paying special attention to young people and women.

In particular, the Strategy focuses on reducing the digital divide, both the urban-rural divide and that between small and large companies; promoting the use of data as a driving force for the sector; boosting business development and new business models, bearing in mind Industry 4.0 and the opportunities for economic diversification offered by new technologies.

Integral digitalisation of the agri-food chain will improve the links between producers and consumers, maintain environmental sustainability, promote the knowledge economy and, in short, generate a smart agriculture ecosystem.

### 3. Access to infrastructure and services in the rural environment

#### 3.1. SHORTAGE OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND AGEING OF SOME ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In rural areas, especially in smaller ones, there is still a deficit of infrastructure and services that affects social and territorial cohesion. This has become especially clear in the current economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of bottlenecks or deficiencies can be observed in some areas related to public investment, mainly in the insufficient provision of certain essential services. Similarly, there is still a deficit in transport infrastructure, telecommunications facilities (especially broadband Internet access), energy supply and water supply and treatment.

The above-mentioned Plan for the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience of Spain is an opportunity to improve investment efforts in this area, as it includes various projects for infrastructure and social amenities. In the specific case of rural areas, these projects are set out in the Government's Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge, through investments aimed at promoting mobility and achieving full connection of rural territories with the global world, to improve territorial cohesion, eliminate the urban/rural divide and promote actions in the areas most affected by inequality.

##### 3.1.1. Telecommunications infrastructure

Use of the Internet, especially via broadband, allows people to access information and a large number of services, while at the same time contributing to the digitalisation of production activities and favouring economic growth in rural areas. It also enables e-commerce, the development of e-government, the provision of online health and education services, and teleworking, all of which contribute to population retention.

However, connectivity does not yet reach the whole of Spain, and in rural areas there is a lack of communications infrastructures of similar quality, capacity and speed to those existing in urban areas. A digital divide therefore persists and, although it has been narrowing in recent years, it is still significant and represents a major obstacle to the development of rural areas and territorial cohesion.

Eighty-seven percent of rural areas have 30 Mbps coverage, while coverage at speeds of 100 Mbps or higher is still only 50 percent, even though the objective of Spain's Digital 2025 Strategy is to achieve 100 Mbps coverage for 100 percent of the population by 2025.

##### 3.1.2. Transport infrastructure

Despite enormous territorial diversity, rural configuration, low population density and the ageing population mean that road and transport infrastructures are particularly relevant in rural areas, as they afford access to basic services for the rural population, and also favour economic development and job creation.

However, such infrastructures continue to be deficient in rural areas, especially in terms of the number of roads and their condition and maintenance, with problems for accessibility among rural areas and between them and urban areas.

Road safety problems persist on rural roads, hindering the transport of both passengers and goods and, in general terms, there has not been proper adaptation of road infrastructures to the new technological implementations and production methods in the agricultural sector. In addition, companies still face major difficulties for connecting to industrial estates and there is still poor GPS signal reception, which is a disincentive to the establishment of economic activities in rural areas.

### **3.1.3. Integrated water cycle**

Water availability in rural areas of Spain is uneven, with chronic shortages in some regions and more widespread occasional shortages associated with the cycle of droughts and the demand generated by the seasonal population. Both are worsening as climate change progresses, despite the decrease in consumption per inhabitant per year. This decrease is visible in data on urban use thanks to the introduction of water-saving measures, and also in agricultural use thanks to savings associated with the expansion of more efficient irrigation systems, mainly drip irrigation.

In the general water supply network as a whole, real losses associated with physical deterioration of the network remain high, at around 15%, and have not been reduced for many years. Furthermore, despite the almost complete connection of the population to water treatment networks and infrastructures, these are basic systems, while tertiary systems, which are necessary to return sufficiently treated water to the environment after use, still cover less than half of the network.

All these aspects are particularly present in rural areas, where the ageing of infrastructures affects, above all, small and medium-sized municipalities, partly because of population dispersion and insufficient investment to even replace and maintain the physical capital.

The current shortcomings reflect, above all, the sluggishness of investment over more than a decade in the wake of the 2008 economic and financial crisis. This had a particular impact on small municipalities, which in practice lost all financial leeway. This aggravated their initial disadvantages in water infrastructure that were already apparent before the crisis.

### **3.1.4. Energy supply**

Most rural areas - with some exceptions in isolated areas with small populations - are connected to the conventional electricity grid. The main problem they face is the quality of electricity supply, with frequent power cuts and delays in repairs.

Rural areas will play a decisive role in the process of decarbonisation of the Spanish economy in that they are an essential part of the solution and will also be able to benefit from the opportunities that the green transition can offer to less populated areas. In fact, the long-term Decarbonisation Strategy considers that industrial deployment and development and knowledge associated with the development of renewable energies, electric-

ity grids, renewable hydrogen and storage technologies in Spain must be articulated as a rural development tool.

In this sense, a specific energy transition plan for rural areas has been drawn up as a lever for generating employment and attracting activity, aimed at promoting energy communities, rehabilitation and regeneration and support for sustainable and affordable energy in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

Special attention should be paid to energy communities in rural areas, as they allow for management of the production, exchange and storage of renewable energy, favouring the development of self-consumption, energy efficiency and, in short, better integration and support for energy infrastructures in Spain. In addition, distributed, renewable and collective generation can be a lever for rural development, with the emergence of new related businesses or as a focus for sustainable tourism.

However, due to the negative impact that the process of decarbonisation of the economy generates in certain economic sectors and, especially, in areas where fossil energies bear significant weight in the local economy, as in rural territories where coal mines and thermal power plants are located, the Fair Transition Strategy is of particular relevance.

### **3.2. SHORTCOMINGS, PROBLEMS AND NEW APPROACHES TO THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC AND LOCAL SERVICES**

As pointed out in the previous report, rural areas continue to show significant shortcomings in terms of access to public and proximity services, which affect social and territorial cohesion. These have become even more evident in the current economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over a third of households in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants report difficulties for accessing at least one public or proximity service (food shops, banking services, postal services, public transport, health services or compulsory education centres), a quarter two services and 10 per cent three.

#### **3.2.1. Connectivity: the digital divide and access to services**

In this context, the digitalisation of certain essential public services and of many proximity services brought about by the lockdown and other measures imposed during the pandemic has highlighted the shortcomings for the rural environment in terms of digitalisation, not only because of insufficient infrastructures, but also because of the lower digital capabilities of the population, associated with various socio-economic gaps, and especially the ageing of the population.

In addition to the clear difference in access between rural and urban areas as a result of different provision of digital infrastructures (primary digital divide), individuals also have different capabilities for accessing and using digital technologies for a set of closely interrelated socio-economic reasons, mainly age, income and education.

As a result, rural residents sometimes suffered greater problems for accessing basic proximity services, such as food shops, pharmacies, banking and postal services, as well as essential public services, including education and social and health services and care

for dependent persons, thus highlighting the shortcomings of the public authorities for meeting these vital needs.

This shows how excessive digitalisation of these services, because of their very nature, together with existing deficiencies in their provision in rural areas, can increase pre-existing territorial inequalities, both in terms of access and quality of provision. In particular, it may increase the risk of greater inequality and/or exclusion of older people and those with lower educational and training capital associated with lower income levels, with a consequent deterioration of social cohesion.

The ageing of the population is one of the main factors determining the lower use of new technologies in rural areas. The lower level of digital skills acquired by the older rural population translates into less access to the different services offered via the Internet, in a context of a greater number of services (information, communication, transport, training, leisure, etc.) and the growing digitalisation of health, learning and proximity services. All this ultimately means a worsening of the wellbeing and quality of life of the older rural population and greater difficulties for their active ageing.

In addition to age, there are other socio-demographic factors such as level of education or household income that explain the significant differences between rural and urban areas, but also differences in Internet use where the persistence of a gender digital divide is visible across the board. This gender digital divide further worsens these differences, given greater masculinisation in rural areas, since in general terms a higher proportion of men than women reach advanced levels in both digital skills and computer competencies.

