

RURACTIVE Forum – Fourth meeting

30 June 2026

On 30 June 2026, RURACTIVE held its *fourth forum meeting*, bringing together 84 participants, including 54 returning participants from previous Forum meetings, representing 29 countries. The diverse audience comprised project partners, public authorities and policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, Local Action Groups and rural development networks, EU-funded projects, businesses and rural entrepreneurs, farmers' organisations, innovation intermediaries, and European and international institutions.

The Fourth Forum marked the conclusion of the first RURACTIVE policy co-creation cycle. Building on the *three previous meetings*, which progressively explored rural challenges and developed proto-policy recommendations, the Forum focused on **validating and refining the project's**

Strategic Policy Directions. These synthesise evidence from the *12 RURACTIVE Dynamos*, the Forum meetings, relevant Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 projects, and RURACTIVE's contribution to the European Commission consultation on the Right to Stay Strategy.

The Forum took place at a particularly **significant moment in the European policy cycle**. As discussions continue on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the future architecture of National and Regional Partnership Plans, and several major European policy initiatives affecting rural areas, including the Right to Stay Strategy, the Vision for Agriculture and Food, the Competitiveness Compass and the renewed EU strategic approach to research and innovation (R&I) for competitive, resilient and sustainable agriculture, forestry and rural areas, the meeting provided an opportunity to assess the relevance, feasibility and implementation potential of RURACTIVE's emerging policy recommendations within this evolving policy landscape.

The Forum adopted a **plenary validation format, with independent experts assessing** the relevance, feasibility and implementation potential of the Strategic Policy Directions across the six *Rural Development Drivers*. Discussions broadly confirmed their relevance while highlighting the need for stronger governance arrangements, financial and implementation realism, and clearer responsibilities across governance levels.

The outcomes directly inform **Deliverable D7.5 – Policy Recommendations and Guidance to Support Smart Solutions and Community-led Innovations**, consolidating RURACTIVE's contribution to future European rural policy and the post-2027 programming period.

ORGANISER:



Task leader of RURACTIVE Forum and formulation of policy recommendation of the project.



Online



84 participants from 29 countries

project partners, policymakers, researchers, NGOs, civil society, LAGs, businesses, farmers, intermediaries, networks, and EU institutions



Presentations and recording: [here](#)



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RURACTIVE overview and objectives of the Fourth Forum

Claudia de Luca, RURACTIVE project coordinator (University of Bologna)

Claudia De Luca opened the meeting by welcoming returning participants and newcomers and emphasising the Fourth Forum's role as the culmination of RURACTIVE's first policy co-creation cycle. As the project enters its final year, she highlighted the **importance of translating practical experience from participating territories into strategic policy guidance** and demonstrating how locally generated evidence can inform European policymaking.

A key message was that **strengthening rural competitiveness requires moving beyond a narrow agricultural perspective**. While agriculture remains fundamental, vibrant rural communities also depend on accessible services, cultural vitality, sustainable mobility, diversified economic opportunities and effective governance. This holistic approach aligns closely with emerging debates around the **Right to Stay**, recognising that enabling people to remain in rural areas requires addressing the broader conditions that make them attractive places to live and work.

Claudia highlighted the progress of the *twelve RURACTIVE Dynamos*, which have established **Rural Innovation Ecosystems** bringing together local authorities, civil society, businesses, researchers and citizens to co-design responses to territorial challenges. This process has generated 38 place-based solutions, complemented by 15 additional innovations developed through the Financial Support to Third Parties programme. Their implementation is generating practical evidence on how community-led innovation can address diverse rural development needs and provides the foundation for RURACTIVE's policy work.

She concluded by encouraging continued stakeholder engagement beyond the Forum, including through the forthcoming *webinar on Building Rural Innovation Ecosystems* for World Rural Development Day. She stressed that the policy recommendations under validation form part of a broader effort to strengthen the contribution of rural communities to future European policy debates.

