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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

POLICY BRIEF

Territorial evidence and policy advice for the prosperous future of rural areas

Contribution to the Long-Term Vision
for Rural Areas

Listed under European Commission's sixth priority, 'A new push for European democracy', the development of the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2040)**, aims *to reassess the role that these can play in the current society and to define a new life for rural areas*.

Developed within a timely context, the aim of this policy brief is to bring its own contribution to this vision and support the discussions surrounding the long-term future development of rural areas, by linking them to the **Territorial Agenda 2030 priorities and objectives**, ensuring that the **distinct territorial dimension is clearly outlined, on the path for harmonious policy intervention**.

This policy brief was jointly developed with the **Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU** (for the first semester of 2021), focusing on one of the presidency's priorities: reclaiming opportunities for rural areas and enabling a smart capitalisation of rural areas assets.

The present, summarized, version should be read in the bigger context, as it condenses the information comprised in the extended version of the document, which deeply explored the connections between ESPON territorial evidence and Territorial Agenda 2030 priorities, through policy recommendations and policy responses for the long-term development of rural areas, and that was validated within several intersectoral and intergovernmental debates.

KEY MESSAGES

- The territorial dimension is the ground where all the actors play their role, desirably united across the governance layers, the administrative borders and the policies by a joint long-term vision. **Now it is the time to act together on building a future for rural areas**, a clear message that the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA 2030) is delivering.
- **Framing the key policy messages under the TA 2030 framework** is promoting an inclusive and sustainable future for all people and places, helping achieve Sustainable Development Goals in Europe.
- Developing the European territory as a whole, along with all its places is an intent sustained by the TA2030 two overarching objectives – a **Just Europe and a Green Europe**. The two objectives are set to provide orientation to strategic spatial planning and call for strengthening the territorial dimension of sectoral policies, including for rural development.
- Approaching the complex territorial interactions from a strategic perspective, focusing on the cross-cutting domains of the TA 2030 when delivering key policy responses for the sustainable and prosperous development of rural areas, is aiming to ascertain a **stronger harmonisation between all EU strategic documents**, on all levels.
- Long-term local, regional, national, and European rural development requires sustainable enhancement of living standards, investments, and building social trust. Similarly, it calls for a **long-term cooperation and coordination between places, levels of governments, policy sectors and societal groups**, in addressing the complex issues and utilising the diverse development potentials in designing the prosperous future of rural areas.

The Territorial Agenda 2030 on rural areas under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU

Rural areas are representative of European territorial diversity; they bring together different types of places, shaped through numerous paths, to untap their potential and overcome challenges in their development.

Although a first stepping stone towards the territorial dimension of a **long-term vision** has been set by the Territorial Agenda 2030 document itself, the further steps will consist of a collaborative **process that will help to design a new intersectoral dynamic, in which key players are called to cooperate.**

The long-term cooperation and coordination actions to accomplish a long-term vision for rural areas should strive for an integrated approach among the committed stakeholders, with the use of multilevel governance mechanisms, place-based approaches, policy impact analyses and other relevant policy tools. Their common denominator should be more balanced and sustainable development of the rural areas embedded in the outlook of territorial cohesion.

The **European Green Deal** links the Green and Just Transition objectives, as it aims to mitigate the impacts of **climate change** and other environmental challenges, and promotes **natural capital**, which is an important asset of rural areas.

A **long-term vision** for the future of rural areas offers a unique opportunity to promote **synergies between the Territorial Agenda and overarching thematic or sec-**

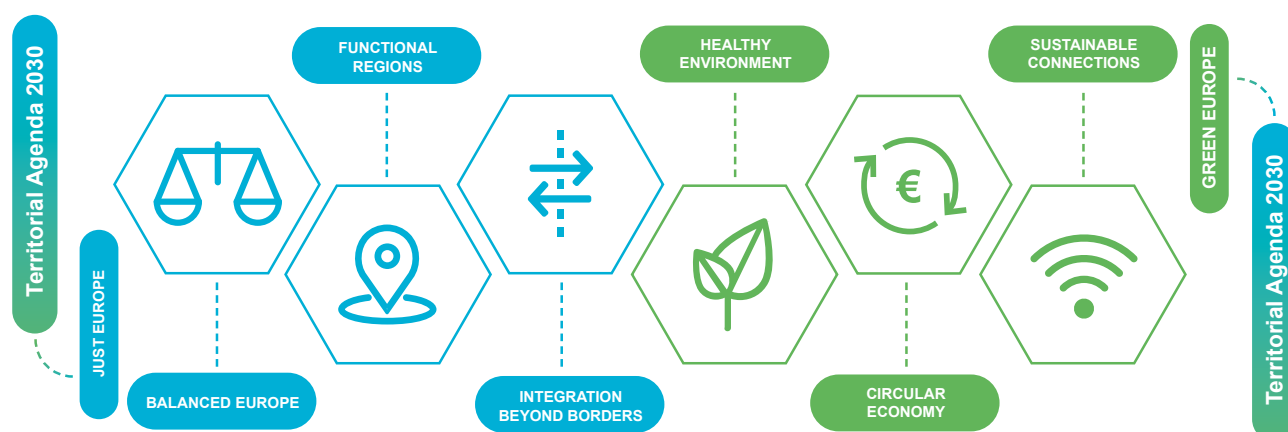
toral EU strategies, agendas, programmes and policies. Such synergies are clear between the **Territorial Agenda and the Urban Agenda, the New Leipzig Charter, EU cohesion and rural development policies,** the implementation of the **EU recovery plan** and the **EU macroregional and sea basin strategies.**

At all levels, from sub-local to pan-European, the increasing economic and social disparities between places and people, along with climate-change-related impacts, risks and pressures, call for an **informal multilevel cooperation** between Member States, subnational authorities, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Investment Bank and other relevant players in realising this opportunity.