In this context, local initiatives that emerged to address the immediate economic and social effects of the pandemic have been useful mechanisms for improving access to some basic and proximity services. Some have also allowed progress towards greater digital accessibility for people in rural areas, as the pandemic has also shown greater social awareness for ensuring online accessibility to public education and health services. The range of solidarity initiatives adopted has been very broad, from ensuring food availability in rural areas, for example through networks of local citizens/producers to deliver food and commodities, to initiatives to help the elderly, or to provide emergency assistance.

The greater presence of mutual aid networks in rural areas is not only a comparative advantage compared to urban areas but also a huge opportunity for social innovation in the fields of inclusion, autonomy for persons with disabilities, ageing, etc. Social entrepreneurship and social innovation can therefore make a big difference in addressing the important challenges that rural territories face. They can be a source of innovative and dynamic approaches to solving social challenges, mobilising civil society actors to promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development from the bottom up.

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*Local initiative*

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### 3.2.2. Mobility

Mobility is a necessary condition for quality of life in many rural parts of Spain because access to essential public services depends on it. However, the scarcity, absence or inadequacy of a public transport system that meets the needs of people living in rural areas, together with a mobility model based fundamentally on the use of private vehicles, limits or excludes many people, especially the young and the elderly.

The digitalisation of public and private means of transport is leading to a reorientation of public transport towards real demand and to new approaches towards more inclusive and sustainable mobility and more public-private partnerships. This amounts to an opportunity to incorporate new approaches to collective transport, replacing the classical model with on-demand modes: flexible systems in terms of route, vehicle, vehicle operator, type of payment and category of passenger, and shared-use systems, among others.

The range of possibilities with new technologies is wide, both to define new hybrid modes of transport (shared-individual, public-private, flexible, and even autonomous) and to increase the possible synergies of collaboration. New digital tools also have great potential for analysing people's modes, journeys and uses of transport. Such analysis should allow for efficient definition of functional areas for the establishment of new lines in the public transport service for rural areas.

For the time being, public initiatives for transport on demand have focused on urban areas, and there are still only a limited number of experiences of this sort. Implementing this type of system is more difficult in rural areas, as it requires faster adaptation to the existing demand, and greater use of collaborative economy services. And such factors require greater digitalisation of the rural population, in terms of networks and skills.

On the other hand, there are obstacles to the implementation of hybrid models between existing systems and configuration that is based more on functional areas. These obstacles are visible both in administrative regulation and in concrete planning and organisation (hybrid models require determination of the appropriate combinations of on-demand collective transport, regular transport and other services). Also, and especially in rural areas, it is difficult for passengers to familiarise themselves with new forms of transport as procedures for using them differ from those of more traditional means of transport.

### 3.2.3. Challenges for education and training in rural environments

ESC Report 1/2018 explained that education is undoubtedly one of the main lines of action for rural development. Together with health and social protection, education forms part of the set of basic public services that must be provided in rural areas with guaranteed quality and in line with areas' specific characteristics. This is both for reasons of equity and with a view to revitalising rural areas.

Although it is difficult, as already pointed out in that report, to analyse in detail the non-university education on offer in rural areas because of the scarcity and dispersion of

data, all the available data undoubtedly point to two central issues: on the one hand, small schools with small numbers of pupils per unit and per teacher (in standard terms), which would be an advantage in terms of attention, but is seen as a more costly alternative than grouping the school population in more populated locations; on the other hand, there is a relative scarcity of vocational training centres and even of secondary schools in the smallest municipalities, in contrast to their over-representation in those with more than 100,000 inhabitants. This therefore makes for a scarce rural educational offer.

Likewise, among other provisions that affect assessment of the educational offer, current data on ICT indicate clearly that rural centres are at a disadvantage, in contrast with the essential nature of ICT for effective revitalisation of rural areas.

Updating of the results reported in the ESC 1/2018 Report continues to show worse educational results, with more early dropouts by young people in intermediate and rural areas and a lower weight of lifelong learning among the adult population.

The latter is closely related to a lower supply, while the higher dropout rates may be due, among other reasons, to a different demand for labour in rural areas where jobs are in shorter supply and require higher qualifications, to the direct and indirect costs of continuing training, and to different population characteristics, such as, for example, the higher educational level of parents in more urban areas (which tends to be related to the level of education attained).

Added to this is the fact that those who continue their education leave rural areas precisely for this purpose, given the lack of centres for post-compulsory studies, especially vocational training. This raises the percentage of early school leavers but implies that this phenomenon is somewhat different in rural areas. The problem is that this may become even more negative if these people do not return to rural areas because there is no work or professional prospects for them, there are better opportunities in urban areas, and because they have been uprooted from their places of origin.

All of the above shows that rural education has shortcomings, and that provision is insufficient, which undoubtedly has an impact on overall results and should be resolved by means of various instruments. These were already outlined in Law 45/2007, on Sustainable Rural Development, which highlighted measures to encourage the stable presence of teachers in rural centres, through professional promotion and even economic incentives.

The new Organic Law 3/2020 of 29 December, which amends Organic Law 2/2006 of 3 May on Education (LOMLOE), adopts a more positive approach than previous regulations, in which rural areas were treated above all as a problem of quality and sometimes a matter of cost, to be solved by moving pupils in order to guarantee equal opportunities. The new approach seeks first and foremost to provide rural schools with the necessary means to guarantee better quality and aims to facilitate non-compulsory schooling in rural areas, which helps students put down roots and achieves social enrichment.

However, it will be necessary to await the development and actual implementation of these new regulations - specifically, through the public policy initiatives to which they

give rise - in order to assess their effect, an effect that will require prior attention to be paid to closing the large gaps in infrastructures and services in rural areas.

### 3.2.4. Problems and shortcomings in rural health care

Analysis of the state of health and access to health care in rural areas in Spain is hampered by the absence of systematic inclusion of variables reflecting the degree of urbanisation in specific statistical sources. The particular demographic structure in rural areas, characterised by the greater presence of people aged over 65, has, however, led it to be assumed that there is a predominance of high-prevalence disorders and chronic diseases in this segment of the population.

In any case, there is some evidence of how the health crisis has particularly affected health care in rural areas. In this context, the Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge provides an opportunity to consolidate the positive elements arising from the health emergency, as well as to address the structural challenges of health care in rural areas, balancing the protective action of the *Servicio Nacional de Salud* (SNS) throughout the national territory.

From the point of view of health and health care, the period between approval of the previous ESC report and the present time, marked by the pandemic, has brought some of the shortcomings of SNS action to the forefront, making it urgently necessary to undertake reforms that guarantee equitable access to care for the entire population and with the required commitment to quality.

The structure of the SNS designates primary care as the axis around which the integrated network of health services in the territory revolves and confers on it the characteristics of maximum proximity and accessibility for citizens. In theory, this level of care should offer the majority of care close to the patient's home, reserving hospitals for highly specialised procedures. In an environment with a high proportion of older people, proximity is of added importance to facilitate access for the many people with mobility problems due to health issues, lack of private vehicles and a shortage of public transport.

However, the budget cutbacks made in the wake of the 2008-2012 crisis have weakened primary care, with variable provision across different territories, varied levels of human resources and a varied portfolio throughout Spain, all of which are profoundly affecting the quality of services received by the population.

In this situation, the pressure exerted by the pandemic on the SNS structures as a whole since the start of the crisis in March 2020 has halted many of the measures planned, while at the same time helping to make visible some of the structural problems of health-care in rural areas and exacerbating the most important ones. Thus, during the most critical weeks, the decision was taken to suspend face-to-face care in local clinics, concentrating health staff in the regional centres, and focusing all efforts on the fight against the pandemic. Care was reduced to telephone consultations, prescription processing, emergencies and inescapable care for the chronically ill, subject to prior appointment.

In many areas, this situation has continued beyond the first moments of the emergency, making the consolidation of some elements such as telemedicine foreseeable.

It should be recalled that the approval of the Strategic Framework for Primary and Community Care in 2019 considered the most pressing problems of a level of care that is vitally important in rural areas by addressing, among other issues, the reinforcement of human resources, improved coordination with other levels of care, the strengthening of prevention and the use of communication and information technologies. However, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 changed all forecasts by making the fight against the spread of the virus the top priority, and this has left a deep mark on the entire system.

