



RURACTIVE

Empowering rural communities for change

RURACTIVE Forum – Third meeting

23 April 2026

On 23 April 2026, the RURACTIVE project held its *third Forum meeting*, gathering 77 participants from 26 countries. The diversity of organisations (spanning European networks, public authorities, research institutions, development agencies, and other EU-funded projects) reflected the Forum’s nature as a cross-European science–policy interface for rural innovation and policy exchange.

Building on the *February* and *November* 2025 editions, this third meeting marked a clear shift from exchanging on rural challenges towards the **structured development of proto-policy responses**. The Forum took place at a critical moment in the EU policy cycle, as negotiations progress on the post-2027 framework and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034. In this context, the Forum positioned

RURACTIVE as a mechanism for translating territorial evidence and

local experimentation into policy-relevant input across its six **Rural Development Drivers (RDDs)**: sustainable multimodal mobility, culture and cultural innovation, sustainable agrifood system and ecosystem management, energy transition and climate neutrality, nature-based and cultural tourism and local services, health and wellbeing.

Discussions highlighted implementation experience, place-based innovation, and conditions for scaling rural solutions across diverse territorial contexts. A recurring issue was the **need to better align emerging proposals with EU policy instruments**, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), and **emerging governance and monitoring frameworks**, in order to improve coherence and uptake.

Participants worked in six thematic breakout groups aligned with the RDDs. Each group combined an expert presentation with facilitated discussion, **resulting in a first set of proto-policy recommendations grounded in territorial experience**. The meeting concluded with a plenary session where rapporteurs presented cross-thematic insights and emerging policy directions, to be further refined ahead of the **next Forum on 30 June 2026**.

ORGANISER:



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



Online



77 participants from 26 countries

project partners, policymakers, researchers, rural practitioners, civil society organisations, actors involved in other EU-funded initiatives



Presentations and recording: [here](#)

RURACTIVE overview and objectives of the Third Forum

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

Claudia De Luca provided an update on the progress of the RURACTIVE project, addressing both new and returning participants. She recalled the scale of the initiative, which involves **28 partners across 12 countries over a four-year period**, and noted that the project is now **past its halfway point**. Beyond technical delivery, she emphasised that RURACTIVE also **focuses on strengthening relationships with local communities and supporting collaborative rural innovation processes**.

She then revisited the project's six RDDs, which are complemented by **three cross-cutting priorities** (climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity, and social justice and inclusion) which are embedded across all activities to ensure an integrated approach to rural development.

An update was provided on the work to **identify and systematise rural innovation solutions**. The project continues to expand its online repository of solutions collected from previous initiatives and is developing tools to improve access and usability of this knowledge base.

A substantial part of the presentation focused on the **RURACTIVE *Dynamos***, the project's pilot territories. Claudia explained how local partners have worked with stakeholders to identify territorial challenges, map local ecosystems, and co-design responses through participatory processes. This work has led to the development of Local Action Plans, which are now entering the implementation phase.

At the time of the Forum, the project had **generated 38 place-based solutions through local co-creation processes and 15 additional solutions through the *Open Call for Innovators***. All are currently under implementation in participating territories. Examples include initiatives on sustainable tourism in Ukraine, equitable food systems in Scotland, and healthcare support services for vulnerable rural populations in Spain.

She concluded by inviting participants to consult the project's publicly available resources, including Local Action Plans, datasets, and deliverables, highlighting their relevance as an evidence base for the Forum's policy discussions.

Policy relevance in the current EU cycle

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

Serafin Pazos-Vidal provided an **overview of the current EU policy context**, underlining why the timing of the Forum is particularly relevant for ongoing debates on future rural development policy.

He situated the discussion within the ongoing reform of the EU policy framework and budget, noting that **negotiations on the post-2027 period and the MFF 2028–2034 are entering a decisive phase**. As discussions advance across EU institutions, he stressed that the coming months represent a critical window for influencing policy design, making the Forum's contribution to emerging policy recommendations particularly timely.

The presentation focused on the **proposed restructuring of the EU budget**, which seeks to simplify funding architecture by consolidating multiple instruments into a smaller number of integrated frameworks. A key element of this proposal is the introduction of **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)**, which would combine several existing funding streams into a single investment plan per Member State. While this approach

is intended to improve coherence and coordination across policy areas, Serafin highlighted potential risks linked to increased centralisation.

In particular, he noted that, if not carefully designed, the new framework could weaken the territorial dimension of EU policies and reduce the meaningful involvement of regional and local actors. He stressed the importance of **ensuring effective stakeholder participation and cautioned against “performative partnerships”**, where consultation processes exist formally but have limited influence on decision-making.