The **Territorial Agenda 2030**, with its focus on territorial dimension, offers an essential space for the collaborative process to achieve the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas through better synergies between cohesion, environmental and agricultural development policies.

Only with all stakeholders on board, and by focusing on the debate and action on intersectoral articulation of policies, can the European rural areas achieve the long-term vision that is being built.

Territorial Agenda 2030 framework



ESPON's contribution to addressing the challenges and identifying evidence-based policy recommendations

The Territorial Agenda 2030 recognises that policy responses **need to have a strong territorial dimension and coordinated approaches, while acknowledging and using both the diversity and the specificities of places**. In this respect, the Territorial Agenda 2030 identifies a list of necessary actions, clustered in cross-cutting domains, which are all relevant to rural areas.

In this policy brief, ESPON provides the territorial evidence (data collected) and knowledge (long-term trends identified) to further support and contribute to designing a prosperous future for rural areas. It does so by approaching the complex territorial interactions from a strategic perspective. On that basis, ESPON further advises on adequate policy measures structured in six **cross-cutting** domains of the Territorial Agenda 2030 (Figure 3). These are particularly valid in rural areas, where economic and social disparities between places and between people, along with environmental risks and pressures, are increasing.

To illustrate the territorial impacts and the connections established between and within rural areas, findings from a number of relevant ESPON projects have been extracted to scale the complexity of challenges and offer recommendations on policy responses. On this basis, the policy brief seeks to ensure a more integrated uptake and understanding of both the status quo and the future trends, by looking at the domains that compose the rural

landscape and specific features that determine the sustainable development of rural areas¹:

- shrinkage and demographic decline in rural regions ([ESCAPE](#));
- quality of life in rural regions ([QoL](#));
- marginalisation and limited access to services of general interest (SGIs) ([PROFECY](#));
- economies affected directly and indirectly by natural hazards (floods and landslides, water scarcity and droughts, storms and earthquakes ([TITAN](#));
- biodiversity and ecosystem services in mitigating climate change effects ([GRETA](#));
- transitioning economies and new technological transformations ([T4](#)).

This policy brief is the result of the joint collaboration between the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of European Union and ESPON, developed as a document supporting the implementation of the European Commission's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. All relevant contributions and feedback from the intersectoral and interinstitutional dialogue on this policy brief have been included in its final version. We therefore, once more, acknowledge the efforts of all committed stakeholders and highlight the importance of their contributions to the process of drafting.

¹ More information on the projects can be found at <https://www.espon.eu/applied-research>

Envisaging the prosperous future of rural areas under the Territorial Agenda 2030 framework

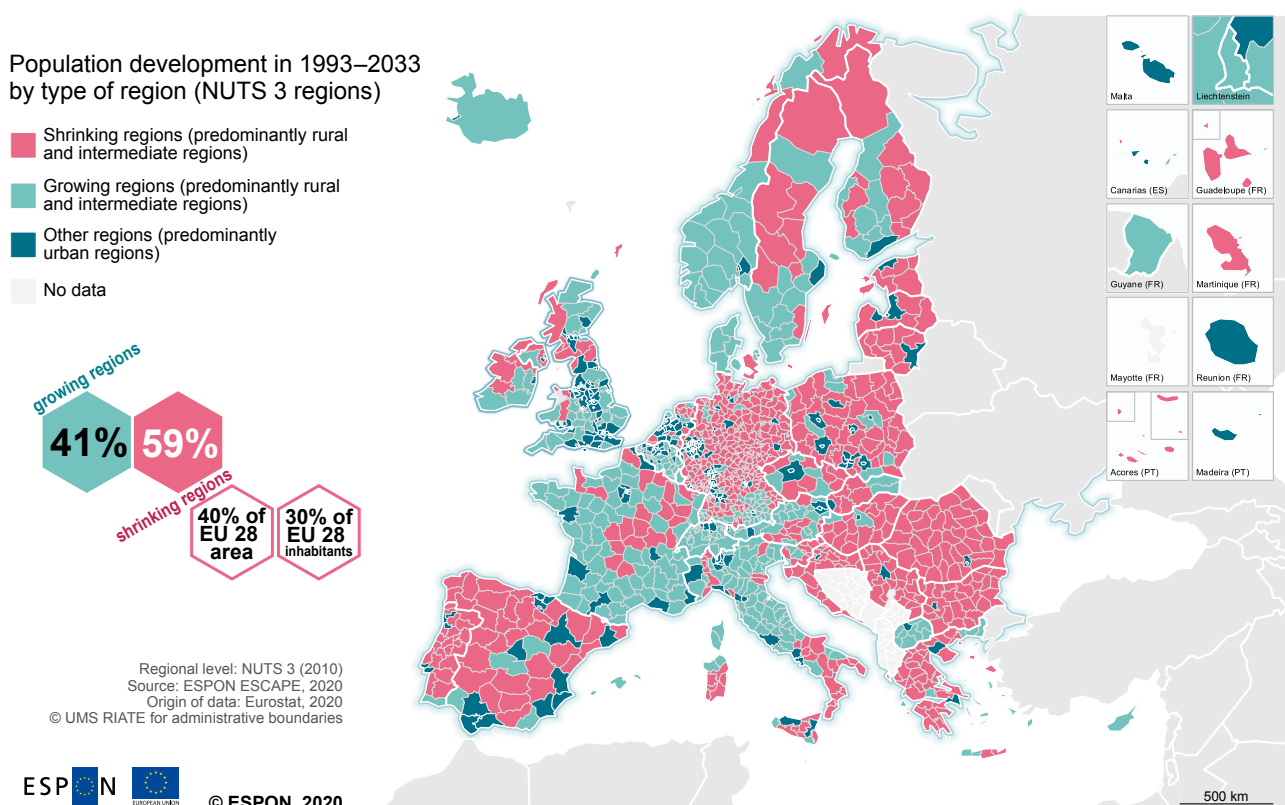
The demography trends of moving from rural to urban areas, from less developed to developed national regions, from East to West and from Southern Europe to the North have a visible mark on EU society, impacting directly the lives of EU citizens and the local communities with significant effect at national, regional and local level. (REGI, 2020) But history has proven that the more challenging the problems are (in peripheral, rural or vulnerable areas), the more potential there is for innovation and for seizing opportunities, which demands integrated, smart, structured visions and approaches. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to accelerate the change and stimulate further the debate on the importance of rural areas, redirecting the attention to what less densely populated places could offer.