Regional hospitals, where most specialised care is provided in rural areas, are essential for continuity of care due to their greater proximity and accessibility. However, their activity is conditioned by certain problems common to the SNS hospital network and also by the particularities of the regional centres themselves, such as shortcomings in terms of facilities and technology and deficiencies in terms of human resources, particularly in certain specialities in which the jobs on offer are perceived as unattractive.

### **3.2.5. Under-developed services for care-dependent persons**

The network of services for care-dependent persons is underdeveloped throughout the country, but conditions in rural areas are even worse, with an under-resourced system that is less developed than in other areas, because of both problems of spatial mobility and the difficulties in this environment for meeting the general requirements of centres and services, which adds obstacles to care under equitable conditions throughout the country.

Despite this, and despite the great importance of care for dependent persons in rural areas in terms of quality of life for a large segment of the population, the Information System of the System for Autonomy and Care for Dependent Persons (*Sistema para la Autonomía y Atención a la Dependencia, SAAD*) does not provide data in its regular statistics on the volume and profile of this segment, or on the extent of care provided in rural areas. This makes it extremely difficult to assess the State's protective action in this field and is a major impediment for the assessment of needs and the allocation of resources to cover the requirements of a potentially larger proportion of the population than in more urban areas.

Other sources give an approximate view of some key factors, such as the greater weight in rural areas of chronic morbidity and health problems and of difficulties for personal care, both of which are associated with the more elderly rural population but are indicative of a greater need for dependency care. But these are only approximations which are insufficient.

The ESC therefore considers it urgent to include the habitat approach in the information generated by the SAAD information system, so that an accurate assessment can be made of care needs for dependent persons in rural areas.

Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on the older population has dealt a severe blow to the dependency care system, highlighting its structural weaknesses throughout the country, including in rural areas, where improving quality of life for dependent persons and their family carers faces challenges that are only too well known. Among other changes, the regulations need to be adapted to the peculiarities of this environment. Also, infrastructures and services linked to care for dependent persons need to be developed, bearing in mind demographic aspects.

In this respect, it is to be hoped that the recent agreement between the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, the Autonomous Communities and the social partners, embodied in the Dependency Emergency Plan, will result in an improvement in the system's care capacity with increased funding, including a rise in the amounts of the minimum level and recovery of the agreed level.

The agreement establishes priority objectives for improving the SAAD over the coming years, including substantial reductions in the waiting list and application processing times, employment conditions for people working for the SAAD, and improvements in services and benefits to guarantee quality care for dependent persons, preferably through professional services.

## 4. On the environmental, historical and cultural heritage

### 4.1. THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE GREEN TRANSITION

The current health crisis has highlighted the need to accelerate the green transition as a key element in reconstruction and, from this perspective, rural areas are crucial. On the one hand, they play a key role in the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, as they hold most of the land, water and other natural resources that depend on the continuation of appropriate and sustainable practices. On the other, agricultural activities have the potential to reduce GHG emissions, which in 2019 reached 12.5 per cent of the total, registering a year-on-year fall of 1.4 per cent, partly resulting from lower emissions from farming land management. It is therefore a priority to reduce the emissions produced by such activities and to exploit the potential for absorption, safeguarding biodiversity and economic activity in rural areas, and offering them avenues for sustainable development.

In the ESC's view, it is essential to establish effective measures to increase the soil's capacity to absorb GHG emissions, to use resources sustainably and to study in greater depth the impacts, vulnerabilities and adaptation measures specific to the agri-food sector in Spain. These relate to aspects such as biodiversity, the conservation of native breeds and local varieties, management models, assessment of measures adopted and the integrated calculation of the economic costs of actions aimed at adaptation.

In addition and despite the undeniably greater social awareness of the demographic emergency in inland Spain in the Government's actions with respect to the 2018 Report, many of the effects for the environment associated with the progressive abandonment of

rural areas are still all too obvious, such as greater loss of soil and the exposure of large areas to erosion, or the neglect of forests making them more vulnerable to fires.

Finally, organic farming in Spain accounted for 9.6 per cent of the total utilised agricultural area in 2019, compared to the European average of 8.5 per cent, and energy consumption per hectare was 101.5 kg oil equivalent, compared to the EU-28 average of 159.1 kg oil equivalent, positive indications of the adaptation of activities to the green challenge. Other indicators, however, have progressed negatively, such as the consumption of nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen), or emissions into the atmosphere of both ammonium and greenhouse gases, which accounted for 12.5% of the total in 2019, despite a year-on-year fall of 1.4%, due to the reduced use of inorganic fertilisers.

The new CAP aims to ensure that the European agricultural system attains the paradigm of producing with fewer resources and contributes to meeting international environmental commitments. This will require an effort to adapt, but also brings an opportunity to have the resources to transform agricultural activities. In this respect and in application of the so-called “green architecture”, support will be available, on the one hand, for farmers who meet the definition of a genuine farmer as adopted by each country, but will also be subject to enhanced cross-compliance, i.e. compliance with a series of good agricultural and environmental practices and legal requirements in the areas of climate and environment, public health, animal and plant health and animal welfare. Where a farmer’s environmental commitments go beyond enhanced cross-compliance, eco-scheme payments will be available, aimed at meeting specific objectives and thus compensating farms located in protected areas for any limitations arising from the corresponding management plans.

#### **4.2. SETBACKS IN THE PRESERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Spain has an enormous amount of heritage resources, most of them in rural areas, offering great possibilities in terms of territorial development and sustainability. The importance of this dimension of culture stems from the fact that it is a key element in the affirmation of different territorial identities and group cohesion, but also from its potential as a factor for economic development. Hence the importance of properly managing all heritage elements.

In this respect, Spain made a considerable effort over the three decades prior to the 2008 crisis, with major investments aimed at the restoration and dissemination of heritage located in rural areas, with the support of European initiatives for the recovery and enhancement of cultural assets. However, in the context of the budget cutbacks in the wake of the crisis, there has been a significant drop in investment, which is affecting the preservation and enhancement of all these assets.

Added to this is the complexity of the management/conservation of a large number of heritage elements in a context of decentralisation of powers alongside the reservation

of certain powers for the General State Administration, together with diverse ownership of heritage assets.

From the point of view of the importance placed on environmental, historical and cultural heritage for the cultural and leisure practices of the Spanish people, this has increased greatly in the last ten years, although with notable differences depending on age and other variables. It would therefore be advisable to promote such practices because they galvanise local economies in a cross-cutting manner, while bearing in mind the complexity of the social fabric at which they are aimed.

Therefore, providing rural areas with more means to develop cultural activities would have positive effects on the urban-rural divide. The fact that a significant proportion of heritage elements is located in rural areas is also a good opportunity to promote access to culture for their inhabitants. But revitalising such elements would also contribute both to the generation of local development opportunities, by improving their capacity to attract and retain population, and to a better knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the rural world among the urban population, increasing the sense of belonging to the territory for all.

## 5. Public policies in rural environments

Spain has its own central instrument for the adoption of policies to promote the rural development process, that is, Law 45/2007, of 13 December, on Sustainable Rural Development (LDRS), but its development and effective implementation was halted very early on in the wake of the 2008 crisis. Its main implementation instrument, the Sustainable Rural Development Programme 2010-2014, was not effectively applied and no further programmes were subsequently drawn up.

Thus, to date, the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), drawn up in the context of application of the EAFRD, the specific European fund for this objective, have been the main actions to promote rural development in Spain. In addition to these, there have been actions related to the first pillar of the CAP, as well as to the European Structural and Investment Funds in general. Both have a significant impact on the rural environment, favouring socio-economic and environmental improvement through aid and investment.

In the coming years, these tools and resources will be complemented by the proposals laid down within the framework of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan and, specifically, the Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge and actions within the framework of component 3: Digital and environmental transformation of the agri-food and fisheries sector. This set of resources and actions constitute a unique opportunity to address the challenges that the rural environment has to face.

Overcoming the persistent rural/urban divides in connectivity, income levels and access to services, the demographic challenge, climate change, and the ongoing digital and technological transformation depend on the effective and efficient implementation of all these instruments.

