



Making EU rural policies more  
migration-sensitive. A plea for a  
strategic reorientation of EU  
vision on rural areas

Whole-COMM Strategy Paper

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June 2024



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004714



## Acknowledgement

This paper is the culmination of the efforts of all Whole-COMM partners and stakeholders who have actively participated in various activities over the past years. We extend our gratitude to CIDOB, especially Oriol Farres, for creating the visual representation of the key outcomes of the strategy paper.

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# 1. Setting the scene

The Whole-COMM Policy Brief has identified policy implications of the research results for small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMSTRAs) in general. In this Strategy Paper we consider Whole-COMM's findings with a more targeted lens, namely one that reflects on specific implications for EU's rural areas, starting from the assumption that they are worthy of specific attention.

As stressed in the EU Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027<sup>1</sup>, migrant population of rural areas tends to fare worse on most indicators of integration not only compared to natives but also with respect to migrants living in cities and towns<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the Territorial Agenda 2030<sup>3</sup> points out demographic and societal imbalances underlining that “ageing and migration point to further concentration in urban areas along with depopulation in rural and peripheral areas” (p. 9).

Besides these structural trends, it is important to notice that, while the salience of rural areas in the current contingency is growing, the specific nexus between rural areas and migration is still neglected. For instance, in EU's new common agricultural policy (CAP) 2023-27 that entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023, migration is a seriously neglected dimension. Another interesting example comes from the large farmers' protests that started in December 2023 in many member states and in Brussels: while they have brought rural areas at the core of the European public debate, they have also completely neglected the important role of migrant labour for the sustainability of European agricultural systems.

All in all, it is remarkable (and lamentable) that policy documents and the European debate more generally disregard the actual and potential role of migrant populations for the future of rural areas. This Strategy Paper aims to contribute to fill this gap, which is also a growingly serious strategic weakness.

With this purpose, we review the main EU strategy document in this domain, i.e. the “Long-term vision for rural areas: for stronger, connected resilient and prosperous rural areas”

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<sup>1</sup> The Plan is available here: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion\\_en#:~:text=The%20Action%20plan%20on%20Integration,citizens%20with%20a%20migrant%20backgroud.](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion_en#:~:text=The%20Action%20plan%20on%20Integration,citizens%20with%20a%20migrant%20backgroud.)

<sup>2</sup> See also JRC, Migration in EU Rural Areas, 2020,

[https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC116919/migration\\_in\\_eu\\_rural\\_areas.pdf](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC116919/migration_in_eu_rural_areas.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2021/territorial-agenda-2030-a-future-for-all-places](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2021/territorial-agenda-2030-a-future-for-all-places)



(Rural Vision from now on) <sup>4</sup> adopted in 2021 after a European Commission's initiative with the aim of developing a common European vision for 2040<sup>5</sup>.

The Rural Vision builds on the emerging opportunities of the EU's green and digital transitions by identifying means to improve rural quality of life, achieve balanced territorial development and stimulate economic growth in rural areas, with a specific attention to remote and less developed rural regions. It "has the ambition to create a new momentum for rural areas by changing the way they are perceived and by building new opportunities, with a stronger voice for rural communities" (p. 2). Hence, the Vision is a crucial "window of opportunity" to imagine and enhance the role of migration in the development of rural areas and, more generally, of Europe. So far, however, this "window" does not seem to have been fully exploited.

Therefore, the Strategy Paper is a plea for a strategic reorientation of the EU vision on rural areas to make it more migration-sensitive. Because of this, the Strategy Paper is somewhat complementary to Whole-COMM's Policy Brief which instead aims to make migrants integration's strategies more sensitive to the specificities associated with municipality size by offering concrete suggestions in the form of policy recommendations.

Considering the frequent lack of the necessary economic and human resources for developing migration-specific initiatives (with the exception of particularly vulnerable groups for which specific programmes funded by the central governments are generally available), the main rationale inspiring our strategic hints is the necessity of mainstreaming migration. Indeed, this goal is consistent with the first key principle of the EU Action Plan for Integration, namely "inclusion for all", that "is about ensuring that all policies are accessible to and work for everyone, including migrants and EU citizens with migrant background. This means adapting and transforming mainstream policies to the needs of a diverse society, taking into account the specific challenges and needs of different groups" (p. 5). Despite this emphasis in the Action Plan, migration is still marginal, if not absent, in the strategic documents concerning other policy fields, such as the Rural Vision.

For this reason, the main target of this document is not represented by stakeholders working on migration-related issues. Our objective is rather to raise awareness on the important structural implications and potential benefits of international migration among the decision-makers and stakeholders engaged in rural development at all levels of government.

