


## Article

# EU Rural Policy's Capacity to Facilitate a Just Sustainability Transition of the Rural Areas

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**Abstract:** The sustainability transition of rural areas is a must due to rapid climate changes and biodiversity loss. Given the limited resources of rural communities, policy should facilitate a just sustainability transition of the EU rural areas. The analysis of EU development policies, past performance and the envisaged scope of reform, presented in this study point to a serious inconsistency between the declaration and implementation of relevant policies. Namely, the marginal role rural areas perform in common agricultural policy and cohesion policy; a result of the lack of a complex approach to rural development. The analysis was based on the concept of good governance and took a multi-level perspective. It advocates territorial justice as an approach that should be at the core of creating a comprehensive policy for rural areas in the EU, including their diversity and empowering local communities to choose the transition pathway that is most in line with their current situation and development capacity. This analysis fills a gap in research on the evolution of the rural development policy in the EU. This research can inform the reprioritization and intensification of efforts to create equitable policies for EU rural development.

**Keywords:** rural policy; sustainability transition; just transition; rural development; European Union; territorial justice; good governance; common agricultural policy; cohesion policy; rural areas



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## 1. Introduction

Climate change and biodiversity loss caused by human activity has reached a point at which an immediate socio-economic transition into a circular and sustainable economy is the only way to save the existence of humanity on the Earth. Even though the fact that environmental pollution is detrimental not only to biodiversity, but also to human health has been the common knowledge for at least half a century, when the Rome Committee's report *Limits to Growth* was published in 1972 [1], hardly any actions have been taken to prevent the degradation of the habitat for all the living species.

The needed sustainability transition is a concept well-established in the literature [2,3]. It can be defined as “pathways through which socio-material changes reduce environmental risks” [4]. The European Commission defines it as “long-term transformations of societal systems towards more sustainable modes of production and consumption” [5]. The sustainability transition is a complex and dynamic process. To succeed, adaptive good sustainability governance is required [6] that is based on a holistic perspective integrating different systems and their dynamics [7].

To achieve sustainability transition, it is necessary to include all the economy sectors and all the communities as well as all the territories. It is clear, that each sector and community cause a specific set of negative externalities which calls for well-targeted

policy instruments aimed at reducing the negative impact on the environment. Yet, the climate changes mitigation efforts have not been evenly spread or applied to all the sectors. Especially in the EU, the agricultural sector and rural areas were free from zero emissions efforts until now. The rural areas struggle with their specific limitations in reducing GHG emissions and the environmental footprint as dispersed housing is often not modernized to efficiently use natural resources and reduce produced pollution. Rural areas have not been seen as a place in need of public support in introducing green solutions, even more profound than in big and industrialized cities. This is even more important to tackle when we realize that the rural areas are key to preserving biodiversity. It is not only the agricultural activity that can support protecting biodiversity, but also rural communities through reducing the scale of pollutions to the air, water, and soil that they generate. Yet, this is a complicated task as solutions for single households are costly and the potential of local communities to undertake public investment in green infrastructure often exceeds their financial capacity.

Rural local administrative units often suffer from a low level of their own resources, low credit rating and high indebtedness which are detrimental to their investment potential [8]. Moreover, the cost of investment per inhabitant is high due to high special dispersion. Therefore, public policies targeting these problems are crucial. Yet, the EU rural policy does not respond to these needs [9].

The aim of the study is a critical review of the EU policy towards rural areas conducted from the perspective of the fitness of the EU support for facilitating a just sustainability transition of rural areas in the EU. The analytical framework applied in the review is based on the concept of territorial justice and good governance principles. The study covers the period since the year 2000 and is based on the analysis of the relevant EU documents and literature reviews of the studies in the EU rural development policy.

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part is devoted to the presentation of the research material and methods applied. The second part presents results of the study. It starts with the presentation of a brief review of the evolution of the rural development policy in the EU. Then, the issue of the interlinks between the second pillar of the CAP and cohesion policy and their relations and the role of these two policies in rural development are discussed. The third element in the results part of the paper presents the research findings of the Horizon 2020 SHERPA project [10] on the vision for EU rural areas in 2040 and analysis of the readiness of the EU rural policy to support the realization of this vision. The final part of the paper is a discussion of the results of the study and the assessment of the fitness of the EU rural policy to facilitate just transition of the rural areas into resilient and green communities.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study is based on the analysis of EU regulations related to rural development and the evaluation of this policy as well as on the literature review aimed at assessing the functioning of the EU rural development policy. The study focuses on identifying the aspects of the EU rural development policy that need to be modified in order to make this policy a catalyst for a just sustainability transition of the EU rural areas. The period under the study of the functioning of the EU rural development policy encompasses the years 2000–2021 as the year 2000 is considered to be the year when this policy was launched.

The literature review also was conducted for the period 2000–2021. We searched Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar for relevant scientific publications. The search was conducted for four sets of words:

1. “Rural development” and “European Union”;
2. “Rural policy” and “European Union”;
3. “Rural development” and “common agricultural policy”;
4. “Rural development” and “cohesion policy”.

Most of the publications appearing in one database also appeared at least in one of the other databases, so for further procedure duplicates were eliminated. The search found

a small number of results. For example, search in the Scopus resulted in the following number of results: 777, 127, 406 and 22, respectively. It was significantly reduced after eliminating the publications for which the title and/or abstract showed they dealt with only agriculture or other sectors of the economy or did not focus on policy impact. In the case of the Scopus search, this step resulted in a significant reduction in the number of publications for further scrutiny. The number of the publications for further procedure were: 253, 31, 147 and 16, respectively. In the next step the publications were scrutinized for their relevance to the study aim, methods applied and data used. Only the relevant ones were used in our study. To supplement the number of publications reviewed we checked the ones cited in the paper analyzed by us, which seemed to be relevant to our study. These also underwent the verification procedure described above. The wide range of case study examples, studies focusing on one country or region, helped us address possible bias of local/regional/national specific characteristics limiting or boosting the impact of the EU rural policy.