### 5.1. EAFRD: SIMPLIFICATION, UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The 2014-2020 rural development programme in Spain takes the form of eighteen RDPs, one for each autonomous community plus a National Programme. Altogether, it manages 8.297 billion euros of EAFRD funds. This figure rises to more than 13 billion euros if we add the national and regional contributions to the Community funds.

As of 31 December 2019, when the programmes were at the halfway point, the degree of financial execution achieved by the Spanish RDPs amounted to 45% of the total EAFRD funds allocated, with significant differences between programmes. Moreover, progress in the various priorities and measures included in the RDPs is not uniform, due to factors such as previous experience or the degree to which actions were new, the types and target addressees of actions (investments, premiums, etc.) and their form (direct investments via contracting processes, subsidies, etc.). Results are generally expected to be lower in economic and employment measures and higher in surface measures (agri-environment and climate and organic farming), largely because of different articulation of the measures and different timing to achieve the objectives.

The 2014-2020 RDPs, which were initially scheduled to end in 2023, will finally be extended by two additional years, until 2025, to facilitate transition to the new CAP programming period post-2021, addressing the delays in approval of the CAP reform and limiting the uncertainty and risks they generate in rural areas and in the agricultural sector. This will require additional funds of 2.3998 billion euros.

This challenge is even greater as a result of the changes envisaged in the future CAP 2021-2027 which retains many elements of the current policy but proposes major transformation of the governance model and in the way funds are organised and managed.

Another noteworthy element of the future CAP is that the two pillars will be brought together in a single programme document, the Spanish Strategic Plan for the CAP 2020. The coordinating role of the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA), which will be the Managing Authority of the Strategic Plan, will be strengthened. Definition of the future system of exchange and governance with the regional authorities favouring close collaboration and optimising results will take on special relevance.

The new CAP 2021-2027 emphasises once again the aim of updating and effectively simplifying its design and implementation, reducing the administrative burden and setting up a more flexible system that is better adapted to the specific needs of farmers and rural communities. Less detailed regulation is proposed which, while maintaining elements that are common to the whole European Union, will allow Member States to establish their own rules to ensure they are more in line with local realities.

In addition, the future CAP envisages a shift to a performance-based system, in which the policy will be less about compliance and standards and more about delivering results.

## 5.2. THE DECISIVE EFFECT OF THE FIRST PILLAR OF THE CAP AND THE OTHER ESIF FUNDS IN RURAL AREAS

In Spain, the first pillar, which is financed entirely from the EU budget, absorbs 82 percent of the CAP: 35.705 billion euros in income support for farmers and 3.5 billion in market measures. Although there are large differences depending on the location, specialisation and production, or in matters such as the economic dimension, type of farm and farmer, there is no doubt that the impact of the first pillar funds on the Spanish agricultural sector is decisive.

Without them, all farms, except for the largest, would generate labour income for their owners well below the average wage in the economy. In addition, CAP support has a clear cushioning effect for the risk inherent in agricultural activity and allows farmers' incomes to reach values close to the average wage.

The first pillar of the CAP therefore makes a key contribution to maintaining agricultural activity, which in turn determines maintenance of the productive and socio-economic fabric of the rural environment as a whole.

The new strategic plan, which for the first time brings together the EAFRD and the EAGF in the same national programming document, is therefore an excellent opportunity to promote synergies and complementary and consistent action between the two pillars of the CAP in favour of the rural environment.

However, the effects of the first pillar of the CAP vary greatly depending on farm size, type of farmer, location and production, and the debate is still open as to how the distribution of future aid should be prioritised and concentrated. The definition of all these issues will determine the extent to which the EAGF will have an impact on socio-economic development and on maintaining activity and population in rural areas, in synergy with rural development policy.

In the next period 2021-2027, Spain will receive around 35 billion euros from the Cohesion Policy. The type of actions promoted by the different European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are an interesting complement. This is clear in terms of equal opportunities, training and social inclusion within the European Social Fund (ESF), in terms of digital infrastructures, support for SMEs and innovation in the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and in terms of action in coastal rural environments through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). Furthermore, the future policy will reinforce climate action and policies linked to the transition towards a green economy and this should have a positive effect on rural areas, given their environmental assets.

However, and despite the fact that the different funds have been integrating prioritisation criteria for rural or less densely populated areas, to date, cohesion policy has focused particularly on urban areas. Access to funding is difficult for smaller beneficiaries from less dynamic areas far from urban centres, who often do not have the same resources and means to attract investment from the funds.

Greater consistency and coordination between the EU's cohesion policy and the rural development policy is therefore still a major challenge.

### 5.3. RECOVERY PLAN: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT

Added to the funds earmarked for rural areas from the Rural Development Programmes and from the CAP and cohesion policy, are those from the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, which has relevant connections with the rural environment. There will also be additional funding from the *Next Generation EU* instrument for rural development which for Spain amounts to 717.7 million euros, distributed among the 18 current RDPs. Also, Component 3: Green and digital transformation of the agri-food and fisheries sector, will mobilise an investment of 1.5 billion euros with the aim of improving the sustainability and resilience of the agri-food and fisheries sector from the economic, environmental and social points of view.

The proposals defined in the Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge, which foresees a total investment of 10 billion euros over the period 2021-2023, aim to respond to the difficulties faced by rural areas and areas in demographic decline in order to guarantee equal rights and opportunities throughout Spain. This investment may in turn amount to a great opportunity to achieve sustainability in all its dimensions: environmental, territorial and human.

### 5.4. LONG-TERM VISION OF THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The COVID-19 crisis and the course that the European Green Pact defines for Europe reflect even more the potential of the rural environment and the key role it plays and can play in society as a whole and indicate that its persistent challenges and needs should be specifically considered. It is in this context that the European Commission's roadmap, the Rural Agenda, was published in July 2020. Its primary goal was achieved at the end of June 2021 with the publication of the Communication *Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*, which proposes a holistic vision of the future of rural areas up to 2040. Focusing on the rural environment, this is an initiative that adopts an integrated approach involving various Commission units working together.

CHAPTER II  
PROPOSALS

## 1. Rural areas, a cross-cutting objective in public policies

Coherence and optimal coordination of all the actions that converge in the rural environment are still a major challenge. As proposed in the new long-term vision launched by the European Commission and as pointed out by the European Economic and Social Committee, progress must be made in adopting a holistic approach to rural development, i.e. a mix of policies aiming to achieve synergies and coordination. For this purpose, the ESC considers the following should be priorities:

- *Effective integration of the territory in all sectoral policies, and even reservation of part of the budget of each policy for rural areas.*
- *Some kind of rural guarantee mechanism, sometimes referred to as “rural proofing”, whereby laws, procedures, plans and programmes, with their corresponding budgets, must properly include the interests and needs of rural areas.*

The proposals defined in the Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge are a step forward; in that they seek to resolve the difficulties of rural areas and areas in demographic decline in order to guarantee equal rights and opportunities throughout the territory. And their inclusion in the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan amounts to a unique opportunity to tackle territorial imbalance while overcoming the effects of the pandemic, facing the challenges of climate change and taking advantage of the ongoing digital and technological transformation.

However, in order to make the most of this opportunity, the ESC considers that:

- *Efforts must be combined, and coordination and cooperation between administrations and between all public and private agents working in favour of the rural environment must be encouraged.*  
*Local administrations would have an important role to play in this and could even set up inter-administrative mechanisms to help implement and finance actions, and to improve efficiency in the provision of essential services.*
- *In order to improve territorial and multilevel governance, with greater cooperation at all levels, it is necessary to achieve greater participation by all stakeholders, making progress in the empowerment of rural communities.*

*To this end, in parallel with the smart cities approach, “intelligent rurality” should be promoted, to encourage bottom-up construction of the best specific solutions for each rural reality.*

With regard to rural development policy, co-financed by the EAFRD, the difficulties experienced in the implementation of the 2014-2020 rural development programmes and the delay in their effective start-up were found to have unfavourable consequences for ongoing rural development processes. For this reason, it is important to incorporate certain lessons that will speed up adaptation to the changes occurring in each new period (e.g. providing the necessary organisational resources, starting to adapt applications, regulations and procedures sufficiently in advance, etc.).