What follows is critically fed by Whole-COMM research outputs and by the wealth of exchanges with stakeholders and experts occurred throughout the project. On those bases, we single out a set of challenges and we provide strategic hints for a migration-sensitive strategic reorientation of the Rural Vision.

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<sup>4</sup> The full text is available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC034> 5

<sup>5</sup> For details see: [https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision\\_en](https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision_en)



## 2. Areas of action: challenges and strategic hints

In the following, we conduct a synthetic review of the Rural Vision focused on the current and potential role of migration for the present and future of EU's rural areas.

We will articulate our analysis following the areas of action identified by the Rural Vision itself:

1. Stronger rural areas
2. Connected rural areas
3. Resilient rural areas that foster well-being
4. Prosperous rural areas

For each of these building blocks of the Rural Vision, besides reproducing the summaries contained in the Rural Vision itself, we will provide a synthetic appraisal of what we view as the main challenge(s) related to each thematic area and strategic hints to make the Rural Vision more migration-friendly, i.e. more effective in leveraging the potential of migration for the future of EU's rural areas.

### 2.1. Stronger rural areas

Rural areas should be home to empowered and vibrant local communities. Enabling all individuals to take active part in policy and **decision-making processes**, involving a broad range of stakeholders and networks as well as all levels of governance is key to developing tailor-made, place-based and integrated policy solutions and investments. New possibilities for active public participation such as consultations of rural constituencies or online voting can make rural areas, particularly remote and depopulating ones, more attractive by engaging people in decisions on their own future and in how to make the most of the cultural and economic strengths of their area.

While situations vary between Member States, the population of a number of the EU's rural areas is mostly shrinking and growing older, which may put pressure on the provision of public and private services. Ensuring rural areas are attractive places to live and work is key. In this respect, the effective **access to essential services** of sufficient quality, such as water, sanitation, healthcare, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications, has to be guaranteed for all. Innovative solutions for the provisions of services should also be developed, making the best of the possibilities offered by digital tools and encouraging strongly social innovation.



## Challenge No. 1: Migrants' poor civic and political participation

A key evidence of the Whole-COMM project<sup>6</sup> is that there is still very limited policy engagement with migrant political participation and consultative structures are still missing in many rural localities.

### Strategic hint No. 1: Bringing migration into non-migrant-specific local initiatives

Since rural areas often lack the necessary economic and human resources for developing migration-specific initiatives, migration should be addressed as a structural feature of local communities within initiatives with a broader scope. Specifically, as suggested by Whole-COMM's findings<sup>7</sup>, local policymakers should support the civic and political participation of migrants by promoting informal initiatives open to all residents (citizen initiatives, public consultations, etc), prioritizing activities around common interests and in which newcomers and long-term residents should participate on an equal footing.

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## Challenge No. 2: Marginalisation of rural communities in decision-making processes over migrant integration

The Whole-COMM project<sup>8</sup> shows that the EU and national governments paid little attention to the specific realities of small municipalities in policymaking on migration. On the other side, rural areas often lack the capacities and resources to participate in deliberative fora of policymaking on migration set up at the higher levels of government.

### Strategic hint No. 2: Bringing migration into non-migrant-specific policy venues

Beyond opening up policymaking venues on migrant integration to small localities<sup>9</sup>, it would be crucial to mainstream migration bringing this issue in the non-migration policymaking venues. Indeed, we should consider that rural localities may not have the capacities and resources to participate in the many issue-based fora of policymaking. Non-specialised fora,

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<sup>6</sup> Particularly, see the WP6 Policy Brief "How to foster social cohesion and positive attitudes towards the integration of migrants at the local level?" available at: <https://whole-comm.eu/deliverables/policybriefs/how-to-foster-social-cohesion-and-positive-attitudes-towards-integration/>

<sup>7</sup> See WP6 Policy Brief.

<sup>8</sup> See WP3 Policy Brief "A Differentiated Approach to Improve Migrant Integration in Small and Medium-Sized Towns" available at <https://whole-comm.eu/deliverables/policybriefs/differentiated-approach-to-improve-migrant-integration-in-small-and-medium-sized-towns/>

<sup>9</sup> See WP3 Policy Brief



articulated in thematic subgroups, such as the European Committee of Regions<sup>10</sup>, could be a more viable option for rural areas.

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### Challenge No. 3: Migrants' difficulties in accessing local services

In the face of the goal of guaranteeing access to services for all, the findings of the Whole-COMM project<sup>11</sup> show how newcomers may face specific difficulties because they have poor knowledge of the national languages and of the functioning of local services. On the other hand, a large share of rural localities often lack experience, expertise and resources, including the staff with multicultural competencies, to deal with cultural diversity<sup>12</sup>.