From a rural development perspective, he pointed to **ongoing discussions on possible safeguards** within the new framework. These include proposals to ensure a minimum level of investment in rural areas beyond agriculture, as well as efforts to strengthen requirements for inclusive governance and territorial sensitivity in national planning. At the same time, he highlighted remaining uncertainties regarding instruments such as community-led local development approaches, which are not clearly secured or earmarked in the current proposals.

He also noted that several **key rural concepts** (such as access to essential services, territorial cohesion, and emerging issues like transport poverty) are still **insufficiently reflected in the draft regulatory framework** and are expected to remain subject to negotiation.

In concluding, Serafin emphasised that the **policy landscape is still evolving and that inputs from initiatives such as RURACTIVE can play an important role in informing the debate**. By translating practical experiences from rural territories into concrete and evidence-based recommendations, the Forum is well positioned to contribute to more inclusive, place-based, and effective rural policy design in the next EU programming period.

KEYNOTE - Rural Pact Framing by Rural Pact Support Office

Enrique Nieto, Team Leader (Rural Pact Support Office)

Following the discussion on the evolving EU policy landscape, Enrique Nieto presented the **Rural Pact and its role in strengthening rural voices in EU policy debates**. He reminded that the Rural Pact was established under the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas -LTVRA- (2021), which promotes a more **integrated approach** to rural development beyond sectoral boundaries. The initiative addresses economic, social, environmental, and territorial challenges in rural areas through a holistic framework.

The **LTVRA is structured around four objectives**: stronger, connected, prosperous, and resilient rural areas. These priorities cover access to services, mobility, connectivity, economic diversification, sustainable food systems, climate resilience, and community empowerment, many of which align with the themes addressed by RURACTIVE.

The Rural Pact was introduced as a **key mechanism to support this vision** by improving coordination across governance levels and strengthening stakeholder participation in policymaking. Its objectives include **amplifying rural voices** in EU processes, **supporting capacity-building** among local actors, and encouraging implementation of **initiatives on the ground**.

The initiative currently brings together more than **4,000 members** across Europe and beyond, including public authorities, civil society organisations, researchers, and practitioners. It operates as a platform for networking,

knowledge exchange, and policy engagement, including through thematic community groups on topics such as smart villages, innovation, mobility, tourism, energy, and rural services.

A central part of the presentation focused on **opportunities to engage with the preparation of the future NRPPs**. Enrique noted that much of the Rural Pact's current work is oriented towards strengthening stakeholders' capacity to participate in these emerging policy frameworks and related governance processes.

He also outlined **available support tools**, including policy events, webinars, publications, good practice repositories, and mechanisms for increasing the visibility of local initiatives at European level.

In conclusion, he emphasised that **rural innovation is already taking place across Europe** and that policy frameworks should better recognise and support these initiatives. He encouraged continued engagement with the Rural Pact as a means of ensuring that territorial experiences are reflected in future EU rural policies.

SIX PARALLEL ROUNDTABLES

The following session was organised into six parallel roundtables (one per RURACTIVE RDD) to enable focused, participatory exchanges on key rural development themes. Each followed a common format comprising a 10-minute presentation by an external speaker introducing the topic and key challenges, a 45-minute facilitated discussion on challenges, solutions and policy implications, and a 5-minute rapporteur summary capturing the main points and emerging policy-relevant ideas for plenary reporting

Sustainable multimodal mobility

The breakout session, facilitated by *Serafín Pazos-Vidal* (AEIDL), opened with a presentation by *Pedro Homem de Gouveia* (Senior Policy Advisor at POLIS Network), who introduced the concept of **transport poverty** as a structural issue affecting rural and low-density territories, including off-peak users and people with reduced mobility. He stressed that mobility constraints directly limit access to services, employment, and education, reinforcing dependency on private cars. He called for a **shift from traditional transport models towards a broader "mobility menu"** combining shared mobility, carpooling, car-sharing, demand-responsive transport, and electric cycling, supported by digital platforms to match supply and demand in rural areas.

The discussion confirmed a shared view that rural mobility should be framed not only as a transport issue but as a matter of **territorial cohesion and equal access to services**. Participants noted persistent under-prioritisation of rural mobility in EU and national policies despite its importance for demographic retention and access to essential services. A key policy message was the need to move away from infrastructure-heavy investment models towards **service-based mobility systems**, including operational funding, experimentation, and flexibility for local solutions.