Thus, in the ESC’s view, a number of proposals can be put forward along these lines:

- *A joint evaluation exercise common to all Spanish RDPs, to facilitate overall understanding of the effects of rural development policy in Spain, in order to implement more effective actions and systems of coordination and governance and make adoption of the future CAP more successful.*
- *Proper definition of the results and objectives to be achieved in the future CAP post 2021, including current experience based on the joint evaluations.*
- *It is also essential that all agents involved understand and accept the change of paradigm associated with the new CAP in terms of rural development.*
- *The procedures, guidelines and capabilities of the management teams must be duly adapted.*

The new CAP Strategic Plan, which for the first time brings together the EAFRD and the EAGF in the same programme document at national level, is an excellent opportunity to promote synergies and complementary and coherent action between the two pillars in favour of the rural environment. However, final definition of how CAP aid should be concentrated and prioritised will determine the degree to which the EAGF will have an impact on socio-economic development and on the maintenance of activity and population in rural areas, in synergy with rural development policy.

On this point, the ESC considers that:

- *Spain’s future rural development policy, the second pillar of the CAP, has the opportunity to adopt a simpler system, limiting the difficulties and complexities of the past. This must be central to all stages of policy implementation, from design to monitoring.*
- *All the elements common to the implementation of rural development measures in all the Autonomous Communities must be reinforced in the CAP Strategic Plan, although they may subsequently be implemented in a more specific way depending on the particularities of each territory.*

- *For a more in-depth assessment of the possible impact that the current CAP reform will have on the social and economic development of the agri-food sector and the rural environment as a whole, it is important to consider the report that the European Commission is preparing in this regard. The final version of the CAP Strategic Plan should therefore take into account the results of this report.*
- *Actions and instruments should be established to overcome any difficulties in the practical application of the mechanism for transferring funds between development programmes as provided for in the National Rural Development Framework 2014-2020. This will make it possible to carry out swift transfers of funds between regional programmes when there is a risk of financial loss and to maximise their use in Spain as a whole.*

With regard to the other European structural and investment funds (ESIF), the ESC believes it is necessary to increase awareness of their specific geographical distribution and to make it known how rural areas benefit from all EU policies, not just the EAFRD. In order to achieve this objective, the following recommendations are made:

- *Specific evaluation to analyse in depth how cohesion policy has been applied or has contributed to the development of rural areas in order to learn lessons for more effective future implementation capable of achieving greater synergies.*
- *The programmes included in the future cohesion policy should take into account co-financing criteria, incentives and rates, to favour participation by smaller entities and rural areas.*
- *Despite the fact that in the period 2021-2027 the EAFRD ceases to form part of the Regulations on common provisions for all the funds, its inclusion in the future Association Agreement for Spain might help promote coordination.*

## 2. ESC proposals on the lines of action included in the Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge

### 2.1. DRIVING THE GREEN TRANSITION

#### 2.1.1. The role of the rural environment and of primary sector activities

The current crisis has highlighted the need to speed up the green transition as a key element in reconstruction and from this perspective rural areas are crucial, given the need to reduce emissions from some of the activities carried out in them and the potential of these areas, which represent most of the territory, for absorbing CO<sub>2</sub>.

- *In line with Report 1/2018, the ESC considers it necessary to reduce emissions from primary sector activities, safeguarding biodiversity and the economic activity of rural areas, and offering paths for sustainable development, in particular by pro-*

*moting organic farming, while continuing efforts to reduce energy consumption in the sector.*

- *It is also essential to develop effective measures aimed to increase the soil's capacity to absorb GHG emissions and the sustainable use of resources.*
- *The ESC also maintains the criterion regarding the need to strengthen fire prevention measures and to optimise firefighting capacity.*
- *The ESC believes that the supplements allocated to farms located within the Natura 2000 network, as provided for in the eco-schemes, could compensate for possible limitations resulting from the management plans in these protected areas, thus providing an opportunity to improve these farms.*
- *Furthermore, the ESC believes it would be useful to draw up a report to monitor the socio-economic and environmental impact of the new CAP, in view of the concern and uncertainty that is being generated in some areas.*
- *With regard to the fisheries sector, the ESC believes that a zero-tolerance policy should be pursued for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices, providing incentives for the recovery of discards, applying landing policies, renovating or modernising fishing vessels and fisheries control, and improving data collection to protect aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity.*
- *For this purpose, the ESC calls for improved knowledge of the impacts, vulnerabilities and specific adaptation measures for the agri-food sector in Spain, specifically in key aspects for the Spain Circular 2030 strategy, such as biodiversity, the conservation of native breeds and local varieties, management models, evaluation of measures adopted and integrated calculation of the economic costs of actions for adaptation.*
- *It is also essential to encourage the training of farmers, livestock breeders and fishermen to optimise environmental management in the sector.*

### **2.1.2. The rural environment needs a fair transition**

If the energy transition required to move to a low-carbon economy is to be sustainable and fair, it must take place in the three aspects that determine sustainability. First, the social aspect, in terms of the impact of the costs for citizens and the maintenance and creation of employment, involving the agents that act in the sector and the public administrations, both financially and in management of the change, and avoiding the destruction of the production fabric in the territory. Second, the economic aspect, establishing deadlines and appropriate regulation so that the change does not hinder the competitiveness of companies or the economy. And third, the environmental aspect, accepting the agreed targets for decarbonisation and efficiency.

The substitution of one technology for another must consider the social, economic and environmental impacts for the territory, being socially responsible, avoiding desertification and contributing to the creation of quality employment. In the case of rural areas, in the ESC's view, this translates into the following proposals for action:

- *Appropriate accompanying measures for sectors and groups at risk during the transition process, with the aim of encouraging the population to remain in their home locations and promoting diversification and specialisation consistent with the socio-economic context of each area and taking into account environmental, economic and social sustainability.*
- *In particular, any measures should pay special attention to achieving a fair transition in territories where closures of mines and of coal-fired and nuclear power plants could create difficulties for businesses and economic activity.*
- *Focus on the development in rural areas of the facilities needed to achieve decarbonisation targets, not only to ensure energy supply but also to have a direct effect on economic activity and employment in rural areas.*
- *Promotion of the extension of a network of renewable energies with low environmental impact, through renewable sources of electricity generation, such as wind, solar thermal and photovoltaic, or the use of biomass energy from agricultural, livestock and forestry waste.*

*However, attention should be paid to the cumulative effects of renewable installations in the rural environment and specific environmental criteria should be promoted, avoiding an impact on fragile environmental values or values of interest for conservation of the environment, both protected natural areas and forest environments or agricultural or livestock activity, to reduce the risk of deterioration of the natural heritage, biodiversity and traditional economic activity linked to the territory.*

- *In parallel with all the above, sustainable, stable and quality energy supply in rural areas should be promoted, and actions should be designed to improve energy efficiency, energy savings and the electricity service. These include support for self-consumption facilities and other renewable, electrical or thermal energy sources, both for private use and for business and service activities.*
- *In the ESC's opinion, it would be advisable to draw up regular monitoring reports to measure progress in the fair transition and to report on the degree of compliance with the commitments made.*

### **2.1.3. The integral water cycle in the green transition**

- *Within the framework of the provisions of the Spanish Plan of Recovery to meet the Demographic Challenge, the ESC agrees on the importance of promoting a new irrigation modernisation plan to encourage more efficient use of water and sustainable development of rural areas in view of the effects of climate change, in recognition of the value of crops as carbon sinks and of the role of the agricultural sector in securing the rural population.*
- *Along these lines, the ESC advocates greater investment in distribution and storage infrastructures aimed at saving water and making water use more efficient, especially in areas declared to be of general interest, while water purification, treatment and reuse systems should be improved to overcome the environmental problems and challenges facing Spain in this area.*

- *In any case, the ESC believes that the new challenges of water cycle management should be addressed by considering urban planning and promoting shared responsibility among all stakeholders, through participation and accountability mechanisms and through urban-rural collaboration formulas when necessary.*
- *All this should be included in the framework of a governance model for the integral water cycle that makes it possible to meet demands that are more in line with needs and to achieve the green transition goals.*

## **2.2. DIGITAL TRANSITION AND INNOVATION. CONNECTIVITY AND MOBILITY FOR TERRITORIAL STRUCTURING**

### **2.2.1. Connectivity, mobility and services**

Services and infrastructure must be adapted to rural realities, whether for transport, digital services, housing, schools, health care and long-term care, or social integration.