### Strategic hint No. 3: Acting at supra-municipal level

Whole-COMM's documents offer multiple solutions to overcome the above mentioned barriers in accessing services<sup>13</sup>. In order to make those solutions viable for rural areas, which can hardly rely on enough resources to carry out target-specific interventions, it would be helpful to develop supra-municipal infrastructures to support local services in becoming more migrant-friendly (eg. for translating and simplifying materials, providing intercultural mediators, training the staff, etc) rather than pushing individual municipalities to set up their own migrant-specific measures.

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<sup>10</sup> According to the WP3, the European Committee of Regions is the only forum that is able to involve small municipalities)

<sup>11</sup> Particularly, the WP4 Comparative report on "Migrants' access to housing and employment", available at <https://whole-comm.eu/deliverables/comparative-reports/8-country-comparative-paper-migrants-access-to-housing-and-employment/>

<sup>12</sup> Particularly, see WP3 and WP6 Policy Briefs.

<sup>13</sup> See the Whole-COMM Toolbox available at <https://whole-comm.eu/deliverables/toolbox-local-strategies-for-effective-migrant-and-refugee-integration/>



## 2.2. Connected rural areas

The further development of rural areas is dependent on them being well connected between each other and to peri-urban and urban areas. This makes them easier to access while improving access to a wider range of services for local communities.

In terms of transport, this means **maintaining or improving affordable public transport services, and infrastructure** (...) The potential for rural areas to act as hubs for the development, testing and deployment of sustainable and innovative mobility solutions should also be further explored.

**Digital infrastructure is an essential enabler for rural areas** to contribute to and make the most of the digital transition. The development of digital capacities in rural areas will improve their attractiveness. Digital technologies will offer services such as multi-modal intelligent transport systems, rapid emergency assistance in case of accidents, more targeted waste management solutions, smart energy and lighting solutions, resource optimisation, and more.

### Challenge No. 4: Rural-urban diversity distance

In rural-urban distance, physical aspects are intertwined to the cultural and symbolic ones. As emerged from Whole-COMM project<sup>14</sup>, during the spare time migrants living in rural areas tend to reach cities to enjoy their diversity of products, services and social environments. This reveals as rural areas do not appear as places open to cultural diversity setting a further and more challenging distance between rural and urban areas. Against this backdrop, the urban-rural cultural divide seems to increase rather than reducing and to translate into a political divide with rural areas' rising discontent and aversion towards European integration<sup>15</sup> and growing consensus for far-right anti-migrant political parties<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> See WP5 Policy Brief.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, *Forging a sustainable future together – Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe – Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy, February 2024*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/974536>

<sup>16</sup> An Investigate Europe analysis of the latest national election data from 11 countries found that far-right parties achieved their highest percentage of votes in rural districts, see <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/17154120/>





## Strategic hint No. 4: Valuing migrants as agents of “urban-rural linking”

Beyond connecting rural and urban areas through public transport and digital infrastructures, cultural links have to be developed as well. Reducing the cultural gaps between urban and rural area is of utmost importance to avoid that rural places’ uniqueness, valued by the Rural Vision, translates into cultural closeness and aversion against the subjects perceived as non-local such as migrants or the EU. From this perspective, acceptance of different lifestyles offers a valuable test of rural communities’ openness that is worthy to be (self-)monitored. At the same time, with lives unfolding across continents and between rural and urban areas, migrants are powerful agents of “de-provincialisation” of rural areas and of “urban-rural linking” that should become key components of wider strategies to refresh and rethink the relations between rural and urban areas.

### 2.3. Resilient rural areas that foster well-being

Rural areas can and should play a central role in the European Green Deal. The preservation of natural resources, the restoration of landscapes, including cultural ones, the greening of farming activities and shortening supply chains will **make rural areas more resilient to climate change**, natural hazards and economic crises. As providers of services that protect ecosystems and solutions for carbon neutrality, rural areas have an increasingly important role to play in climate change mitigation and the sustainable bio- and circular economy. Rural areas should build on sustainable farming, forestry, agri-food economic activities and a diversified range of greener economic activities promoting carbon-farming and local, community-based high-quality production. (...)

The **green and digital transitions should be fair** and take the needs of all rural community members into account, including those from disadvantaged groups to strengthen the social resilience of rural areas.