KEYNOTE - Rural innovation in the evolving EU policy landscape

Carole Esclapez, Policy Officer, DG AGRI, European Commission

The *keynote address by Carole Esclapez* situated the **RURACTIVE policy recommendations within the rapidly evolving European policy landscape**. Speaking from the perspective of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), she provided participants with an overview of recent and forthcoming EU policy initiatives that are expected to shape rural development during the next programming period. Carole emphasised that rural policy is entering a **period of significant transformation**. Several major strategic initiatives adopted over the past year demonstrate an increasing recognition that the future competitiveness of Europe depends not only on urban centres but also on the vitality, resilience and innovation capacity of its rural territories. In this context, she highlighted the importance of projects such as RURACTIVE in generating evidence capable of informing policy design through practical experience and territorial experimentation.

She first referred to the **Vision for Agriculture and Food**, adopted in early 2025, which places vibrant rural areas at the centre of Europe's long-term agricultural strategy. While improving the competitiveness and sustainability

of agriculture remains a key objective, the vision also acknowledges that the future of farming depends on broader territorial conditions, including access to services, quality of life, employment opportunities and demographic renewal.

Building on this perspective, Carole presented the **Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture**, which seeks to double the number of young and new farmers by 2040. She explained that attracting a new generation into farming requires more than facilitating access to land, finance and knowledge. It also depends fundamentally on creating attractive rural communities where people and their families can access education, healthcare, housing, mobility and other essential services. Addressing these wider territorial conditions is therefore essential to breaking the cycle of depopulation and ensuring the long-term sustainability of European agriculture.

She also introduced the recently adopted **Strategy for a Competitive and Sustainable Bioeconomy**, highlighting its potential to diversify rural economies through new value chains based on biological resources, circular production models and innovative bio-based products. By creating additional income opportunities and employment beyond traditional agricultural activities, the strategy contributes to strengthening the economic resilience of rural areas.

Beyond agricultural policy, Carole stressed that rural development increasingly requires coordination across multiple European policy domains. She pointed to the recently adopted **EU Coastal Communities Strategy** and **EU Islands Strategy** as examples of integrated territorial approaches addressing challenges shared by rural, coastal and island regions, including accessibility, demographic change and economic diversification. These initiatives illustrate the European Commission's growing commitment to overcoming sectoral silos and promoting more place-based territorial development.

Looking ahead, she identified the forthcoming **Right to Stay Strategy** as one of the most significant policy developments for rural areas. Building upon previous work on demographic change and talent retention, the strategy aims to showcase policies and initiatives that enable people to remain in the places where they choose to live while strengthening the attractiveness and competitiveness of European regions. Carole welcomed RURACTIVE's contribution to the public consultation process, noting that the project's territorial evidence provides valuable insights into the practical dimensions of implementing the Right to Stay concept.

The keynote also situated rural innovation within the broader framework of the European Commission's **Competitiveness framework**, which seeks to enhance Europe's productivity, resilience and strategic autonomy. Carole explained that competitiveness should not be understood solely in industrial terms but also as the capacity of territories to generate innovation, attract investment, create quality employment and develop sustainable economic opportunities. In this context, research and innovation projects are increasingly expected to demonstrate pathways from knowledge generation to real-world uptake and market deployment.

She subsequently outlined the implications of the Commission's proposals for the **post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**. While negotiations remain ongoing, she explained that the proposed architecture would strengthen the role of the European Competitiveness Fund and seek greater coherence across funding instruments through integrated policy frameworks. At the same time, she acknowledged that discussions on future governance arrangements and funding priorities are still evolving, making evidence-based contributions from research projects particularly timely.

Finally, Carole introduced the forthcoming **Research and Innovation Strategic Approach for Agriculture, Forestry, Rural Areas and Food Systems**, which is expected to be adopted later in 2026. The renewed strategy places particular emphasis on accelerating the uptake of research results, improving synergies between European programmes and strengthening the translation of innovation into practical territorial solutions. She encouraged participants to remain engaged with these processes and invited them to contribute to future policy discussions through the European Commission's upcoming research and innovation events.