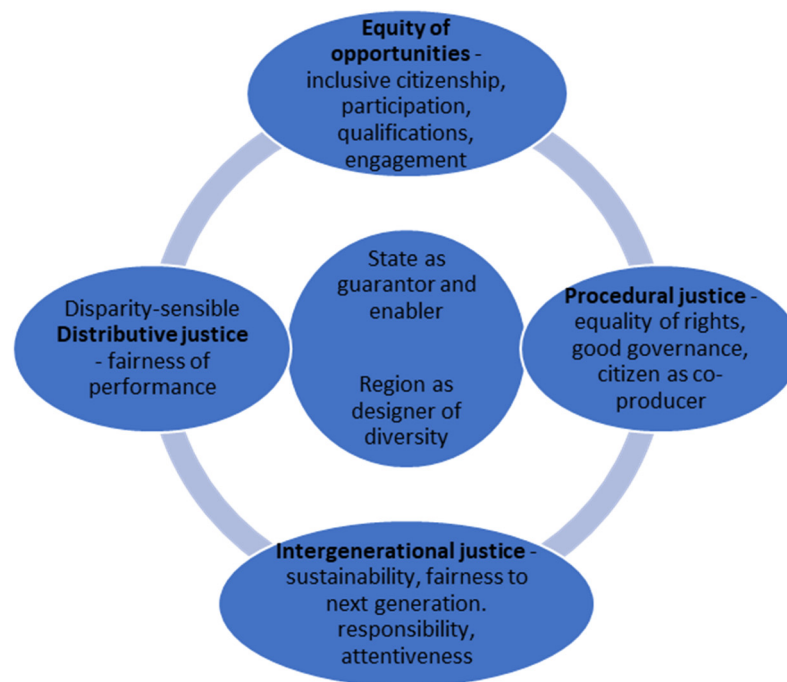
This study of the EU rural policy takes the perspective of a policy regime. It is defined as in the study conducted by Kujala et al. “as governing arrangements for addressing a set of problems, accompanied by the ideas, institutional arrangements and interest alignments” [11]. The rural policy is assessed using an analytical framework based on the concept of territorial justice and good governance principles.

Territorial justice is a concept coined by Davies [12] and it refers to distribution of public resources and the mechanisms of this process. The studies on territorial justice, sometimes also referred to as spatial justice, often explore the divisions in resource allocation between rural and urban areas [13,14]. The just territorial division of public resources should be a guiding principle for public policies [15].

Territorial justice focuses on the spatial allocation of resources and its impact on living conditions and opportunities for inhabitants [16]. This question of the influence of the EU rural policy on spatial justice requires answering in the context of green transition that needs to be a just transition. Territorial justice similarly to good governance pays close attention not only to the actual distribution of resources (distributional justice) but also on the mechanisms and decision-making processes that lead to this distribution (procedural justice) [17]. Magel and Miosga also include in their model of territorial justice, inter-generational justice [18], which in the context of climate change and biodiversity loss, gains on importance and should be a part of a holistic approach to a just sustainability transition. Magel’s and Miosga’s model sees the state as a guarantor and enabler, while region as designer of diversity (Figure 1).

An analysis of existence of spatial justice should include several aspects, including: demography, economy, policy and governance, environment, society and technology [19]. This shows how complex and holistic this concept is. It also shows how it interlinks with assessing the state of good governance or sustainability governance.

As the study focuses on the adequacy of the EU rural policy to foster sustainability transition, it also applies a multi-level perspective (MLP). It is a well-established tool used in analyzing transition processes to deal with their complexity. The MLP was already applied to sustainability transition research in agriculture and food systems and El Bilali conducted a systematic review of such studies [20]. It “bridges evolutionary economics and technological studies” [21]. Geels distinguished three levels that interplay in the process of transition. These are: novelty niches, patchwork of regimes and landscape [22]. Novelty niches are innovative solutions applied in a limited number of cases, which show an alternative approach to existing systems. If they gain sufficient critical mass, they can become mainstream solutions. To achieve this, they must show their beneficial feature to a different regime which includes actors, institutions and technologies that are not easy to change. However, changes in the landscape can catalyze the changes. Landscape encompasses the socio-developmental factors as well as political and environmental developments.



**Figure 1.** Magel's and Miosga's model of territorial justice. Source: [18].

The policy analysis conducted in this study is based on good governance principles. These principles are a base for creating collaborative policymaking processes which are key to sustainability transition. The effective and efficient governance requires fulfilment of the principles of good governance. However, there is no common consensus on the list of these principles. According to Keping [23], there are six essential principles: “legitimacy, transparency, accountability, rule of law, responsiveness and effectiveness”. Graham et al. [24] offers an even shorter list, but in the definitions of some of these principles they use concepts that by other authors are often named as separate principles. These five principles include:

- Legitimacy and voice, including participation and consensus orientation;
- Direction, a strategic vision;
- Performance, including responsiveness as well as effectiveness and efficiency;
- Accountability, including both accountability and transparency;
- Fairness, encompassing rule of law and equity.

The policy analysis framework, of the already defined policy regime, applied in this research study is based on a study devoted to the protection of drinking water resources from agricultural pressures in line with the OECD water governance principles. [25]. The proposed policy analysis framework was adjusted to the studied problem and two criteria of analysis are applied:

1. Consistency of EU regulation;
2. Flexibility of implementation at regional/local level.

These two criteria for analysis are assessed for three dimensions including 2-3 principles each (Table 1). In fact, the first criterion relates to assessing the design of the policy and its implementation process at the EU level, while the second criterion refers to the translation of this policy to the national, regional, and local conditions.

**Table 1.** EU rural development policy analysis framework.

Dimension	Principles	Consistency of EU Regulation	Flexibility of Implementation at Regional/Local Level
Effectiveness	Capacity	-	X
	Policy coherence	X	X
	Clear roles and responsibilities	X	X
Efficiency	Efficiency criteria applied	X	X
	Data availability	X	X
Trust and engagement	Trade-off between users, areas, measures	X	X
	Stakeholder engagement	X	X
	Integrity and transparency	X	X

Source: Based on the [25].