Making rural areas more socially resilient requires **tapping into the full breadth of talents and diversity in our societies**. Everyone should be able to access re- and upskilling, opening the possibility of good quality jobs and opportunities, and they should be equally represented in decision making, at the national, regional and local levels. Gender-based violence and gender stereotypes should be addressed. Particular attention should also be paid to young people as well as older persons, persons with disabilities, children, LGBTQI+ people, people with a migrant background and Roma communities that sometimes lack access to basic services, such as adequate social and educational services and health care.



## Challenge No. 5: Migrants' exclusion from the "imagined rural communities"

Migrants constitute a relevant share of workers employed in the preservation of natural resources but they often remain invisible in the "imagined rural communities". As a matter of fact, the Rural Vision, although not entirely neglecting the role of migration in rural areas, does rely on a very partial and potentially distorting understanding of such a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon as international migration. When mentioned in the Vision, migrants are framed as disadvantaged workers or victims of discrimination, i.e. as people in need of help rather than people able to contribute to build resilient rural communities.

## Strategic hint No. 5: Developing (fair) resilience through community building

In the Rural Vision, cultural diversity is meant as diversity *across* rural communities and understood as the basis of their uniqueness whereas diversity *within* rural communities is largely overlooked. Instead, by bringing different traditions and stories, migrants could contribute to go beyond the inheritance-based uniqueness to focus more on the uniqueness to come opening up new ways of dealing with challenges. Hence, resilient communities may develop through building "new imagined rural communities", reframing migrants' contribution in keeping alive natural and cultural landscapes and tapping into their potentials. In this regard, as suggested by the research results of Whole-COMM<sup>17</sup>, activities around common interests, starting from climate change mitigation and adaptation, which involve migrants and natives on equal terms could contribute to implementing this approach.

## 2.4. Prosperous rural areas

**Rural areas can become more prosperous by diversifying economic activities** to new sectors with positive effects on employment, and improving the value added of farming and agrifood activities.

The diversification of economic activities should be based on sustainable local economic strategies including measures that make their environment attractive to companies. Economic diversification also requires giving access to digital and hybrid education and training for communities to acquire new skills and support entrepreneurial mind-sets. Improved networking of smaller businesses can be an alternative to consolidation, which often leads to the transfer of power and profit away from rural areas.

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<sup>17</sup> See WP5 Policy Brief.



**The important economic role played by agriculture, forestry and fisheries should be preserved.** Developing short supply chains, making use of labelling schemes acknowledging the quality and variety of local and traditional food products will have a positive impact on local economies. Producer organisations can contribute to promoting products and their regions through activities, such as advertising campaigns. This also plays a role in satisfying the increasing demand for local products - linked to the specific rural areas they are from - and contributes to preserving the self-sufficiency and sustainability of European food production.

### Challenge No. 6: Neglect of the role of migrant workers in EU agricultural policies

As highlighted in the Vision, the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and in particular its European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), is one of the key sources of EU funding for rural areas to foster a smart, resilient and diversified agricultural sector, and to prompt sustainable and integrated rural development. As a matter of fact, although migrants constitute a large share of agricultural workforce and a key component of the “Green economy” as a whole, their role is not addressed and valued in the EU policies such as the CAP. Also considering the new social conditionality mechanism<sup>18</sup>, the main stakeholders served by the 2023-2027 CAP are (overwhelmingly native) farmers, confirming the overall employer-driven approach of Farm to Fork policies<sup>19</sup>.

### Strategic hint No. 6: Valuing migrants as key agents for innovating agrifood traditions

In many areas migrants, either as employees and entrepreneurs, ensure the production of traditional food products and this role should be acknowledged and supported. At the same time, by merging different traditions, they can be sources of innovation of the agrifood activities both as producers and consumers. Hence, they should be regarded as crucial agents to maintain, refresh and expand the local food landscapes and to develop prosperous rural communities.