In this respect, the pandemic has highlighted opportunities for digitalisation to revitalise rural areas, but also the problems and risks inherent in a model based on remote provision that does not address the current capabilities and needs of the rural population, especially in terms of the ‘social’ digital divide, that is, the presence of lower digital skills, mainly associated with a more elderly population.

On the other hand, in order to improve access to social, educational and health facilities, mobility must be made a right, an element of social cohesion and of economic growth. Although this vision seems to be present, if both the future Safe, Sustainable and Connected Mobility Strategy 2030 of the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda and the forthcoming Plan for the Revitalisation of Depopulated Areas are to reach the entire population, they should consider, among others, the European Union’s recommendations for action in areas with low population density and in the process of depopulation.

Finally, regarding both connectivity and mobility, the role of local administrations and the Autonomous Communities is important as they can help to reduce the social digital divide, by offering training and support for people with fewer resources and digital skills through innovative social initiatives. Also competences, such as urban planning, need to be redefined in a more flexible way to allow for shared provision of public and local services and to reorganise transport systems and lines to ensure good access to them for the entire rural population.

On these issues, the ESC considers it appropriate to make two more specific proposals to improve connectivity and mobility in relation to access to services in rural areas:

- *All actions aimed at digital literacy and security protection for internet users in rural areas should be tailored to the socio-demographic characteristics of their potential users at local level. Providing assistance and support to community projects based on support ecosystems has proved useful in stepping up the adoption of digital tools, both by the*

most vulnerable population and by basic service professionals in rural areas. It would therefore be necessary to support both social solidarity networks and entrepreneurial and social economy initiatives linked to the territory, which aim to help citizens in rural areas, especially the elderly and migrants, in their use of digitised public services.

- Regarding the improvement of mobility, adopting new approaches in transport, as with other public services, requires precise determination of the specific rural typology in each case, as well as accurate information on the needs of the specific populations and on the territorial framework in which the different services are located, to allow for more precise and flexible planning by functional areas and for the implementation of on-demand systems.

### 2.2.2. Telecommunications infrastructure

It is necessary to promote the disappearance of the digital divide between rural and urban areas, achieving the target set by the Digitalisation Strategy 2025 of 100 per cent coverage of 100 Mbps by 2025. For this purpose, the ESC considers that:

- Efforts must be stepped up in rural areas to expand and improve infrastructure, reinforcing and reorienting the available instruments with a view to universalising mobile broadband coverage of 30 Mbps and extending ultrafast broadband of 100 Mbps.
- The extension of 5G coverage and availability of the 5G service throughout the national territory should be encouraged and accelerated, with the objective of reaching 75 per cent population coverage by 2025 in the 5G preferred bands, while also covering areas that traditional operator deployments would not reach because they are not economically profitable.
- To ensure effective network deployment throughout the territory, it would be appropriate to amend the regulations to allow administrations to promote deployment in cases where no solutions are provided by private initiative.

### 2.2.3. Transport infrastructure

In order to revitalise rural areas, it is also necessary to extend and improve transport infrastructure. The rural road network must be improved to guarantee appropriate conditions of use and safety, while respecting the integrity and quality of the rural landscape and avoiding territorial fragmentation. Transport systems must be adjusted to the requirements of the rural population, making them compatible with respect for their natural, cultural and landscape heritage. More specifically, the ESC considers it necessary to improve such infrastructure:

- Developing links or nodes with ports, dry ports, industrial parks or logistics zones and specialised shared-use infrastructures, in line with the provisions of the Government's Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge.

- *Renovating and improving secondary networks, using part of the State's resources in order to achieve better structuring of the territory by interconnecting rural areas with each other and with urban areas.*

#### **2.2.4. Production activity and firms**

Regarding digitalisation of the economy in the rural environment, the ESC considers that:

- *The digitalisation of rural production activity should be promoted, mainly in the agri-food sector and in retail trade, as well as in all strategic sectors that favour the development of new activities and high added-value, data-based services.*
- *Closing the digital divide between large and small companies should be a priority, to avoid the risks of exclusion that SMEs in particular may suffer in terms of access to and use of digitalisation and its financing.*
- *For this purpose, efforts must be made in terms of awareness-raising, training, professional skills and promotion of digitalisation, enabling SMEs to understand the scale of the process and the implications of new technologies for the future of their businesses.*

Synergies and cooperation in digital transformation processes may constitute competitive advantages that improve competitiveness and business productivity, so it would be advisable to support SMEs in their digitalisation processes, through:

- *The development of digitalisation tools.*
- *Measures to promote technological renovation.*
- *Incentives for the adoption of digital solutions that facilitate commercial activity, mobile digital solutions or the application of big data.*
- *Guaranteed access to sufficient and appropriate financing for the implementation of these new technologies.*

In the agri-food sector, in particular, it is necessary to make progress in the elimination of technical, legislative, economic and training barriers in the field of digitalisation, in order to contribute to economic, social and environmental sustainability. In addition to acting on the various digital divides, in the ESC's opinion the following are necessary:

- *Encourage the implementation of data-use technologies to improve production processes and market knowledge in the agri-food sector.*
- *Promote the use of digital enabling technologies for the co-development of new solutions and services for the sector.*
- *Promote business development and new business models, bearing in mind Industry 4.0 and opportunities for economic diversification offered by new technologies.*

The transformation and digitalisation of the logistics chain for agri-food and fisheries must be promoted, as they can help foster quality, sustainability and the circular economy, organic production and seasonal and local consumption, while reducing food waste, generating value and jobs around the agri-food and fisheries system and supporting rural economies while curbing depopulation. The ESC proposes, among other things:

- *Special attention should be paid to the digital training of workers in the agri-food sector through formal training measures, training for employment, specialist training or retraining of staff from other sectors.*
- *There should be a sufficient number of digitally trained professionals in the sector, who are able to make use of the data and enabling technologies at their disposal, and who know how to identify what kind of data and technologies are needed to generate value-added services.*
- *For both objectives, new digital professional profiles should be devised for the near future, integrating the digital component with good qualifications and competencies in disciplines such as agronomy, economics or biology.*

#### **2.2.5. Technological development and innovation**

- *It is a priority to promote innovation in firms in rural areas, and to encourage the emergence of new, innovative firms. Support programmes should be developed by public administrations to promote initiatives for innovation in the business fabric.*
- *In addition, it would be appropriate to encourage the establishment of innovation ecosystems in the rural environment to provide the right environment for the development of technology and science-based firms that can reap the benefits of research.*

### **2.3. PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

Despite the great potential of the rural environment for tourism, it has not yet been consolidated as a viable economic alternative for many inland areas. A major effort should therefore be made to promote the development of sustainable tourist destinations in rural and inland areas, supporting the digital and green transition for supply and the tourism economic ecosystem in rural areas, as well as enhancing local heritage, through the rehabilitation of historical heritage for tourism purposes.