Creating the right context for framing the right policies for rural areas

Understanding and identifying the geography of demographic trends | or how to classify the heterogeneity of rural areas across Europe. ESPON evidence (see map 1) suggests that the dynamics that shape the demographic diversity are the result of complex socio-economic and spatial changes, becoming long-standing processes. When looking at the demographic potential of **rural regions**, a clear distinction could be made: some regions are/will be “*accumulating/growing*”, and some are/will be “*depleting/shrinking*”. For the latter, it is expected that the share of population living in shrinking rural areas, to further decrease from 36.1% in 1993, to 29.2% in 2033 (or from 178 million to approximately 157 million inhabitants).

Map 1

Shrinking and growing Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics 3 regions over a 20-year period (or in the overall period 1993–2033)



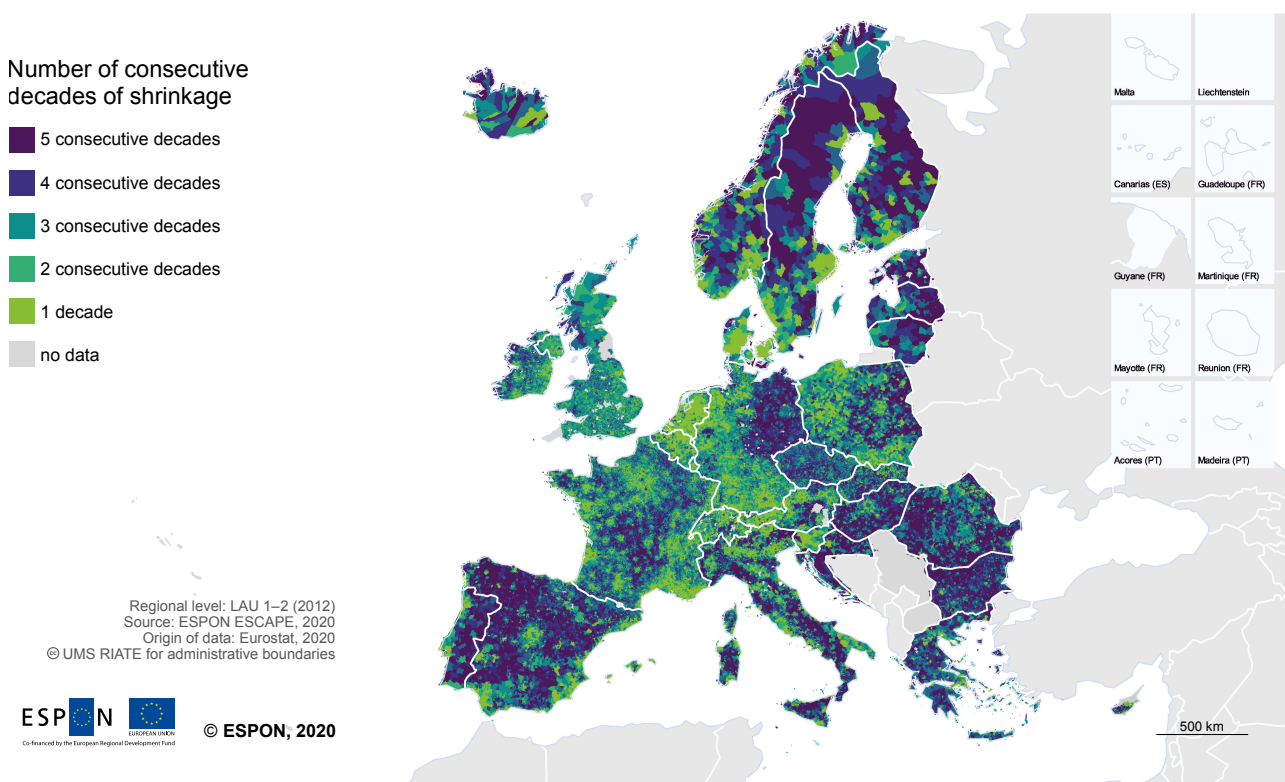
*Rural regions in the ESPON ESCAPE project correspond to predominantly rural regions and intermediate regions (NUTS 3). Shrinking correspond to a population decrease and growing correspond to a population increase over a 20-year-period in the overall period 1993-2033.