Summing up the study procedure encompassed several steps, including:

1. Defining the object of the study, policy regime;
2. Defining the scope of analysis, fitness for facilitating just sustainability transition of the rural areas;
3. Applying a multi-level perspective to identify the characteristics of the policy regime needed to be fit for the defined policy objective. It led us to identify good governance and the territorial justice approach as the best descriptions of the characteristics of a policy capable of facilitating sustainability transition;
4. Defining the policy characteristics required by good governance and territorial justice approach;
5. Operationalization of the assessment, creating a policy analysis framework.

Therefore, the applied method allows for complex investigation of the EU rural policy regarding integration and concentration on policy goals, and its ability to account for the regional divergence of EU rural areas.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Brief Review of the Evolution of the Rural Development Policy in the EU

The brief review of the EU rural development policy refers only to the programming periods since 2000. In fact, it is not much earlier than this policy was established that it was consolidated from CAP structural instruments and the regional development policy under the Agenda 2000 [26]. This means that from the onset it was not a cohesive mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural instruments.

In the period under study the critical assessment of this policy, which is part of the EC common agricultural policy under the second pillar, shows that it remains a sector orientated policy, focusing mostly on agriculture which is only a part of rural economy and rural developmental issues. Some non-agricultural rural stakeholders criticize this agricultural focus of the second pillar of the CAP [27]. Integrating the rural policy with the CAP can be seen as stating a close link between rural development and agriculture.

The EU rural development policy has clearly defined phases stipulated in regulations: planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In the programming period 2014–2020 the member states were obliged to engage different stakeholder groups in the process of planning. Yet, their actual importance was limited and depended on the level of the good governance standards implemented by each member state/region. This is also the case at the implementation process, when the representativeness and the empowerment level of the monitoring committees depends on the level of good governance practices implementation in a region or member state. Yet, this is not only the problem of rural development programs but also the regional operational programs [28].

The cornerstone for creating the EU rural policy was the Cork declaration “a living countryside” developed and agreed upon in 1996 during the European Conference on Rural Development. In this declaration it was strongly emphasized that “rural development must address all socio-economic sectors in the countryside” [29]. The rural preference described in the declaration after a quarter of a century remains valid. Rural communities demand better prospects and make rural areas more attractive.

In the programming period 2000–2006 the rural development measures were listed in Council Regulation no. 1257/1999. In the introduction to this regulation, it was stated that “within the CAP for almost two decades, attempts have been made to integrate agricultural structural policy into the wider economic and social context of rural areas” [30]. The aim of the rural policy was named “restoring and enhancing the competitiveness of rural areas and, therefore, contribute to the maintenance and creation of employment in those areas” [30]. In this regulation the measures not related directly to agriculture included:

1. “Basic services for the rural economy and population;
2. Renovation and development of villages and protection and conservation of the rural heritage;
3. Diversification of agricultural activities and activities close to agriculture to provide multiple activities or alternative incomes” [30].

Further reorientation of the CAP from sectoral to rural policy was strengthened in the programming period 2007–2013 with Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005. In this regulation, it is stated that coordination of rural policy is required at the EU level due to the financial limitations of the member states and the extent of observed disparities [31]. According to this regulation, the EU rural policy should support rural areas “helping them to diversify farming activities towards non-agricultural activities and develop non-agricultural sectors, promote employment, improve basic services, including local access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and carry out investments making rural areas more attractive in order to reverse trends towards economic and social decline and depopulation of the countryside” [31]. Yet, the objectives of the rural policy remained biased towards the agricultural sector and still more funds and more measures are targeted strictly at farming activity. The stated objectives of the support for rural development were:

- “Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry by supporting restructuring, development and innovation;
- Improving the environment and the countryside by supporting land management;
- Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of economic activity” [31].

The measures directly related to rural development for the period 2007–2013 included, apart from training for the Leader implementation both for beneficiaries and for the personnel involved in the implementation, two categories; measures to diversify the rural economy and measures to improve the quality of life:

1. Measures to diversify the rural economy, comprising:
  - “Diversification into non-agricultural activities;
  - Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises with a view to promoting entrepreneurship and developing the economic fabric;
  - Encouragement of tourism activities” [31].
2. Measures to improve the quality of life in the rural areas, comprising:
  - “Basic services for the economy and rural population;
  - Village renewal and development;
  - Conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage” [31].

In the following programming period, the regulation stipulating the approach to rural policy was Regulation no. 1305/2013 [32]. It stated the diversity of rural areas and mentioned the importance of knowledge transfer and innovation, development of local infrastructure and local basic services. The need for providing rural areas with

ultra-fast broadband was emphasized. With this regulation a concept of community-led local development was introduced to the EU rural policy. The need for cooperation and promoting links between rural and urban communities was also highlighted.

Therefore, the measure of basic services and village renewal in rural areas envisaged the mentioned types of investment and actions that are needed for catering to the listed needs and problems, including drawing up plans for development of municipalities, broadband infrastructure, local basic services and recreational infrastructure.

The leader approach also was kept as a vital part of rural development policy and the core of community-led local development. Yet, it generally continued to be a marginal part of most of the rural development programs of the EU member states and their regions.

Twenty years after the Cork declaration, in 2016, a second declaration was agreed upon [33]. Cork 2.0 A Better Life in Rural Areas is a more detailed declaration as it names ten policy orientation points that should support rural development:

- “Promoting rural prosperity;
- Strengthening rural value chains;
- Investing in rural viability and vitality;
- Preserving the rural environment;
- Managing natural resources;
- Encouraging climate action;
- Boosting knowledge and innovation;
- Enhancing rural governance;
- Advancing policy delivery and simplification;
- Improving performance and accountability” [33].