Emerging policy directions

- Multimodal rural mobility systems based on service integration
- Expansion of shared and demand-responsive transport under public oversight
- Integration of mobility with access to essential services
- Regulatory reforms enabling innovation and interoperability
- Development of accessibility-based transport indicators
- Long-term goal: service access within ~30 minutes without private car dependency

Culture and cultural innovation

The session, facilitated by *Janne Sinerma* (AEIDL), explored culture as a **transversal vehicle for rural resilience and transformation**, beyond heritage preservation. The session included a presentation by *Maria João Horta-Parreira* (researcher at University NOVA of Lisbon) who introduced findings from her doctoral research on rural cultural innovation and the RUSTIC model. Her work frames culture as a systemic driver linking civil society, governance, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, knowledge, and funding, and proposes participatory tools to measure cultural innovation in rural areas.

The discussion highlighted persistent urban–rural disparities in cultural investment and participation, as well as the fragility of rural cultural initiatives due to short-term and discontinuous funding cycles. Participants stressed the need to move towards a **functional territorial cultural ecosystem**, where rural and urban areas are interconnected rather than treated separately.

Culture was consistently framed as both a **creative and structural development force**, with strong links to social cohesion, youth engagement, and territorial identity.

Emerging policy directions

- Multi-annual and stable funding frameworks for rural culture
- Recognition of rural areas as cultural innovation producers
- Strengthened participation in cultural networks and mobility schemes
- Development of integrated rural–urban cultural ecosystems
- Support for youth-led and intergenerational cultural innovation
- Use of participatory tools and qualitative indicators for cultural policy

Sustainable agrifood system and ecosystem management

This breakout session was introduced by *Prof. Ian Baker* (Honorary Professor at University of Birmingham, Institute of Forest Research), who framed **sustainable agri-food systems as requiring a balance** between environmental integrity, economic resilience, and social well-being. He emphasised **systemic innovation and multi-actor collaboration** as essential to overcoming fragmentation in food system governance

During the facilitated discussion by *Blanca Casares-Guillén*, AEIDL, participants conversed on the need to reposition farmers as **ecosystem stewards**, with recognition for their role in biodiversity, soil health, and water management. Small-scale farmers were identified as central but structurally vulnerable actors in rural transitions.

Key themes included strengthening local food systems, improving land governance, and ensuring that digitalisation is **co-designed with farmers and embedded in real workflows** rather than imposed as a top-down solution.

Emerging policy directions

- Integrated advisory systems (agroecology, business, digital, cooperative)
- Simplified micro-grant and inclusive financing instruments
- Stronger public procurement for sustainable local food systems
- Recognition of farmers' ecosystem services in policy frameworks
- Land stewardship mechanisms (land banks, observatories, trusts)
- Co-designed digital ecosystems for farming communities

Energy transition and climate neutrality

The session, facilitated by *María Alonso-Roldán* (AEIDL), drew on contributions from *Luke Haywood* (Head of Climate and Energy at the European Environmental Bureau) and RURACTIVE pilot experiences. Luke emphasised that renewable energy deployment in Europe will be largely rural-based, positioning **rural territories as central actors in the energy transition**. His intervention highlighted the need for stronger local governance, fair benefit-sharing mechanisms, and improved technical and financial support for community-led energy initiatives.

Participants stressed that rural areas should not only host renewable infrastructure but actively benefit from it through **citizen energy projects, municipal reinvestment schemes, and cooperative ownership models**. Structural barriers such as grid limitations, regulatory constraints in protected areas, and lack of technical capacity were identified as key obstacles.

A strong emphasis was placed on **early-stage support mechanisms**, including feasibility funding and dedicated facilitators to support community engagement and project development.

Emerging policy directions

- Compulsory or structured local benefit-sharing mechanisms
- Pre-development and feasibility funding for community energy projects
- Rural-proof grid and infrastructure planning
- Deployment of local energy transition facilitators
- Integration of renewable revenues with territorial and ecological restoration
- Strengthened access for rural actors to EU energy and climate funding

Nature-based and cultural tourism

The breakout session featured a keynote intervention by *Klaus Ehrlich* (Secretary General of RuralTour). He argued that rural tourism must be understood simultaneously as a **business activity, a visitor experience, and a territorial development tool**, emphasising that profitability and continuity are essential for sustainability. He stressed three core principles: tourism must be enjoyable for visitors, economically viable for providers, and supported by effective local destination management structures. He also highlighted the risks of overplanning and excessive regulation, which can suppress local initiative and innovation.

During the facilitated discussion conducted by *Merveille Ntabuhashe* (AEIDL), participants reinforced the importance of **destination management organisations (DMOs)**, simplified administrative systems, and locally embedded advisory and mentoring services.