Acknowledging and adapting to the demographic changes and trends are the next logical actions, as long-term trends for rural depopulation are already visible: since the 1960s many of the LAUs, especially in East-Central and Southern Europe, have experienced prolonged periods of population decrease, while only a smaller number, located in Western and Central Europe, exhibited a continuous population increase. The east-west and north-south divide is as evident as, the most impacted areas in Europe, where more than 10% of population was lost over a decade, are to be found in Bulgaria, the Baltic countries, Croatia, the former German Democratic Republic, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania or Spain (see map 2).

Understanding different drivers behind complex shrinking processes. Although often seen as an irreversible trend, driven either by contraction (due to an imbalanced age structure or natural decrease) or by outmigration, depopulation stands as a common outcome to different processes, underlying more complex socio-economic and spatial transformations, driven by Europe-wide/ globalized flows or national/ regional/ urban-rural interactions. These processes could be grouped into four main categories: *economic restructuring, locational disadvantage, peripheralization, and events and transitions.*

In generating a more detailed understanding of the challenges that need to be addressed, the shrinking regions

Map 2
Number of consecutive decades with population shrinkage in European LAU 2 units from 1961 to 2011



were further examined, looking at economic models of migration and labour-allocation. The data driven analysis was built using a highly differentiated set of variables and following this exercise, regions with similar characteristics were clustered together, revealing that there is a strong association between demographic change, economic factors, and locational disadvantage (see also map 3).

- **agricultural (intensified) regions**, with low-income jobs, where the population is declining due to high out-migration rates and contraction;
- **industrial regions**, with low-to medium-income jobs, where the population is declining adue to economic restructuring and low-productivity jobs, damaging a weak population structure;

- **agro-industrial regions**, with low-income jobs, where the population is declining due to outmigration in addition to natural decrease, despite a relatively stronger economy;
- **servitised regions**, with low- to medium-income jobs, where the population is declining due to an imbalanced population structure (high share of aged population), despite a strong economic sector;
- **industrial and servitised regions**, with medium-income jobs, where the population is declining due to an imbalanced population structure and low fertility rates, despite a robust economic sector.

Map 3 Typology of complex shrinking in rural and intermediate regions

Label of clusters (NUTS 3 regions)

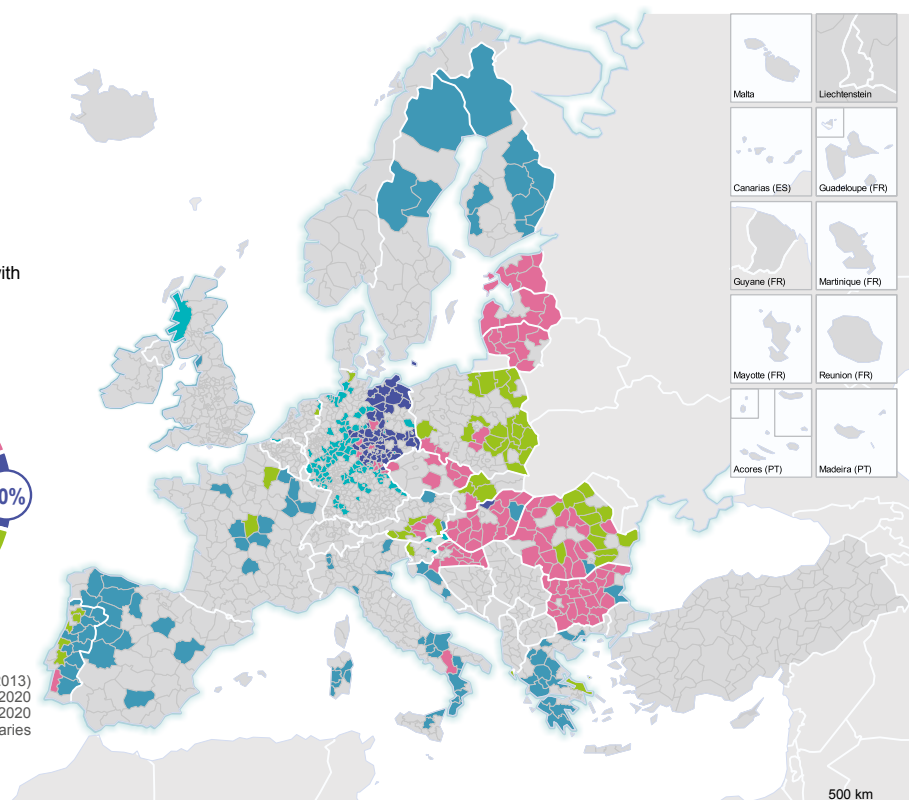
- agricultural, very low income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking
- industrial, mid-income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking
- agro-industrial, low income regions with moderate, mostly legacy shrinking
- servitised, mid-low income regions with moderate legacy shrinking
- industrial/servitised, mid-income regions with moderate, legacy shrinking
- other regions
- no data