The recommendations of the Cork 2.0 declaration show the vital needs of rural areas and required pathways that should be followed to ensure a just sustainability transition. The proposal for the CAP post-2020 states that “a modernized Common Agricultural Policy will need to support ( . . . ) the development of vibrant rural areas” [34]. The European Commission (EC) claims that the Cork 2.0 recommendations were taken into account in the preparation of the proposal [34]. The new CAP has nine specific objectives. Only in two of them rural areas are mentioned:

- “Attract young farmers and facilitate business development in rural areas;
- Promote employment, growth, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including bio-economy and sustainable forestry” [34].

The concept of preparing strategic plans is presented by the European Commission as a significant change in the planning of the CAP by member states and a realization of the Cork 2.0 principles. This approach is called a “new delivery model” [35]. However, for the rural development policy this change does not constitute an important alteration as the plans with rationale for the measures used has already been in place and the first pillar measures, for which it is a novelty, do not include rural development. Therefore, the proposed reform of common agricultural policy and of cohesion policy seems not to take into account the proposed recommendations in the sufficient extent.

The diagnosis of rural problems is correct as the EC stated that “many rural areas in the Union suffer from structural problems such as lack of attractive employment opportunities, skill shortages, underinvestment in connectivity, infrastructures and essential services, as well as youth drain” [34]. The answers to these problems proposed by the EC are: “jobs and growth to rural areas, promoting social inclusion, generational renewal and the development of smart villages across the European countryside, ( . . . ) new rural value chains such as renewable energy, the emerging bio-economy, the circular economy, and ecotourism” [34]. There are few measures proposed which directly relate to rural development:

- Investments in basic services in rural areas;
- Support for rural start-ups;
- Rural business knowledge exchange system.

The flagship element of rural policy in the EU is the leader approach. It is a bottom-up approach requiring rural participatory governance [36] and it is considered an innovative way to support development [37] and engage the third sector [38]. Leader specificity is based on the following features:

- “Area-based approach;
- Bottom-up approach;
- Local partnership;
- Innovation;
- Integration of different sectors of the economy;
- Interterritorial cooperation;
- Networking;
- Decentralized management and financing” [39].

Although highly appreciated, leader does not thrive in all EU regions. There are different causes of mixed results, but the key seems to be the legal arrangement; to what extent local action groups implementing leader are unencumbered in their activities and how accountable they are to local communities [37].

Part of the EU rural policy is the popularization of the concept of a smart village. A smart village basically refers to employing both digital tools and endogenous strengths to boost development and attractiveness of rural communities as well as to combat rural decline [40]. This concept relates to public and private services and management. The smart village concept is still hardly put into practice [41] as the ICT infrastructure in many rural neighborhoods is insufficient to offer reliable connection and the skills needed to use the digital tools are inadequate. Therefore, digitalization is at the top of the enablers of long-term vision for rural areas in the EU [42]. Moreover, the concept can only succeed in areas with the adequate capacity to benefit from it. As a similar concept implemented in cohesion policy, smart specialization, shows that less developed regions are incapable of the ability to “fully generate powerful innovations that would boost the economic activity in the smart-specialization domains” [43].

### 3.2. Second Pillar of the CAP vs. Cohesion Policy

The EU rural policy is not only part of the CAP. In fact, some authors state that there are more than one EU rural policies, which “are hosted in a variety of different policy areas for which they are not the main concern” [44]. These include CAP, fisheries policy, regional policy (often referred to as cohesion policy), economic policy and social policy. However, economic, and social policies are generally territory blind, whereas fisheries policy covers only urban and rural areas with a fishery sector. Therefore, the key policies targeted specifically at rural areas are CAP and cohesion policy. This fragmentation of the EU rural policy results in the lack of a coherent vision for their development.

The Treaty on Functioning of the EU, in article 174 calls for actions “strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion”, and names rural areas among areas that “particular attention shall be paid to” [45]. This is the only time rural areas are mentioned in this treaty.

There are several studies discussing the interlinks between the second pillar of the CAP and the cohesion policy in their support offered to rural areas [46–50]. There are also voices stating that the origin of rural development policy in the EU is its cohesion policy [24]. The EU cohesion policy is supposed to increase the cohesion of the EU territory and its place-based approach, should support place-sensitivity in cross-sectoral development ensuring social inclusion [51]. Yet, some scholars question the emphasis on the competitiveness of the regions that appeared in the cohesion policy with the Agenda 2000 and continued with strategy Europe 2020, stating that increasing competitiveness does not translate into increasing cohesion [52]. Moreover, concentration on competitiveness, introduced in 2005 [53], leads to the marginalization of remote areas [54] as their potential to increase the competitiveness is lower than in regional capitals and other urbanized areas; therefore, in the assessment of applications they are at a disadvantage. Currently the cohesion



policy focusses on sustainable growth and innovation [55], which also does not specify the different types of rural areas, especially the peripheral and less developed ones.

The Agenda 2000 created a system where the rural developmental needs can be catered both within the CAP and the cohesion policy but it must be clearly stipulated which support measures are in which policy to ensure no overlap (so-called ringfencing). Yet, from the perspective of the cohesion policy, rural areas are hardly visible. When they appear as part of the regional programs, they are typically perceived as problem areas due to their low population and other related deficiencies [56,57]. However, the ringfencing and the actual approach to rural development policy differs among the member states. This can result in different scenarios, a wide range of support instruments in both policies or almost no instruments in either of the policies, or any mixture of these two extreme scenarios. Therefore, the extent and level of rural support can vary depending on the scenario implemented.

The most common scenario implemented was the one with gaps in funding as the coordination of the scope and the level of support was often difficult to achieve because of the lack of time and power struggling among different policymakers. Moreover, the co-funding level was a barrier for less-off rural communities [58,59]. The differences in the approach of different member states results in a different set of policy instruments and as a result different economic impact [48]. Therefore, there is a question of how common the EU policies should be, not to offer inefficient one-size-fits-all solutions but at the same time, not to lose the common EU goals [60].

