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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The evolving demographic trends shaping opportunities for rural youth – <i>Policy debate</i>

Delegations will find attached the background document prepared by the Presidency as the basis for the policy debate at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 25-26 November 2024.

The evolving demographic trends shaping opportunities for rural youth

Policy debate

Demographic trends in the European Union are increasingly defined by an ageing population, with many Member States facing depopulation resulting in increasing labour shortages in these areas. These shifts significantly impact our societies, both present and future generations, affecting the competitiveness, resilience, and overall prosperity of the EU. The demographic changes also have a great impact on the territorial, economic and social cohesion including the cooperation between generations, with some Member States and regions experiencing more of these challenges than others.

Rural regions across the EU are increasingly exposed to these profound demographic changes. While depopulation is not unique to rural areas, such regions, and young people particularly, are disproportionately impacted by these demographic shifts. On average, rural areas have significantly older populations compared to urban centres, and they are more likely to face population decline. Compared to the urban population, the rural population is nearly twice as likely to reside in an area experiencing a decline in highly skilled and young workers.¹ Furthermore, regions facing population ageing, low educational attainment, and significant departure of young people, risk falling into a "talent development trap," which undermines their ability to build sustainable economies.² Therefore, creating supportive environments, which encourage young people to stay in rural areas, is vital to the preservation and development of these regions.

¹ Commission Staff Working Document, *Accompanying the document*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 - SWD(2021) 166 final.

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Harnessing talent in Europe's regions COM (2023) 32 final.

Young people represent not only the present and future of our societies but are also indispensable catalysts of progress. They bring innovative ideas, fresh perspectives and dynamics that are essential for addressing the complex challenges of today's world. The presence, innovation and vitality of young people can create new opportunities, a thriving local environment and contribute to increased performance in these regions. However, many rural and remote regions within the European Union are facing distinct demographic challenges, which reduces the impact and growth of young people in their local environment.

The decline in the working-age population in rural and less developed areas, hampers growth and directly effects the competitiveness of Europe, challenging the economic, territorial and social cohesion of the EU. As the labour force shrinks, rural regions find it increasingly difficult to attract investment and sustain economic growth. As young people move away from rural areas, these regions are left without the necessary human capital and talent to drive innovation and development, further exacerbating already existing challenges. The European Commission's Communication on "Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions" offers strategic guidance aimed at reversing this trend, by transforming these regions into vibrant, talent-driven economies. Key to this effort is an integrated approach that focuses on diversifying employment opportunities, talent development, enhancing quality education and training, and making rural areas more attractive places to live, learn and work. These strategies, supported by cohesion policy and EU funds, are vital for ensuring the sustainable development of rural regions and maintaining the competitiveness of the European economy.

It is important to bear in mind that demographic changes in rural areas not only affect the economy but also have profound impacts on the social fabric of these communities. Young people in these regions may face higher risks of social exclusion and isolation as well as limited access to quality education, training and employment opportunities, access to social and healthcare services as well as to land, and more likely to experience insufficient representation in decision-making. These issues, coupled with the geographic isolation of some rural areas, can exacerbate social and economic exclusion and weaken a community's capacity to sustain itself on the long-term. However, communities, equal access to high-quality education, and local opportunities in higher education can also play a critical role in retaining young people and mitigate demographic changes such as the “brain drain” phenomenon. Strong community ties, social inclusion, local housing support and opportunities for meaningful participation can help keep rural youth engaged and invested in their local regions³. Fostering intergenerational fairness and cooperation becomes essential in addressing these challenges. Promoting cooperation and understanding between younger and older generations, can build stronger, more resilient societies. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and its European Youth Goal #3 and #6 highlight the importance of fostering inclusive societies and creating rural areas where young people can realise their full potential and thrive locally.⁴ Empowering rural youth is not only vital for their individual success but is key to reversing demographic decline and revitalizing rural areas. By investing in their potential, we can create more dynamic, innovative and sustainable communities that are better equipped to face future challenges.

³ Bártá, O., & Moxon, D. (2024). EUYD10 EU Youth Conference in Budapest, Hungary. Final Conference Report. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13836827>

⁴ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European Cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (2018/C 456/01).

The Commission Communication “Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action”⁵ provides a set of policy tools available to Member States for managing demographic change and its impacts on the EU's society and economy, including its global competitiveness with one of the 4 pillars focusing on young people. To this end, public policies and support at the relevant level should be adjusted with a view to supporting and empowering younger generations to thrive, develop their skills, have better access to the labour market and to affordable housing.

In the light of the above, Ministers are kindly invited to reflect based on the following guiding questions. We kindly ask to limit interventions to a maximum of 3 minutes.

Questions for the discussion:

- How can demographic trends that most affect young people living in rural and remote areas be effectively addressed?
- How can young people living in rural and remote areas, especially those with fewer opportunities, be empowered to make use of their untapped potential to prosper locally?
- How can best practices on local, regional, national and EU level be shared and implemented across Member States to mitigate regional disparities, depopulation and prevent young people leaving these areas?

⁵ EUR-Lex - 52023DC0577 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)