Regional level: NUTS 3 (2013)
Source: ESPON ESCAPE, 2020
Origin of data: Eurostat, ESPON database, Nordregio 2020
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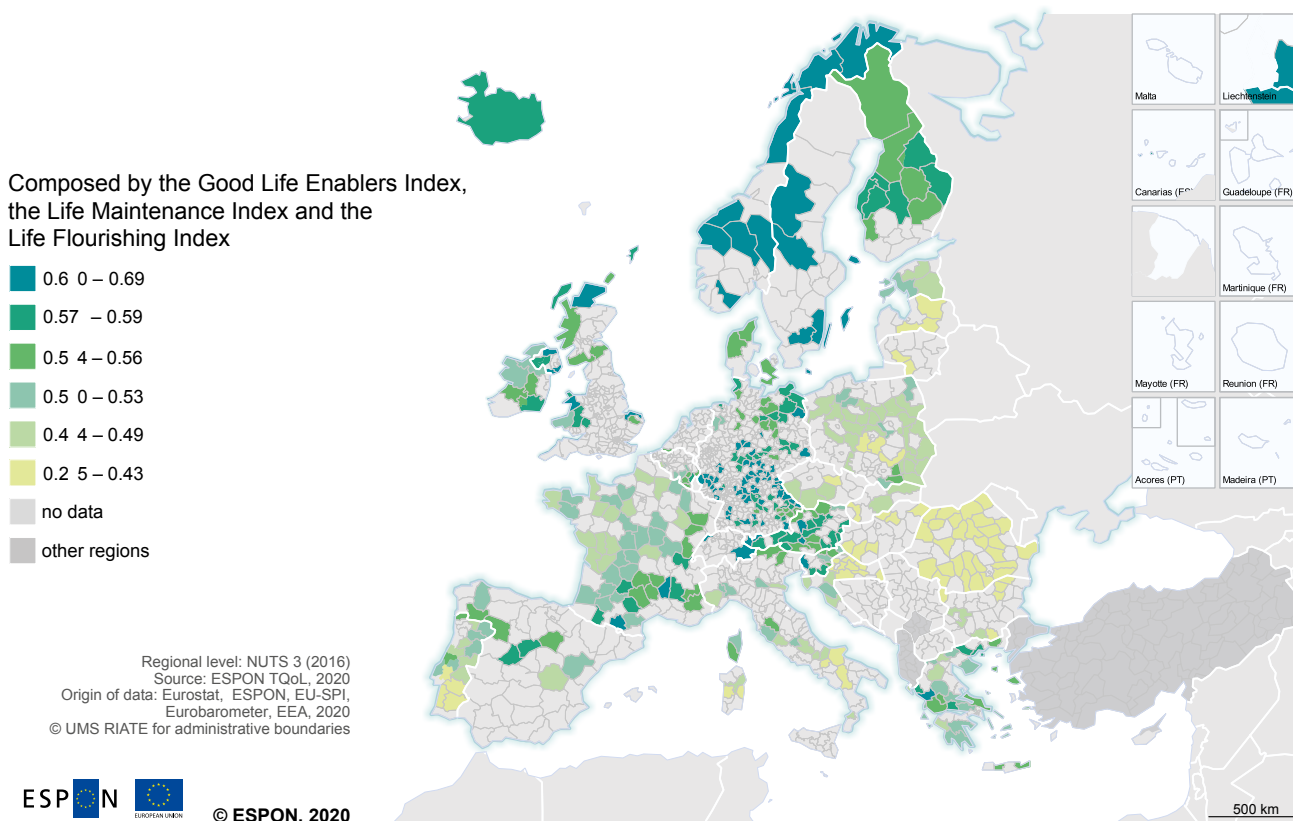
Hence, negative demographic processes can stand both as a cause and a consequence of wider socio-economic challenges of an area and for so many reasons, these territories were unable to retain or attract residents. More so, it is likely that these trends will continue to manifest themselves, in the absence of new opportunities and access to an enhanced quality of life.

The numerous challenges of securing a high(er) quality of life in rural areas. Addressing the issue of quality of life goes beyond good service provision or accessibility, and encompasses three spheres: personal, socio-economic and ecological. All these spheres could be measured through three dimensions: good life enablers, life survival (maintenance) and life flourishing. The territorial dimension of the Quality of Life in Europe (TQoL index) reflects to some extent both a centre-periphery (driven in many cases by the economic power of European regions), and a core-periphery pattern. Within rural regions, the same delineations are preserved, with Northern and Western regions being the ones with

higher performance and Southern and Eastern regions tending to lag behind (see map 4).

Providing an adequate access to main SGIs. Not only an indicator of the degree of territorial connectedness, this is also an indicator on the quality of life - by looking at the easy-to-reach and affordable access to different types of services. Ensuring the quality and quantity of service provision (education, healthcare, public administration etc.) is the challenge that all rural territories are facing, but especially the shrinking ones. Due to permanent migration, low fertility rates or accelerated ageing of the population, service provision (especially healthcare, education and social) has been under an increased pressure, backed by a lack of specialized staff or underequipped service units. There are still areas that have relative poor conditions and appear as inner peripheries in regards to accessing several SGIs (i.e. experience a long travel time to several services); these are to be found mainly in rural regions (45.2% of the total IP).

Map 4 TQoL index of rural regions



* ESPON TQoL 50 indicators proposed at the European level are selected to inform the different domains and subdomains. Weighting currently occurs through the hierarchical organisation of indicators in three dimensions, 9 domains and 22 sub-domains. Dimensions are aggregated with a generalised weighted mean of power of 0.5; variables in domains and sub-domains all weight equal.