To the question whether the cohesion policy works, numerous studies provide a positive answer [61–63]. Yet, the question has not been asked whether it works for all types of rural areas and what needs to be improved to make it more effective and efficient.

In conclusion, it can be stated that CAP caters to smaller projects, while the cohesion policy offers higher scale funding [64] but they both have something to offer to rural areas. However, there is a need to make the complementarity more robust [65] and more effective.

### 3.3. Vision for the EU Rural Areas 2040 vs. Rural Policy

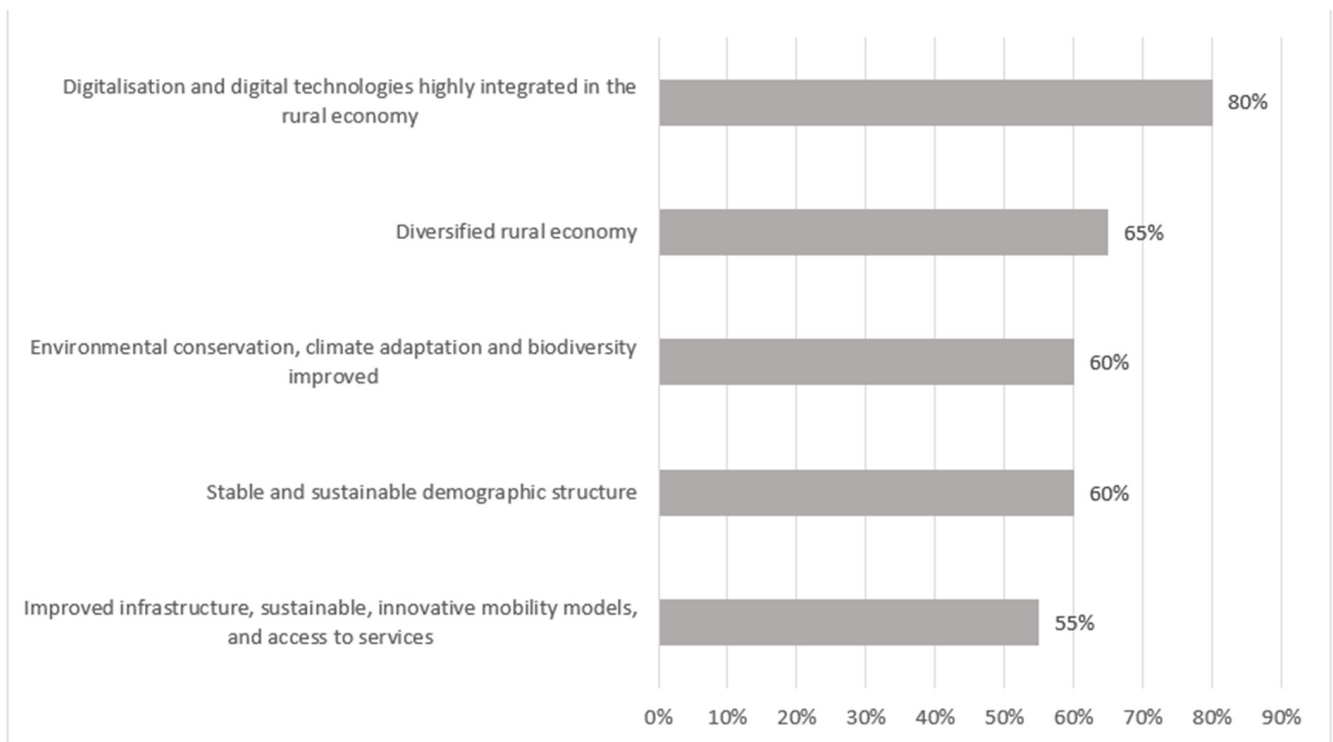
The European Commission announced in the Autumn of 2019 that in 2021 it will publish a document called *The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2040)*. It was announced under the priority of a new push for European democracy, which shows that rural development is not limited to economic or environmental issues. Following this announcement and the launched public consultations, several different stakeholders and research projects prepared their own documents presenting their vision for rural areas in 2040.

A Horizon 2020 project that incorporated the question of rural vision for 2040 was the project Sustainable Hub to Engage into Rural Policies with Actors (SHERPA). Within its first year the topic for discussion by multi-actor platforms (MAPs) created by the project team was the desired long-term vision for rural areas in the areas covered by each of the 20 MAPs.

The results show that in the view of MAPs' members "long-term vision is of rural areas that are characterized by opportunity, innovation, modernity, liveliness, resilience and equality, their sustainable and multi-functional environments" [42]. The participants of discussions on the vision for rural areas were also asked to identify enablers for making this desirable vision a reality. The listed enablers included: empowered local actors and communities that can be achieved by multi-level territorial governance and the availability of flexible funding that takes into account local characteristics.

Access to fast internet is considered to be a key tool to support rural areas and their development potential [66]. It is needed not only for businesses, but also for public services and for individuals to access all kinds of services, including education and cultural events. The studies show that initiatives based solely on market lead to a budget gap of about two-thirds of the required total investment for fast internet in the EU, mainly in rural areas [67].

Summing up, the results of the discussions conducted by MAPs in their first cycle, the top issues that need to be satisfied are present in the vast majority of EU countries and regions. This shows that despite the significant diversity in their socio-economic development as well as in environmental amenities, the needs of the EU rural communities facing climate changes and sustainability transition are similar (Figure 2). The key element of the desirable future, named by 80% of the MAPs, are digitalization and digital technologies.



**Figure 2.** Key elements of the desirable long-term vision for rural areas in the EU according to the SHERPA MAPs. Source: Own processing based on data presented in [42].

The Eurobarometer survey conducted among the EU citizens in April 2021 also indicated the infrastructure and basic services as key problems of the EU rural areas [68], the most vocally mentioned was transport infrastructure. The majority, 65%, of respondents stated that the local area/province receiving infrastructure support should be able to decide how to spend it.