In concluding, Carole underlined that the challenges facing rural Europe—including demographic change, economic diversification, climate adaptation and territorial cohesion—cannot be addressed by individual policy sectors acting in isolation. Instead, they require integrated approaches that combine innovation, governance and place-based knowledge. She noted that the work undertaken by RURACTIVE illustrates how collaborative experimentation at local level can generate policy insights with relevance far beyond the participating territories, reinforcing the project's contribution to shaping future European rural policy.

From territorial evidence to strategic policy directions

Janne Sinerma and María Alonso-Roldán, AEIDL

Janne Sinerma and María Alonso-Roldán *presented the process* through which **RURACTIVE has transformed local evidence into a coherent set of Strategic Policy Directions**. Their presentation emphasised that the recommendations are the result of an iterative policy development process, rather than a standalone exercise conducted during the Forum meetings.

Janne first situated the policy work within the broader timeline of the project. Since the launch of RURACTIVE in 2023, **policy analysis** has accompanied the implementation of the Rural Innovation Ecosystem across the Dynamos, combining a review of existing European policy frameworks with continuous evidence gathering from the participating territories. This process has progressively incorporated findings from Local Action Plans, project deliverables, stakeholder consultations and the successive Forum meetings, ensuring that policy development evolved alongside implementation rather than following it.

He explained how the Forum itself has served as the project's principal science–policy interface. The first Forum established a community of stakeholders and identified priority themes for discussion. The second Forum explored the policy implications of territorial challenges and emerging innovation practices. The third Forum translated these discussions into a first set of **51 proto-policy recommendations**, which were subsequently refined through benchmarking against previous Horizon Europe and Horizon 2020 projects, bilateral exchanges with project partners and Dynamos, and RURACTIVE's contribution to the European Commission's consultation on the forthcoming Right to Stay Strategy. This work ultimately resulted in a consolidated set of **Strategic Policy Directions**, which formed the basis of the validation exercise conducted during the Fourth Forum.

Janne also positioned the project within the current European policy cycle, noting that the recommendations have been developed at a particularly opportune moment. Ongoing discussions on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, the future National and Regional Partnership Plans and several major European initiatives affecting rural areas create an important window for translating territorial evidence into policy proposals. The objective of the Fourth Forum was therefore not to generate new recommendations, but to assess whether the proposed strategic directions are sufficiently robust, realistic and relevant to inform future policy development.

Before presenting the thematic recommendations, Janne introduced three transversal principles that had progressively emerged across all Rural Development Drivers (RDDs):

- the concept of a “**Right to Stay test**”, proposing that future policies should be systematically assessed according to their capacity to strengthen territorial liveability, improve access to essential services and create opportunities for people to remain in rural areas by choice;
- the second principle advocated a “**Do No Harm to Cohesion**” approach, recognising that new policy initiatives should avoid reinforcing existing territorial inequalities and instead consider their wider impacts on social, economic and territorial cohesion through appropriate territorial impact assessments; and
- the importance of **integrated territorial governance and Rural Innovation Ecosystems**. Successful rural innovation depends not only on individual projects or funding instruments but also on governance arrangements capable of bringing together public authorities, civil society, businesses and knowledge institutions across different administrative levels. Strengthening intermediary organisations and collaborative governance structures therefore emerged as a recurring priority throughout the policy development process.

Building on this overview, María Alonso-Roldán presented the Strategic Policy Directions developed across the project's six RDDs, focusing on the broader conceptual shifts underpinning each thematic area. Across all six RDDs, a common message emerged: **future rural policy should move beyond isolated sectoral interventions towards integrated territorial approaches capable of addressing multiple challenges simultaneously.**



Within **Sustainable Agrifood Systems and Ecosystem Management**, the proposed direction is to move beyond viewing agriculture solely as a productive sector and instead recognise farming as part of wider territorial social-ecological systems. This implies strengthening coherence between agricultural, environmental and territorial policies while recognising farmers as providers of ecosystem services and supporting regenerative approaches through advisory systems, access to land and improved knowledge exchange.



Regarding **Energy Transition and Climate Neutrality**, María stressed that rural territories should no longer be regarded simply as locations for renewable energy production but as active participants and beneficiaries of the transition. This requires fair benefit-sharing mechanisms, stronger community ownership models, improved governance capacity and greater alignment between renewable deployment, biodiversity objectives and territorial development priorities.