The ESC therefore calls for the future Spain 2030 Sustainable Tourism Strategy to be drawn up as soon as possible. With regard to rural tourism, the Strategy should aim to transform it into a model of sustained and sustainable growth, based on:

- *Improving the competitive capacity and profitability of the tourism industry.*
- *The differential natural and cultural values of destinations.*
- *Equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of tourism.*
- *The development of digital platforms to manage tourism supply and demand.*

#### 2.4. EQUAL RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The problems faced by young people and women in rural areas for finding jobs need to be addressed specifically. With regard to young people and the problem of generational change in the agricultural sector, the ESC considers that:

- *The various measures that exist in this area should be strengthened, such as the co-financing of aid managed by the Autonomous Communities through their rural development programmes, complementary direct payments for young people, or measures to facilitate access to credit.*
- *Vocational training programmes must be developed in line with the qualification needs of young people and professionals, including programmes linked to rural environments.*
- *Land access policies must be implemented (purchase, transfer, rental, land bank, etc.), favouring the incorporation of workers from both within and outside the sector, creating and developing agile and flexible mechanisms for the transfer of farms and reinforcing the bank for CAP basic payment entitlements.*
- *Concrete policies should be put in place to close the gender gap in the sector. In particular, the incorporation of young women into farming should be encouraged, through specific pathways, using positive discrimination criteria in land access, basic payment entitlements, farms to be transferred or any other system of aid to the sector.*

Regarding women:

- *It is a priority to approve and develop a new specific plan for rural women, to help make their roles in the rural environment visible, recognised and valued, promoting advances in social co-responsibility and in gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship, supporting the incorporation of women in decision-making and participation bodies in the rural environment, and promoting rural women's associations as a key element of social, economic and cultural galvanisation.*
- *The gender gap in employment and entrepreneurship should be reduced by means of enhanced education and training for women, through training programmes in digital and computer skills, and by promoting their entry into employment, both as wage-earners and in management bodies within companies and cooperatives.*
- *Systems should be implemented for the recognition and accreditation of professional qualifications acquired through practice in sectors related to care work, which is of great importance in women's employment, particularly among immigrant women.*
- *It is still necessary to promote women's real access to property ownership, through shared ownership. So far this has had very little effect, so Law 35/2011 on shared ownership of agricultural holdings should be revised.*
- *Maximum safety and care must be guaranteed for victims of gender-based violence and, in the labour market, specific actions must be taken to include women. In particular, there*

*should be public employment policies adapted to the social and economic reality of rural municipalities, specialised employment advice, specific training plans for employment and self-employment; local businesses should be encouraged to become involved in the social and occupational integration of victims of gender-based violence, hiring should be facilitated by tax breaks, and teleworking should be facilitated where possible, especially in the most isolated areas or those far from urban areas.*

Regarding education and training:

- *Exhaustive maps of education in rural areas should be drawn up, from the point of view of supply and results, in order to help understand the situation and to support the corresponding public policies. Such maps should be kept up to date in all the Autonomous Communities and should provide details on centres and specialities, with the aim of determining shortcomings in the education supply, complementing training curricula and thus avoiding overlapping and waste of resources and identifying other types of necessary measures.*
- *Specific diagnoses should be made on training needs at local level, and the promotion of youth guidance centres, for example at district level, to promote, in close connection with employment services in the area and with firms, effective vocational and occupational guidance, including the possibilities of entrepreneurship.*
- *The educational and training measures of the Youth Guarantee should be adapted to the rural situation, so that it can effectively reach young people in rural areas.*
- *With regard to the shortage of vocational training and even of compulsory secondary education, the ESC believes that the network of centres should be planned in line with the real expectations of each region and its specific training needs.*
- *Measures, such as those provided for in Law 25/2007 on Sustainable Rural Development, should be taken to improve job stability for teachers and to increase job attractiveness in order to recruit the best educators, and to remedy the shortcomings that still exist in educational facilities and resources, especially in relation to ICT and virtual education.*

## **2.5. PROMOTION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS ACTIVITY**

### **2.5.1. Economic activity**

It is essential that, once the pandemic is over, social and economic reconstruction should not only ensure that rural areas are not left behind, but that a firm commitment is made to revitalising them and harnessing their potential and diversity in order to build a fairer, more territory-based and resilient economic model.

To enable rural areas to become an area of opportunity that attracts new activities and generates economic activity, diversifying and modernising their economies, the ESC considers that:

- *Specific measures should be devised to facilitate the development of professional projects and entrepreneurship, to attract talent, and to promote innovation and digitalisation, which will help improve the efficiency of the rural productive fabric and thus enhance competitiveness.*
- *Priority should be placed on the development of economic diversification strategies, especially in the most depopulated and depressed regions, through funds, plans and specialised rural development agencies.*
- *Industrial competitiveness must be modernised and improved by incorporating and exploiting the vectors of digitalisation and sustainability in the business fabric, favouring energy transition and promoting cross-cutting actions that complement the necessary transformation process to guarantee long-term viability, while maintaining employment. In this context, industrial policy must also focus on less industrialised areas, taking advantage of the potential of each of the territories.*
- *The production activity generated around commercial formulas linked to short distribution circuits (local markets, self-consumption formulas, etc.) are useful for promoting alternative lines of economic activity in rural areas. However, in order to guarantee a sufficient level of economic activity, it is essential for public policies to give priority to the installation and development of industrial processing and marketing activities. In general, these are more likely to lead to the creation of added value in the agricultural and fisheries products produced in rural areas. In this respect, the role of the agri-food industry and fishing and aquaculture activities, among others, should be highlighted.*

The effective development of industrial parks in rural areas should be reinforced, as they help to retain and relocate dispersed activities and attract new ones, taking advantage of the synergies of the environment. This ultimately favours the development of economic activity and employment in rural areas and helps to retain the population. To this end, it is necessary to:

- *Ensure that industrial land in rural areas meets certain requirements in terms of infrastructure and the management of basic services and supplies.*
- *Improve the occupation of certain industrial land in rural areas, exploring other related uses, such as waste management and environmental improvement, dedicating part of their physical space to selective collection and other activities.*
- *Improve links or nodes with ports, industrial parks or logistics areas and specialised shared-use infrastructures, in line with the provisions of the Government's Plan of Measures to Meet the Demographic Challenge.*

### **2.5.2. Business fabric**

Since the size of companies has a direct impact on their productivity and competitiveness, by determining their ease of access to finance, export capacity, innovation capacity

and the incorporation of human and technological capital, action must be taken in this area, promoting larger companies and developing specific lines of action for small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, the ESC considers that action should be taken:

- *Reinforcing lines of support for the constitution of companies, as well as specific lines of public support for the constitution and strengthening of business formulas linked to the social economy, such as those for cooperatives and worker-owned companies, among others.*
- *Supporting SMEs through advisory plans, technical assistance and analysis of the viability of their businesses in accordance with the potential of the territory, as well as for the creation of inter-company networks.*
- *In the institutional framework in which business activity takes place, guaranteeing the efficient and competitive functioning of markets and productive sectors.*
- *Favouring innovation, digitalisation, internationalisation, training and collaboration and cooperation between companies (introducing incentives for their continuity in the long term) as vectors for business growth.*
- *Ensuring that the conditions for access to finance do not constitute a barrier for new business initiatives or a risk factor for the survival of SMEs.*
- *Attention should also be paid to larger companies, whose capacity to influence smaller companies can contribute to the economic development of rural areas by generating, through demand, greater economic activity, employment and investment in them.*

### **2.5.3. Agri-food sector**

The ESC agrees that it is necessary to sustain and improve the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, in order to continue to ensure food supply to the population at reasonable and stable prices, to continue to contribute to equilibrium in Spain's trade balance, and to maintain the population, employment and economic activity in rural areas, as envisaged in the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan. To this end, it is necessary to:

- *Improve the participation of farmers and agricultural cooperatives in the processing and marketing of their products in major consumer areas and international markets, which will ultimately help strengthen their position in the food supply chain.*
- *Continue to improve governance of the food supply chain, in order to achieve greater economic efficiency in the production sectors involved, thereby contributing to better rural development and greater food safety.*

With regard to the content envisaged for the CAP post-2021, the enormous diversification of production systems and territorial characteristics in Spain require prior adaptation to the eco-schemes, which should not be allocated exclusively on the basis of farm size. In terms of receiving aid, the ESC considers that:

- *Priority should be given to farmers defined as professional or genuine.*
- *To avoid possible distortion in the distribution of aid, the establishment of ceilings, the application of degressivity mechanisms or a limit on the number of eco-schemes per farm should be addressed.*
- *It would also be appropriate to provide an additional supplement in the case of disadvantaged areas, as well as for islands.*
- *Other aspects considered as requirements for the provision of aid should also be regulated (provision of an electronic farm logbook, hiring of a technical advisory service).*

## **2.6. PROMOTION OF EMPLOYMENT IN RURAL AREAS**

As already noted by the ESC in its 2018 report, occupation levels in rural areas remain low compared to other territories. Employment rates are below those in urban and intermediate areas, and part-time work is more frequent, especially among women, for whom temporary paid employment is also somewhat higher. However, the rural unemployment rate is similar to the urban rate and slightly lower than in intermediate areas.