Accessing the potential of innovation. The insufficient availability of (good-quality) local services underlines the necessity of supplying an adequate connectivity infrastructure, which refers to both transport infrastructure (provision or better organization of public transport services), and **digital infrastructure**. There are still many households in (remote) rural areas that do not have access to broadband internet. The situation becomes increasingly complicated when a high share of population experiences a form of digital illiteracy.

Furthermore, in such rural areas, the capacity to attract new investments in high-tech, **innovative**, industries is

as limited, as is the regional sectoral specialisation or the composition of the local labour market. And as the technological 4.0 transformation is already visible, regions have to find new ways to cope with the socio-economic transformations, as a response to increasing competitiveness. Technological development is possible and regions that have an existing edge in 3.0 technologies tend to be more advanced on the path for 4.0 transformation. More so, as the territorial distribution of accumulating knowledge highlights, this is leading to the rise of new islands of innovation. (see map 5)

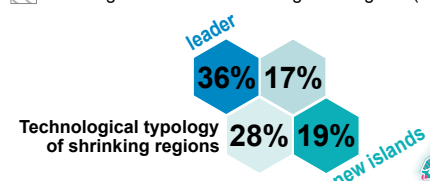
Map 5 Classification of 4.0 inventing regions from 2010 to 2015

Regional technological transformation and innovation (NUTS 2 level)

- low-tech regions
- technology falling behind regions
- new islands of innovation
- technology leader regions
- servitisation
- industry 4.0
- digitalisation of traditional services
- niches of robotisation and of traditional manufacturing
- no data

Future demographic trends in shrinking rural regions (NUTS 3 regions) from 2017 to 2032

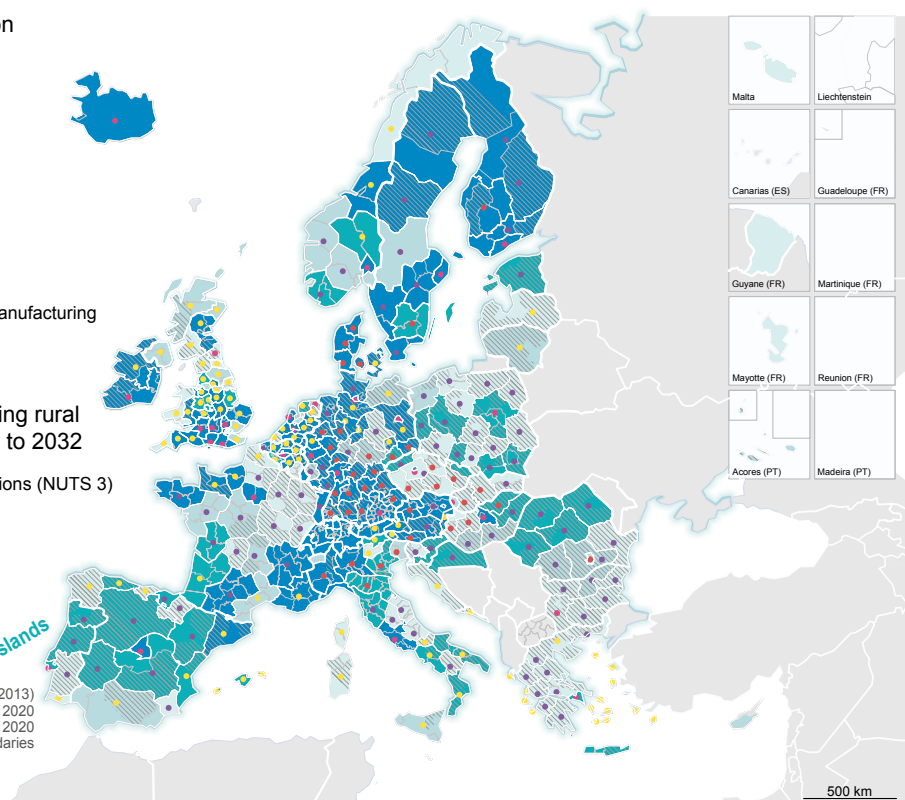
- Shrinking and at-risk of shrinking rural regions (NUTS 3)



Regional level: NUTS 2 (2013)
 Source: ESPON T4, 2019, ESPON ESCAPE, 2020
 Origin of data: OECD-REGPAT, ORBIT, 2019, Eurostat, 2020
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Tackling the effects of climate change. Climate change has also a very quantifiable dimension, as its effects are already felt by population across the EU, impacting both socially and economically the residents. Both direct and indirect economic impacts, on productive capacities of the regional economies, are sizeable and ESPON evidence reveals that coastal and mountainous areas, as well as

areas along major rivers, experienced the highest economic impacts of natural hazards. Out of these, more than 170 shrinking rural regions are registering a higher average economic impact, situation which could further increase disparities between regions. These regions overlap with highly vulnerable territories and located in countries like Bulgaria, Greece, Italy or Romania. (see map 6)