Emerging policy directions

- Flexible, minimal planning frameworks enabling experimentation
- Simplified funding mechanisms (lump sums, unit costs)
- Strengthening of local DMOs and governance models
- Improved advisory, training, and mentoring systems
- Enhanced data collection on visitor demand and territorial capacity
- Territorial branding and identity development strategies
- Support for micro-enterprises and local associations

Local services, health and wellbeing

The session included a presentation from **Prof. Mar Ortega-Reig** (Professor at Universitat Politècnica de València), who coordinated the ESPON DESIRE project, focusing on territorial inequalities in access to essential services, including healthcare, education, transport, and social services. The research highlighted how cumulative service loss accelerates rural depopulation and increases territorial vulnerability.

Participants contributions were facilitated by **Raquel Pastor Carretero** (AEIDL), who stressed that **rural service challenges are deeply interconnected**, combining ageing populations, social isolation, digital exclusion, and governance fragmentation. Healthcare was presented as a key case study, showing how territorialised service models (e.g. itinerant care, decentralised primary care) can improve accessibility and efficiency.

Community-based service models were highlighted as particularly effective when combined with institutional support and cross-sector coordination.

Emerging policy directions

- Integrated multi-sectoral service delivery models
- Strengthening of community-based service provision
- Rural-sensitive criteria across all policy domains
- Greater flexibility in EU funding and evaluation systems
- Development of integrated service hubs (health, social care, wellbeing)
- Improved territorial data systems for service planning
- Support for pilot and scalable local innovations

Plenary discussion

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

The plenary session brought together rapporteurs from all six thematic breakout groups to synthesise cross-cutting findings and reflect on their implications for rural policy development.

A first overarching observation concerned the **persistent gap between territorial realities and policy architecture**. Across all RDDs, participants noted that rural challenges are increasingly interdependent (linking mobility, services, energy, food systems, culture, and tourism) while EU and national policy frameworks remain largely structured in sectoral silos. This mismatch was identified as a key barrier to implementation, particularly in relation to funding eligibility rules, administrative procedures, and monitoring systems that do not fully capture cross-sectoral impacts.

A second cross-cutting issue was the **tension between complexity and implementation-readiness in EU policy design**. While current policy debates increasingly emphasise integration, strategic planning, and performance-based approaches (notably in the context of NRPPs), participants highlighted the risk that additional procedural layers may further distance policy from local implementation capacity. This concern was particularly acute for small municipalities, micro-enterprises, and community-led initiatives, which often face disproportionate administrative burdens relative to their operational scale.

The plenary also identified a shared concern regarding **asymmetries in capacity and access**. Whether in energy transition, agri-food systems, tourism, or local services, rural actors frequently face structural disadvantages in

accessing funding, technical expertise, and administrative support. These constraints are not uniform but tend to accumulate in the most remote, sparsely populated, or institutionally weaker territories, reinforcing territorial inequalities within rural Europe itself.

Across all thematic areas, participants emphasised the importance of **intermediation structures** capable of translating policy frameworks into actionable support at local level. This included references to destination management organisations, energy transition facilitators, advisory systems in agriculture, and integrated service hubs in health and social care. These intermediary functions were seen as essential for bridging the gap between EU-level policy objectives and local implementation realities.

Another emerging theme was the **need to redefine evaluation and success metrics in rural policy**. Participants highlighted that existing indicators often prioritise infrastructure delivery or expenditure absorption, rather than accessibility, service quality, social outcomes, or territorial resilience. This was particularly evident in discussions on mobility (where access rather than transport supply was prioritised), local services (where service continuity was linked to demographic outcomes), and cultural initiatives (where continuity and participation were seen as more relevant than project outputs).

Finally, the plenary underscored a shared strategic direction across all RDDs: the need to move from fragmented interventions towards **systemic, place-based rural policy approaches**. This implies not only better coordination across sectors and governance levels, but also a shift in how rural territories are understood—moving from passive recipients of policy to active co-producers of innovation, services, and transition pathways.

In this context, RURACTIVE was consistently framed as a relevant platform for bridging practice and policy, by structuring territorial experience into transferable policy learning ahead of the post-2027 programming period.

Next steps and closure

María Alonso-Roldán (AEIDL) closed the session by outlining the next steps: consolidation of all breakout session outputs for circulation to participants, followed by the preparation of draft proto-policy recommendations structured around key messages, context, evidence, and policy alignment. These will be presented for feedback and validation at the 4th RURACTIVE Forum on 30 June 2026, before being finalised into the official *Policy Recommendations and Guidance* document due in August 2026.