For **Culture and Cultural Innovation**, the recommendations seek to position culture as a strategic contributor to territorial cohesion rather than a standalone policy field. This includes integrating culture into wider policy areas such as education, health and social inclusion, alongside establishing more stable funding models capable of supporting long-term community initiatives and recognising the broader social value generated by rural cultural ecosystems.



Within **Local Services, Health and Wellbeing**, the recommendations advocate a shift from measuring service provision according to availability towards assessing effective accessibility. Particular emphasis was placed on integrated service models, inclusive digitalisation, multi-service centres, rural housing and

demographic resilience, reflecting the central role of essential services in enabling people to remain in rural communities.



For **Sustainable Multimodal Mobility**, the proposed shift similarly focuses on accessibility rather than transport infrastructure alone. Rural mobility should be understood in terms of people's ability to reach employment, education and essential services through integrated, flexible and context-specific mobility systems supported by appropriate governance arrangements and long-term operational funding.



Finally, within **Nature-based and Cultural Tourism**, the recommendations promote a transition from growth-oriented tourism towards regenerative territorial development. Tourism should be managed as part of wider territorial systems through strengthened destination governance, improved sustainability monitoring, simplified funding mechanisms and greater support for local businesses and community-led innovation.

María concluded by emphasising that, despite addressing diverse thematic areas, all Strategic Policy Directions converge around a common vision: strengthening integrated territorial systems, reinforcing governance capacity and ensuring that rural communities become active co-creators of the transitions affecting their territories. These overarching principles provided the basis for the subsequent expert validation exercise.

Expert validation panel

Jorge Núñez Ferrer (Director for Cohesion Policy and EU Budget from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions)

Leticia Abarca Velencoso (EU Policy & Project Advisor from the regional government of Castilla-La Mancha)

Stefan Kah (Knowledge Exchange and Research Fellow at European Policies Research Centre)

Moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal, Senior Expert, Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)

The central element of the fourth forum was a **structured expert validation panel moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal designed to assess the relevance, feasibility and implementation potential of the Strategic Policy Directions** presented by the project. Moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal, the discussion brought together three experts representing complementary perspectives from European policy analysis, regional public administration and territorial governance research. Rather than evaluating individual recommendations, the panel focused on the overall robustness of the policy framework and its capacity to inform future European rural policy.

A first recurring message concerned the **need to further strengthen the practical and implementation-oriented character of the recommendations**. While the experts broadly recognised that the policy directions accurately reflected many of the challenges experienced by rural territories, they argued that future policy documents should more clearly explain how proposed measures could be implemented in practice, who would be responsible for delivering them and under what governance arrangements they could realistically operate.

Jorge Núñez Ferrer emphasised that the recommendations should avoid relying excessively on broad policy concepts or aspirational language without demonstrating their operational implications. In his view, **effective**

policy recommendations must not only identify desirable objectives but also **provide convincing evidence of their economic rationale, governance feasibility and institutional responsibilities**. He argued that future rural policy should recognise rural communities not only as recipients of public support but also as active contributors to Europe's economic development, innovation capacity and territorial resilience. This perspective requires demonstrating how proposed interventions generate value for society while acknowledging the financial and administrative constraints under which public authorities operate.

A second theme emerging across the discussion concerned the importance of governance and institutional capacity. The experts agreed that **integrated territorial approaches can only succeed if accompanied by governance structures** capable of coordinating multiple actors across different sectors and administrative levels. Several recommendations—including those related to mobility, energy communities, cultural ecosystems and integrated service provision—depend on **intermediary organisations capable of facilitating** collaboration, supporting local implementation and maintaining continuity beyond individual projects.

From the perspective of regional public administration, *Leticia Abarca Velencoso* highlighted the **importance of translating strategic objectives into policy instruments** that can be realistically adopted within existing administrative systems. Drawing upon the experience of Castilla-La Mancha, she noted that integrated rural policy increasingly requires coordination across departments, continuous stakeholder participation and territorial adaptation rather than uniform solutions. She stressed that successful implementation depends not only on funding availability but also on legislative frameworks, administrative flexibility and institutional learning capable of responding to diverse territorial contexts.