Yet not only physical infrastructure is needed. It is telling that there is almost an equal share of people feeling that they have influence on the decisions affecting their local area and those who do not feel empowered. Faced with the needed transition of the whole socio-economic system, it is vital that a higher share of the population has the feeling of empowerment and influence on the affairs important to their communities' well-being.

Insightful information about the approach of the European Commission to rural development and its importance provides the analysis of the EC's recommendations for preparing CAP strategic plans, which were published in December 2020 (Table 2). Based on the analysis of the extent of documents devoted to rural issues, it can be stated that the topic is of marginal focus in these documents. In recommendations for some countries there are no problems identified other than those related to agriculture.

**Table 2.** European Commission’s recommendations for rural development focus in CAP strategic plans.

Member State	Problems Identified	Solutions Recommended
Austria	Ageing, depopulation	Investments in basic infrastructure and services, economic diversification
Belgium	Only agricultural issues are mentioned	-
Bulgaria	Poverty, depopulation, social exclusion	Strategic longer-term investments in infrastructure (e.g., rural roads and sewage systems) and in services (related to medical provision, education and leisure), creating employment opportunities
Croatia	Depopulation, ageing, unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure	Investments in infrastructures and services (water sewage, childcare infrastructure and services)
Cyprus	Poverty	Investments in economic and social infrastructure
Czechia	No problems directly related to rural areas mentioned	Mobilization of activities in new sectors
Denmark	Ageing	Further increasing digital connectivity in rural areas to improve living and business conditions
Estonia	No problems directly related to rural areas mentioned	Basic infrastructures and service
Finland	Depopulation	Diversification of the rural economy and infrastructural development
France	No problems directly related to rural areas mentioned	Promoting diversification into other economic activities and employment sources, investments in rural infrastructure and services
Germany	Ageing, depopulation	Business environment and human capital
Greece	Poverty, unemployment, ageing	Economic and social infrastructures and services (healthcare)
Hungary	Depopulation, ageing	Basic services and infrastructures, local economic activity
Ireland	Social exclusion	Basic services and their accessibility
Italy	Depopulation, social exclusion	Basic services and infrastructure
Latvia	Poverty, depopulation	Basic infrastructures and services
Lithuania	Depopulation, poverty, inequality	Good quality public services, diversification, job creation
Luxembourg	No problems directly related to rural areas mentioned	Improving conditions for business development
Malta	Lack of basic services, and quality job opportunities	Investments in diverse economic activities and basic services
Netherlands	Depopulation, lack of job opportunities, disappearing basic services	Basic infrastructure and service
Poland	Ageing, lack of basic services	Basic services, rural business start-ups, broadband access
Portugal	Depopulation, poverty	Infrastructure, setting-up of businesses
Romania	Depopulation, poverty, socio-economic gap between rural and urban areas	Rural infrastructure, services, human capital and non-agricultural activities
Slovakia	Gap in standard of living between rural and other areas	Investments into business environment and by investments into basic services.
Slovenia	Ageing, lack of public services and basic infrastructure	Developing economic activity, access to good quality public services and infrastructure
Spain	Depopulation, social exclusion	Employment and economic activity

Source: Based on the [69–95].

The problems and proposed solutions are similar. In all the recommendation documents, it is stated that support for rural development from the CAP strategic plans should ensure “synergies with the other EU and national funds” [69]. The question is whether the EC, when assessing the strategic plans, will ask for proofing of such synergies to be ensured and how stringent it will be in demanding and ensuring that the rural needs are sufficiently tackled in the member states’ policies. As the recommendations are not legally binding documents, the extent of support offered to rural areas can be left to a goodwill of member states governments which can leave some regions without needed support and contribute

to increasing disparities as well as growing disillusionment with the effectiveness of the EU policies and thus, deteriorating the perception of the EU as a body of support to its citizens.

The EC published on 30th June 2021 states the long-term vision for rural areas, It calls for “stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous” rural areas. However, except a correct diagnosis and the publicly approved vision, the strategy does not offer any tools for realizing the vision. Given the fact that the “European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), is one of the key sources of EU funding for rural areas” [96], there is no actual improvement in the position of rural issues in the EU policy agenda. Member states, especially the less developed eastern countries have been using the possibility of transferring part of the second pillar funds to direct payments for farmers which does not translate to supporting rural resilience and connectivity and can widen the gap between rural and urban areas.

Much depends on the approach of member states, which can result in further increase in disparities as the member states are not supervised by the EC to the extent that would ensure rural proofing. The EC’s long-term vision flagship projects will be a vital source for developing future solutions and good practices and interconnections but without a full commitment at a national and regional level the rural policy will not support a just transition into a sustainable circular socio-economic system.

An important weakness of the EU rural policy is the fact that it hardly measures its efficiency and effectiveness. Although the RDPs have a developed system of monitoring and evaluation, these two processes do not offer solid evidence for policy impact. This is a result of the lack of statistical data sources, the lack of timely available data for showing the change resulting from the policy measures [97], the lack of the reporting requirement for beneficiaries on the impact of the support and, at the EU level the lack of the ability to make comparisons and general conclusions as evaluators can choose the methods and the extent of data that they find most convenient or practical given the evaluation questions they must answer. This results in a hardly useful, general and vague recommendation [98]. Moreover, the timeline of policy change, planning and evaluation do not synchronize in a way that evaluation outcomes can directly influence policy reform. Thus, the evaluation does not fulfil its role of catalyzing the learning processes and the planned shape of the evaluation of the rural policy within the CAP after 2022 shows that the evaluation process will not be improved [99].

The conducted analysis of the EU rural policy based on the assessment of three dimensions, effectiveness, efficiency and trust and engagement, shows that this policy does not pass the test of good governance qualities, especially for the criterion of flexibility of implementation (Table 3). The high level of discretion allowed to the member states has not been counterbalanced by the EU’s capacity to safeguard territorial justice and enforcing the EU values. Moreover, there is still a gap between the EU policy and local strategies that needs to be closed [100].