Map 6 Relationship between economic impacts and territorial vulnerability

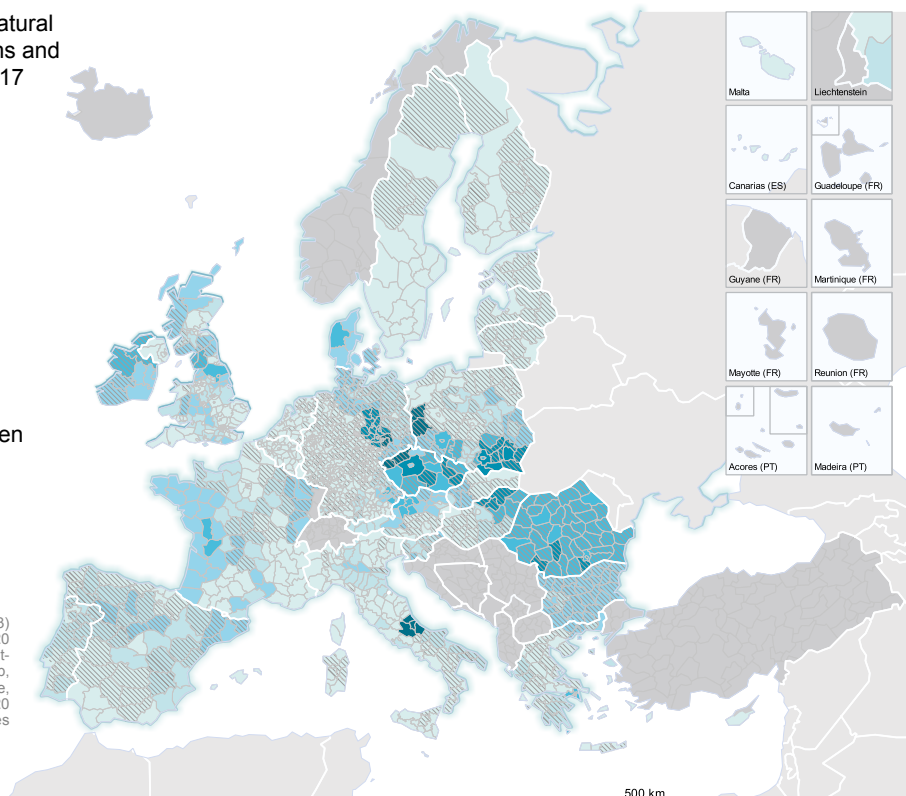
Average economic damage due to natural hazards (droughts, floods, windstorms and earthquakes) between 1995 and 2017 measured in share of yearly Gross Value Added GVA (%)

- fairly low (0.002 – 0.030)
- low (0.030 – 0.051)
- medium (0.051 – 0.117)
- medium high (0.117 – 0.207)
- high (0.207 – 0.295)
- very high (0.295 – 0.448)

Rural population development between 1993 and 2033 (NUTS 3 regions)

- Shrinking (predominantly rural and intermediate) regions
- No data

Regional level: NUTS 3 (2013)
Source: ESPON TITAN, 2020
Origin of data: PBL-JRC EUREGIO multi-regional input-output database, 1995–2017; JRC Risk Data Hub, 1995–2017; EM-DAT, 1995–2017; WISC database, 1995–2017; Natural hazard MRIO modelling, 2020
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*The economic damages for droughts, floods, windstorms, earthquakes were calculated based on the recorded capital stock damages and GVA at NUTS 3 level (direct impacts) and based on the industrial linkages modeled in the multi-regional input-output model (indirect damages). Average economic damages due to natural hazards as a percentage of yearly NUTS3 GVA.
**Shrinking correspond to a population decrease and growing correspond to a population increase over a 20-year-period in the overall period 1993–2033.

ESPON recommendations for place-sensitive policy actions

In this context, territorial cohesion must play its important role in the recovery process, in order to ensure a prosperous future for rural areas, providing an action-oriented framework: within a long-term process, promoting equal opportunities, including access to public services for people and businesses, wherever they are located. The place-based approach, linked to the cross-cutting domains and fitted under the common principles laid out

in the Territorial Agenda 2030, can significantly increase the **coherence and effectiveness of policy responses**, as it is clear that some of these responses will need to be tailored to some specific territorial needs. **Against this background, ESPON policy recommendations could help achieve a JUST and GREEN Europe, supporting the TA 2030 implementation, with a focus on:**