The discussion also reinforced the **importance of territorial diversity within rural Europe**. The experts cautioned against assuming that common policy objectives necessarily imply uniform implementation models. Rural territories differ considerably in demographic trends, economic structures, governance capacity and innovation potential. Consequently, future European **policy frameworks should provide sufficient flexibility for local adaptation** while maintaining shared strategic objectives related to territorial cohesion and sustainable development.

Another important observation concerned the need to **strengthen the evidence base underpinning the recommendations**. While recognising the extensive work undertaken through the Dynamos, the panel encouraged the project to make the **links between territorial evidence and policy proposals even more explicit** within the final deliverable. Demonstrating how recommendations emerge directly from implementation experience would reinforce both their credibility and their relevance for policymakers operating at European, national and regional levels.

Stefan Kah approached the recommendations from the perspective of territorial governance and rural development policy. He welcomed the project's **emphasis on integrated, place-based approaches** and highlighted the consistency of many recommendations with broader debates surrounding Community-Led Local Development, territorial governance and cohesion policy. He also underlined the value of maintaining a strong territorial perspective across different policy sectors, recognising that successful rural development depends upon effective coordination rather than isolated interventions. In this context, he emphasised the **importance of preserving governance arrangements that enable local actors to participate meaningfully** in policy design and implementation.



Despite approaching the recommendations from different professional backgrounds, the three experts converged on several overarching conclusions. They agreed that the **Strategic Policy Directions successfully capture the multidimensional nature of contemporary rural development** and reflect many of the **priorities emerging across current European policy debates**, particularly regarding integrated territorial development, innovation ecosystems and the Right to Stay agenda. At the same time, they **encouraged the project to reinforce the practical dimension of the final recommendations** by clarifying governance responsibilities, demonstrating financial realism and strengthening the connection between territorial evidence and proposed policy actions.

The validation exercise therefore confirmed the overall direction of the project's policy work while providing constructive guidance for its final refinement. Rather than challenging the substance of the recommendations, the discussion focused primarily on increasing their clarity, operational relevance and usefulness for policymakers responsible for designing and implementing future rural development frameworks. These reflections will directly inform the finalisation of **Deliverable D7.5**, ensuring that RURACTIVE's policy recommendations remain firmly grounded in both territorial evidence and implementation realities.

Open discussion and cross-cutting reflections

The open discussion provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the expert panel's observations and their implications for the future development of rural policy. The **exchange confirmed broad support for the overall direction of the Strategic Policy Directions**, while reinforcing several cross-cutting priorities that had emerged throughout the Forum process. Participants agreed that **future rural policies should place greater emphasis on integrated, place-based approaches capable of addressing the interconnected nature of rural challenges**. Across all thematic areas, there was a shared recognition that issues such as mobility, access to services, energy, housing, culture and economic development cannot be addressed through isolated sectoral interventions but **require coordinated governance across policy domains and administrative levels**.

The discussion also highlighted the **importance of strengthening local capacities** to implement policy ambitions. Beyond financial resources, participants stressed the need for intermediary organisations, advisory services and collaborative governance arrangements capable of supporting community-led innovation and facilitating cooperation between public authorities, businesses, civil society and research organisations.

Finally, participants welcomed the **emphasis placed on the Right to Stay as an overarching policy objective**. Rather than focusing solely on preventing depopulation, the discussion reaffirmed that rural policy should create the conditions for people to choose to remain in, return to or relocate to rural areas by improving accessibility, opportunities and quality of life.

Next steps and closure

Closing the meeting, María Alonso-Roldán (AEIDL) thanked participants for their continued engagement throughout the four Forum meetings and acknowledged the valuable contributions of the external experts in strengthening the project's policy work and explained that the feedback gathered during the validation exercise would now be incorporated into the final version of the Strategic Policy Directions, which will form the basis of **Deliverable D7.5**, scheduled for completion in August 2026.