**Table 3.** EU rural development policy assessment results.

Dimension	Principles	Consistency of EU Regulation	Flexibility of Implementation at Regional/Local Level
Effectiveness	Capacity	n.a.	-
	Policy coherence	-	MS dependent
	Clear roles and responsibilities	+	+
Efficiency	Efficiency criteria applied	-	-
	Data availability	-	-
Trust and engagement	Trade-off between users, areas, measures	-	-
	Stakeholder engagement	+	MS dependent
	Integrity and transparency	+	MS dependent

Source: Own research findings.

#### 4. Discussion

Although the issues of rural development and the challenges faced by rural areas and rural communities in the process of a sustainability transition are crucial, the literature on this topic is limited. This means that it is still not visible not only to policymakers but also to researchers. This is an alarming conclusion as just transitions of rural areas are vital to a successful sustainability transition of the whole EU economy.

Rural change that is needed for rural development has not a single pathway. Visualizing change and thus, shaping the rural development policy requires taking into account all of the several narratives of rural change [52]. They include: agri-centric narrative, urban-rural access narrative, competitive narrative, and narrative of society-nature interrelationships [101].

A different set of issues was proposed by Knickel et al. [102] including following thematic areas: “the resilience of farms and rural areas; prosperity and well-being; knowledge and innovation”, as well as “the governance of agriculture and rural areas”. The disadvantageous position of rural areas far from urban growth centers in attracting support funds and collecting significant amount of taxes leaves them with hardly any resources to safeguard their resilience to changes. With the outflow of population, the resilience deterioration is accelerated and the deficits in resilience even more difficult to tackle with not much more than only endogenous resources. In such conditions, balancing all the dimensions of sustainability is impossible and the same applies to prosperity and well-being, while the knowledge and innovation require a significant amount of financial and human capitals and thus are also hard to achieve in deprived rural areas. Therefore, the question of ensuring good governance standards at all policy levels related to rural development is a vital issue.

Good governance is necessary to enable a successful and just transition. With such a complex transition ahead and so much vested interests involved and fears of being left behind or losing jobs or falling into poverty, there is much distrust and resistance to green transition everywhere. This fear is most visible in communities that have for a long time experienced the lack of support and empowerment to successfully present their needs to policymakers and be heard. The bottom-up approach offered within the EU rural development policy is just the right solution but its share in the rural development policy is minor and thus not sufficient to cope with the key transition challenges.

These two approaches show that there is a need for a holistic rural development policy. Namely, it should take into account the regional and local characteristics which put every local community at a different point of a continuous scale of each of the key dimensions of rurality and sustainability. To make the rural policy a success, the policymakers should both zoom in and zoom out the lenses through which they look to identify problems, needs and potential solutions.

The shrinking rural communities require special attention. The policy towards these areas should not focus on economic growth but should concentrate on obstacles faced by the communities [103] in accessing private and public services as well as supporting business development to ensure sustainability. This also refers to theoretical approaches [104]. An approach worth applying in designing new policy measures and supporting innovative solutions is the interplay between novelty and practicality [105]. Nevertheless, the support for rural areas must first be practical with application of innovative solutions.

Analyzing more than two consecutive programming periods and observing the debate accompanying the reform processes show that the pace of changes in rural related EU policies is slower than a one reform perspective can tell. This is proof of an inertia in shaping the policy. A good example of the struggle between what is needed and what is easy to accept is the process of a trialogue for the CAP post-2020 or rather post-2022, which can be seen as a power struggle between the CAP as we know it and the green deal CAP. The outcome of this battle will be the first test of the chances for sustainable transition in EU agriculture which will influence the transition of rural areas.

Some scholars suggest that principles of spatial justice are a good alternative for the “failed realization of territorial cohesion” [106] in the EU cohesion policy. The current cohesion policy is seen as a policy that is focused on safeguarding EU competitiveness and not a policy to empower regions to develop their strengths. As demonstrated by Manipour et al. [17], the contribution of this policy to territorial justice is limited. Moreover, the political interplay among the EU member states causes the policy and the concept of territorial cohesion to continue to remain vague and subject to interpretations that suited different interests.

The opinion presented by the Welsh government on the benefits of Brexit in relation to the EU regional policy emphasizes weak points of EU rural policy. It states that “a potential benefit of being outside of the EU will be the opportunity to work more systematically with functional regional areas that reflect the economic reality in each part of Wales, rather than being constrained by the current geographical and fund-specific limitations. We will no longer need to separate parts of West and East Wales artificially, or address the needs of rural areas, people, and businesses entirely separately” [107]. This shows the limitations and weaknesses of the cohesion policy.

There is evidence that EU support can be hijacked by authorities at lower administrative levels. This serves their particular political purposes and leaves the perception target of EU support unachieved. Some national and local politicians for the sake of their political rankings in the polls, present EU support as their personal/ their parties’ sole achievement and being a part of their own policy agenda [51,108].

The concept of spatial justice clearly shows that the mechanism of distributing the EU funds among the member states/regions based on the GDP per person creates a vicious cycle as it puts the development processes on a trajectory of economic growth and a competitive battle. In this cycle, it is efficient and effective to support only the ones already showing the largest growth potential [109]. Thus, the aimed territorial cohesion becomes a more and more unreachable concept.

An important part of the good governance for territorial justice, when it comes to rural policy and supporting just distribution of resources, is the other side of this equation, urban areas. They also struggle with specific issues and problems such as overburdened public transport, pollution or the lack of green spaces. Therefore, a vital element of rural policy should be rural-urban partnerships. This concept is strongly encouraged by OECD, which it sees it as “an integrated approach to economic development” [108].