This phenomenon, together with others, is important for explaining why the average income of people living in rural areas is lower than in urban areas.

This is aggravated by the fact that, with the exception of Extremadura and Andalusia, temporary agricultural workers employed by others are not entitled to unemployment protection, despite complying with the same contribution obligations as other workers under the General Scheme.

Young people and women find it more difficult to access and retain jobs, which is relevant for explaining why these population groups leave rural areas. Young people who do not find work in rural areas, especially those with higher levels of education, tend to emigrate to areas with better job opportunities.

For these reasons, and particularly in view of the centrality of the agri-food sector, the ESC considers that:

- *Implementation of the above-mentioned measures to support employers in relation to the strengthening of the business fabric, its dimension and the reinforcement of production activity in the agri-food, fishing and aquaculture sectors, among others, is necessary for improving employment levels and job stability in rural areas.*
- *Such measures, together with others related to the promotion of dual vocational training, are particularly useful for increasing qualified job offers in rural areas.*
- *The promotion of job stability must come from a dual line of action in public policies: processing and marketing activities for agricultural, fisheries and aquaculture products in the rural areas where they are produced to guarantee that the added value associated with these processes remains where it is created; the use of contract types that allow for greater stability where they can be adapted production processes.*

- *Stronger unemployment protection for temporary farm workers so that they can receive a level of social protection comparable to that of production sectors in general during periods of inactivity, which rural areas suffer in particular, but also to increase the supply of labour.*

## 2.7. SOCIAL WELFARE AND THE ECONOMICS OF CARE

The socio-demographic reality of rural areas, marked by the large proportion of older people in the population, and therefore by the greater importance of chronic morbidity and dependency problems, makes it advisable for greater efforts to be made in terms of social and healthcare coordination, ensuring continuity of care. This would result in better quality of life for people and more efficient use of resources, optimising the coordinated activity of health services and social and dependency care services. In the opinion of the ESC:

- *The shock caused to the system by the pandemic must be translated into reinforcement of previously planned measures, such as the Strategic Framework for Primary and Community Care.*

*The aim must be to tackle structural challenges while incorporating into the system the positive elements that resulted from management of the pandemic, such as the increase in home care, telemedicine or coordination with hospitals and emergencies. These should be consolidated, always bearing in mind the peculiarities of the rural environment.*

- *Primary care, the backbone of health care which must ensure continuity with other levels, such as specialised care, requires reinforcement of human resources throughout the system, especially in rural areas.*
- *To this end, incentives should be created for the incorporation of family doctors, paediatricians and geriatricians, as well as the necessary nursing staff, both general and specialised.*
- *In addition, a human resources policy should be adopted to encourage health care workers to settle in rural areas.*
- *The strengthening of primary care should also lead to strengthening of the preventive dimension of the health system in rural areas, to improve prospects for the population, with better quality of life and lower incidence of disability and dependency.*
- *As regards specialised care, which is mainly provided by the network of regional hospitals, incentives should also be put in place to attract health care workers, mainly in the medical specialties that are under-served in rural areas.*  
*This would help alleviate the problem of waiting lists in regional centres and referrals to emergency services, with all the benefits that this entails.*
- *Oral health care in the SNS should be boosted, going beyond the most urgent and unavoidable services such as extractions and taking into account the special circumstances of rural areas where, moreover, it is less accessible than in urban areas.*

Regarding care for dependent persons, it is to be hoped that the agreement reached in January 2021 between the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, the Autonomous Communities and the social partners, embodied in the Dependency Shock Plan, will result in an improvement in the system's capacity for care, with increased funding, including a rise in minimum amounts, and restoration of the agreed level.

This context should be used to strengthen the SAAD in rural areas, taking into account their particularities. To this end, more specifically:

- *An accurate and regularly updated diagnosis of care needs in rural areas must be drawn up, improving the capacity for policies to be adapted according to areas of residence. To this end, there is an urgent need to include the habitat approach in the information generated by the SAAD information system, in order to ascertain the specific profiles of the rural dependent population and the scope of the State's protective action, including not only the volume of benefits and the intensity of protection but also the nature of that protection.*
- *Specific incentives should be created to encourage workers in the dependency sector in rural areas to develop their careers.*
- *In addition, value should be placed on experience acquired in home care, considering accreditation of any qualifications held, and adapting qualification requirements for such activities in the rural environment. This would increase the availability of workers in rural areas to provide these services, while at the same time dignifying the work done by such workers, the majority of whom are women, both as family members and in paid employment.*
- *It would also be of interest to promote local business initiatives linked to the care sector, such as those related to the preparation and home delivery of meals for dependent persons, which have proved successful in larger towns and cities.*
- *In any event, in the context of the SAAD, it is important to encourage the development of long-term care services in areas where they are weak or virtually non-existent.*
- *Moreover, bearing in mind the prominence of women in the SAAD as both beneficiaries and care providers, the gender perspective should be firmly incorporated into the system, taking into account the specific features of rural areas and encouraging the creation of a professionalised care segment while promoting women's entrepreneurship in this field.*

## **2.8. PROMOTION OF CULTURE**

The model of recovery and enhancement that has been adopted above all since the 1990s, including the promotion of, and accessibility to the most isolated resources and the development of discursive approaches to give meaning to cultural assets, may have run its course, and it might be appropriate to open up this field to more innovative practices. However, we must not lose sight of the importance of conserving heritage elements,

which help to strengthen local identities and may boost the economy by promoting cultural tourism. The ESC therefore considers that:

- *Public, private and collaborative investment should be stepped up at all levels in order to preserve and enhance the historical and cultural heritage located in rural areas, taking care of smaller villages and depopulated areas, which are constantly at risk of destruction and despoilment, especially those that are particularly significant and attractive, regardless of their location.*
- *Also, in a context of a complex power and administration structure and of ownership complexity that often does not favour proper conservation and management of assets mainly located in rural areas, efforts must be made to coordinate, adapt and update regulations in order to keep the greatest possible number of heritage elements in good condition.*

## FINAL CONSIDERATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of the rural environment for its cross-cutting role in a more resilient and inclusive recovery. This role is based on its traditional consideration as a guarantor, among others, of the preservation of environmental and cultural heritage, as well as the proper functioning of the food supply chain. But also, now, for its potential to host innovative activities and services, and especially for a new population seeking safer and better-quality environments in the wake of the health crisis.

Together with the pandemic, the direction that the European Green Pact has set for Europe has made even more evident the potential and key role that the rural environment can play in society as a whole and indicates the importance of looking specifically at the persistent challenges and needs it faces. It is in this context that the Rural Agenda, the European Commission's roadmap, was established in July 2020. Its first milestone was achieved in June 2021 with the presentation of the Communication *Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas in the European Union by 2040*. It identifies the challenges and problems faced by rural areas and highlights some of the most visible opportunities for the longer term, in an integrated approach that must now continue with the definition of a Rural Pact and a Rural Action Plan for Europe as a whole.

In contrast to this long-term vision, the continued presence of the rural environment on the Spanish public agenda, sometimes in a way that is not in line with its very diverse reality, may entail some risks that should be avoided. First, it continues to be presented as a place of depopulation, and its image is associated only with the problems detected in diagnoses. This is dangerous, as it can lead to the opposite of what rural development policies aim to achieve: nobody wants to stay in a place from which it seems that everyone wants to leave. Second, it can generate pressure for policies and actions to be drawn up without sufficient reflection on the underlying problems that have been pointed out in this Report. In fact, among the risks of these new policy proposals is the idea of configuring the rural territory as a place to visit and enjoy, but not to live in. But the rural environment is a place where business, professional and social activities can be developed, where people's life projects can be based. The rural environment is, in short, a place - or rather many places - to live well.



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