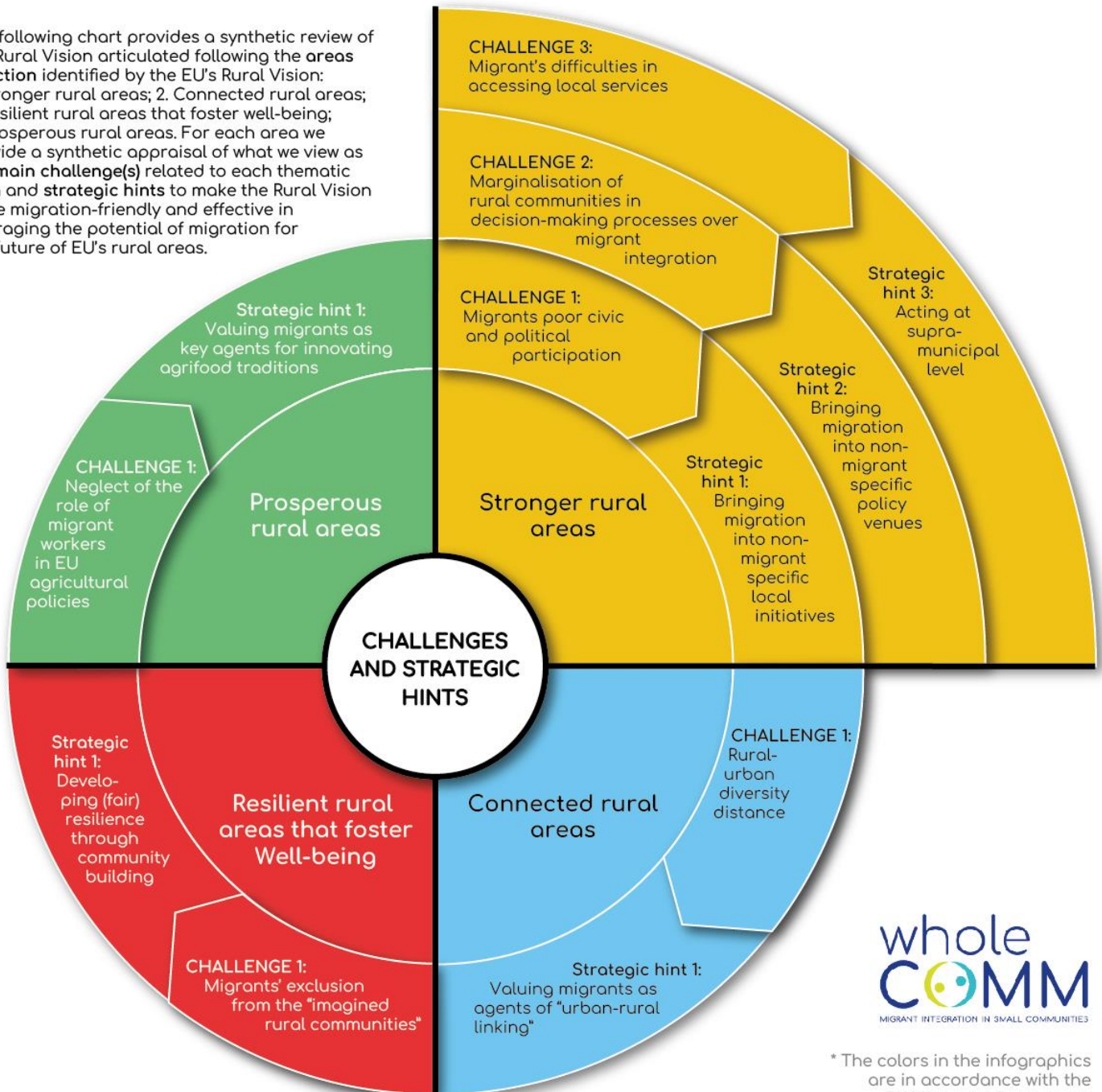
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<sup>18</sup> The new CAP has introduced social conditionality rules to ensure that CAP income support and rural development funding is granted to employers that respect the workers’ social and labour rights, occupational safety, and health as established by the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions and the directives on Occupational Safety and Health and Safety at Work. This mechanism and the new rules will be voluntary until 2025. At the time of the writing, only Italy, France and Austria opted to introduce them

<sup>19</sup> Neidhardt, A.H., Milazzo. E., Kapeti, L., van Meeteren, M. and T. de Lange, *A Regulatory Infrastructure Approach to EU Legal and Policy Frameworks*, DIGNITY-Firm Working paper no. 3, 2024, available at [https://www.dignityfirm.eu/portfolio\\_page/dignity-for-irregular-migrants-employed-in-farm-to-forksectors-a-regulatory-infrastructure-approach-to-eu-legal-andpolicy-frameworks/](https://www.dignityfirm.eu/portfolio_page/dignity-for-irregular-migrants-employed-in-farm-to-forksectors-a-regulatory-infrastructure-approach-to-eu-legal-andpolicy-frameworks/)

# CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC HINTS SUMMARY TABLE

The following chart provides a synthetic review of the Rural Vision articulated following the areas of action identified by the EU's Rural Vision: 1. Stronger rural areas; 2. Connected rural areas; 3. Resilient rural areas that foster well-being; 4. Prosperous rural areas. For each area we provide a synthetic appraisal of what we view as the main challenge(s) related to each thematic area and strategic hints to make the Rural Vision more migration-friendly and effective in leveraging the potential of migration for the future of EU's rural areas.





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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004714