In 2016, the EU introduced the rural proofing of EU policies. The concept of rural proofing emphasizes assessing policies that do not have a “specific geographic focus but have major rural impacts” [110]. They include health and the educational system, justice, taxation, social policy, climate, and industrial policy. The rural proofing should include stages of this process. Each of them should be concentrated on answering a specific question:

- “Stage 1: What are the direct or indirect impacts of the policy on rural areas?
- Stage 2: What is the scale of these impacts?
- Stage 3: What actions can you take to tailor your policy to work best in the rural areas?
- Stage 4: What effects has your policy had on rural areas and how can it be further adapted?” [111]

The current experience with the EU rural proofing shows that this mechanism is non-existent, as the member state recovery plans under the next generation neglect its principles. The members states did not ensure providing for the rural recovery needs despite the problems rural communities experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which differed in certain dimensions from the urban ones. The most vivid example is the lack of reliable broadband connections. Therefore, designing tools to tackle the specific needs of rural areas should be a significant part of every recovery plan and the EC should demand from the member states that they demonstrate in their recovery plan special measures and sufficient funding for rural recovery.

The CAP reform proposal is another clear example that rural proofing does not work in the EU. This may be the result of the lack of political will to make it an effective tool [58]. Moreover, the example of transition of the English rural proofing system to Australia showed that rural proofing works only if the rural areas are similar [112], which is not the case in the EU.

Another important problem related to the EU rural policy is its limited environmental impact. Some authors [113,114] see the environmental measures of the second pillar as part of the EU rural policy as related to environmental problems. Yet, a close examination of these measures shows that they do not support providing environmental public goods [109] and do not facilitate a sustainability transition.

The EC claims that the policy is more and more orientated on climate action, but the examination of the European Court of Auditors shows that these claims are exaggerated. In the court's report of 2016, it was shown that the CAP spending on climate action was not 26% but only 18% [115] and the increased climate ambition the measures of CAP 2014–2020 changed little compared to the period of 2007–2013 and thus the environmental performance of the CAP was not enhanced [116].

The French example shows the danger of leaving rural communities without the necessary support in a sustainability transition. The yellow jackets protests in 2018 are considered to be demonstrations of a “strong feeling of failing public policies” related to rural areas [117] as it was a response to the rise in taxes on diesel petrol. The tax was supposed to help in greening France but provoked riots of people who have no other way than to use a private car to go to work as the public transport in peripheral areas hardly exists. The yellow jackets made the policymakers aware of the problems of peripheral communities which resulted in creating a new policy towards rural areas by establishing the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion which is responsible for it. The EU and national funds are used to improve accessibility to basic public services, revitalize small towns and villages and establish small scale industry enterprises.

The insights from different rural stakeholders concerning the vision for the EU rural areas bring about an already known system of policy building based on the dialogue. It includes all aspects of the policy but stems not from policy goals but from the values [118]. This is what shapes the public consensus on the goals. Therefore, there is a need to support the efforts for a dialogue in which common values can be debated and agreed upon. To make this possible, social capital must be highly developed. Moreover, good governance requires a collaborative governance. The involvement of local stakeholders in a collaborative process of policy making can help tailor the policy agenda and policy instruments to actual needs and context of policy implementation. In a collaborative process it is possible to:

1. Explore, investigate the new problems and topics of interest;
2. Prioritize, put into order the discussed issues;
3. Embed, attribute importance in local context;
4. Integration, attribute links between different topics [119].

Such an insightful process can help build a consensus among stakeholders on the development pathway that should be followed. This is crucial to ensure a just transition process.

There is a realization among stakeholders at different levels that there is a need for a more place-based approach and for tailoring support to the specific needs of different areas as well as creating interlinks to benefit from diversity and make the interdependencies work in a circular economy. This is well-shown in the recent EU documents [120]. The question is whether the strategies can be translated into actual action plans that are accompanied by adequate funding.

“Progress in rural development policy reform is rather slow. There have been ‘missed opportunities’, due to substantial ‘institutional inertia’ at several levels of the policy design and implementation process.” These words were written in 2010 by Copus and Dax [104]. After over a decade and two EU policy reforms, they remain valid. If the sustainability

transition is to succeed and be a just transition, these words should become invalid as soon as possible.

Summing up, the EU rural policy has not sufficient capacity to support a just sustainability transition in the rural areas as it shows following limitations:

- Insufficient budget;
- Limited number of measures not covering all the types of needs characterizing different rural areas and no measures dedicated to the needs related to a sustainability transition;
- It is divided between different funds/different directorate generals of the EC and coordination and cooperation (also and member states and regional level) is not satisfactory;
- Stakeholder groups have not been allowed enough power to participate in the policy design and implementation;
- Policy evaluation does not fully show the scale of impact and is not used to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy;
- There is not much leeway allowed to regions and member states in shaping their rural development programs;
- The common agriculture policy is agriculture orientated, while the cohesion policy focuses on enhancing the competitiveness of growth centers; thus, rural areas and their needs are not considered.

Removing these limitations should become a priority for policymakers. Good governance and territorial justice should serve as guiding principles for the policy modification as they offer the right framework for shaping a policy that can help communities and territories transform from the current carbon overuse to a green socio-economic system.

## 5. Conclusions

The study presented a careful analysis of the process that led to degradation of rural policy and its lack of capacity to support rural areas in a just sustainability transition as well as the reasons why the EU rural policy is so crucial not only for rural areas or climate change mitigation, but also for the existence of the EU itself.

In conclusion, the whole study can be summarized to just one issue. Territorial justice, understood as supporting regions/localities struggling with specific problems that exceed their endogenous capacity to solve them, is in fact at a core of the EUs values. Therefore, effective support to rural communities is much needed proof that the idea of the EU can be an effective reality. The EU must support member states and regional and local communities in the capacity of building a good sustainability governance, unbiased by sectoral policies.

Our research contributes to contemporary debates on the effectiveness of the various EU policies supporting rural development and their greater complementarity. The study demonstrates that the changes needed for rural development require a single pathway that takes into account a range of social, economic and environmental changes. Urgent coordination to ensure standards of good governance at all levels of EU policy related to rural development can have a positive impact on a fairer transformation of rural areas and thus on the success of sustainable development objectives across the EU.

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