JUST EUROPE	Design long-term territorially sensitive policies for the diverse rural shrinking areas	POLICY RESPONSE	Enhance national cohesion to better address increasing territorial disparities	Discover and develop a comparative advantage by encouraging investments in local assets	Capitalise on opportunities that arise as a result of proximity of cities or urban agglomerations or areas
		POLICY RESPONSE	Strengthen weak secondary and tertiary sectors, using sizeable financial support from the EU	Couple the sizeable investments to improve accessibility with efficient measures for ensuring access to SGIs in peripheral regions	
JUST EUROPE	Construct a more positive narrative and move away from labelling rural areas as shrinking or disadvantaged	POLICY RESPONSE	Build the storyline around positive notions of rural 'transition', 'transformation', 'restructuring', 'innovation' or even 'smart adaptation' – terminology that promotes positive images of rural life, and around which a combination of sustainable and resilient pathways towards economic performance and expansion of ecological systems can be offered		
		POLICY RESPONSE	Unpack the conceptual definitions for all local stakeholder associations, ensuring that the communities can embrace, own and use these new types of classifications without feeling the negative fallout		
JUST EUROPE	Change the focus from mitigating the rural shrinkage to smart adaptation, including better digital connectivity to boost the economy	POLICY RESPONSE	Develop a combined policy response that includes both mitigative and adaptive measures and reflects an explicit and coherent understanding of the drivers, to effectively support the transition of rural regions	Develop functional policies with a distinct rural development perspective at the EU, national, regional or local level, involving a large number of players and enhancing the collaborative approach	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Design interventions using local knowledge on the shrinking process and develop integrated and coordinated policy responses across key sectors, looking closely to digital connectivity as a tool to enhance the well-being of residents or boost economy		
JUST EUROPE	Develop and implement the concept of Functional Rural Areas	POLICY RESPONSE	Consolidate and develop the concept, commonly accepted at the EU level	Improve the territorial classification system and target funding in a more effective manner, by helping to create more efficient sectoral policies deployed at the right scale	Create the right frameworks for multilevel governance approaches and enhance territorial cooperation
		POLICY RESPONSE	Construct a more nuanced collection of opportunities and possibilities for rural areas, diverging from purely economic growth objectives		
GREEN EUROPE	Breathe new life into rural areas by attracting new residents and enabling them to achieve their professional, social and personal goals	POLICY RESPONSE	Shift local strategies to a citizen-centric approach, promoting a new wave of representativeness	Enhance the attractiveness of rural areas for new businesses or innovators by providing them with enough resources and appropriate connections	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Improve quality of life by enhancing both socio-economic and environmental conditions for the local communities. This can be achieved by ensuring attractive living environments (in existing settlements) and creating opportunities that the residents can benefit from through accessing the knowledge sources that the connected world has to offer		
GREEN EUROPE	Enable provision and comparable access to Services of General Interest (demographic change is about people and their lives)	POLICY RESPONSE	Use new technology to overcome geographical distance by intensifying schemes that establish social, economic and digital service delivery alternatives	Redesign the delivery responsibility of certain services, from the public sector to the third sector, by incorporating socially innovative models	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Elaborate place-specific strategies that will highlight priority actions according to their specific needs, accentuating spatial restructuring	Encourage population retention by enhancing existing built and residential environments and local facilities, and making general improvements designed to increase well-being	
GREEN EUROPE	Deploy the potential of green infrastructure in strategies, policies and legislation in a geostrategic climate change approach	POLICY RESPONSE	Capitalise on the potential that rural areas have by enabling them to become successful laboratories for improving and utilising the full potential of GI	Embrace the GI approach in integrated and strategic planning, so that decisions incorporate relevant information on their potential benefits across different thematic domains	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Make GI a sustainable investment opportunity as part of the EU's sustainable financial policy framework	Assimilate GI into strategies, policies and legislation, following the EU guidelines, and secure political commitment at all scales	
GREEN EUROPE	Reboot the agricultural sector through sustainable and optimised supply chains to enhance green infrastructure connectivity and ecosystem services	POLICY RESPONSE	Rethink the role of rural areas, looking from a climate change and biodiversity point of view	Reassess the supply chains, from production to distribution, focusing on the sustainable and optimised delivery system for locally sourced produce	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Invest in creating sustainable and efficient agricultural processes; this will contribute to improving productivity indicators, but will also create new high-paid jobs and bring about economic diversification		
GREEN EUROPE	Enhance economic specialisation, diversification and innovation based on local potential and initiatives, but also on knowledge transfer and uptake of sustainable practices	POLICY RESPONSE	Design tailored policies to especially support lagging and shrinking regions in becoming new islands of innovation	Support the efficient uptake of new technologies and ensure a rapid technological transfer towards lagging and shrinking rural areas, through a top-down approach	Adopt and implement 4.0 technologies as solutions for increasing efficiency, quality and revenues in general or to overcome the on-going labour shortages
		POLICY RESPONSE	Capitalise on local knowledge, growing skills and innovating, as territorial assets can take diverse forms, and rural areas are repositories of local innovation; detect specific strengths; and develop productive activities using local resources		
GREEN EUROPE	Simplify EU funding processes and develop long-term EU projects	POLICY RESPONSE	Develop long-term interventions dedicated to rural development (and shrinkage (in particular), and designed to address long-term processes, at both European and national levels, to ensure continuity and long-term sustainability	Simplify EU funding processes to make them more appealing and accessible to a wider range of regional and local players	
		POLICY RESPONSE	Enhance the role of regional and local players in developing rural policies (including for shrinking), and develop integrated and targeted policies at EU and national levels to reflect the essential nature of EU support		
GREEN EUROPE	Close the gap between EU policy and local strategies	POLICY RESPONSE	Ensure effective communication and cooperation between national and regional/local levels as an important preparatory step for the efficient deployment of EU funding	Transfer the appropriate strategy-making and implementation capacity to local and regional levels	Provide guidance and support national level when developing ESIF programmes
		POLICY RESPONSE	Offer substantial and differentiated financing for the strategically targeted national programmes to meet rural development challenges; give rural areas (and the issue of rural shrinkage) explicit recognition		
GREEN EUROPE	Harvest the opportunities through territorial governance and empowering civil society	POLICY RESPONSE	Use territorial governance as an effective tool to empower the local level in policymaking and give it a stronger voice in multilevel governance processes	Support the multilevel governance approach by allocating powers to the appropriate level of governance and develop innovative partnerships	Ensure strong vertical coordination between different levels of governance (national – regional - local)
		POLICY RESPONSE	Enhance collaboration between stakeholders from public sectors and civil society, involving relevant non-governmental organisations in local initiatives and projects to scale up and ensure greater efficiency of their long-term implementation		

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