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POLICY BRIEF

Towards reducing inequalities in well-being between rural and urban areas in Europe

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1. Introduction: why rural–urban well-being inequalities matter now

Recent SAGES research, including Pavel and Ibanescu (2026), and Ibanescu and Gheorghiu (2026), as well as pan-European studies (Lenzi and Perucca, 2018; Meloni et al., 2023; Sørensen, 2014) show that the rural–urban dimension remains central to differences in well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction. Rural areas frequently lag behind urban settlements, although substantial differences also exist within both categories, particularly between metropolitan, intermediate, remote, and peripheral territories. Spatial inequalities are

Inequalities in well-being between rural and urban areas are produced by the interaction of spatial structures, legal entitlements, social conditions, and administrative capacity. Therefore, they vary across countries and regions.

often visible at lower scales, which is why a sharp rural–urban divide may remain hidden behind average values for regions and countries. Even at regional scale, capital regions often represent islands of prosperity in many Central and Eastern

European countries, while in Western and Southern European countries significant economic inequalities and high exposure to poverty are emerging. As traditional spatially blind policies have failed to address peripheral decline behind attractive urban centres, rural–urban inequalities have become one of the central pillars of the place-based approach argued by Barca (2009).

This concerns more than relative positions on a well-being scale. Fine-grained territorial inequalities can fuel discontent, institutional distrust, and support for extremist parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The brief therefore adopts a European and multidimensional perspective integrating health, education, institutional quality, material conditions, and subjective well-being, in line with EU and OECD frameworks (Stiglitz et al., 2018).

2. Conceptual and territorial framing: what counts as “urban” and “rural” in Europe?

To support international comparisons of cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas, six European and international organisations developed a harmonised methodological guide: the

European Commission, FAO, UN-Habitat, ILO, OECD, and the World Bank. The resulting Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) classification divides the urban–rural continuum into three mutually exclusive categories using a 1 km² population grid (European Commission et al., 2021):

- Cities (densely populated areas) are defined as contiguous grid cells with a population density of at least 1,500 inhabitants/km² and a minimum total population threshold of 50,000.
- Towns and suburbs (intermediate density areas) are clusters of contiguous grid cells with at least 300 inhabitants/km² and a minimum total population of 5,000.
- Rural areas (sparsely populated areas) record densities below 300 inhabitants/km²

The methodology complements national definitions and improves international comparability. It distinguishes cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas, while metropolitan definitions incorporate commuting zones. This provides a more detailed representation of population distribution and functional territorial relationships (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2014).

Several selected well-being indicators from DEGURBA Eurostat database pinpoint various aspects of well-being inequalities across the urban-rural continuum. In DEGURBA classification, suburbs and towns match or even outperform cities in indicators such as employment rate and participation rate in education in stable Western economies, such as Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden. This validates the relevance of the urban-rural continuum, in which these intermediate areas are able to capture positive economic spillovers from urban core. This has important policy implications for well-being, as local and regional policies could be more focused on connecting (via transport and knowledge infrastructures) this tier of the settlement hierarchy with the superior one, in order to reduce negative externalities in agglomeration economies (fierce competition, rising housing costs, congestion etc.).

The at-risk-of-poverty indicator reveals sharp urban–rural inequalities that follow different patterns across the EU. In Romania and Bulgaria, risk increases steeply from cities towards rural areas; the gradient is more moderate in Greece, Croatia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These patterns suggest that rural populations in several countries remain disconnected from national growth centres and require territorially targeted investment. In Austria, Belgium, Denmark, and Germany, by contrast, poverty risk is more concentrated in cities.



Figure 1. Urban-rural disparities in well-being across the European Union
Source: Authors' representation

The NEET rate remains a relatively flat and low line, with no significant disparities across the DEGURBA continuum in most countries. Nevertheless, in Bulgaria and Romania, the red and green bars, corresponding to suburbs and towns, and rural areas, sharply contrast with cities. In these countries, cities are among the top performers in youth employment, due to their rapid growth in ICT and other knowledge-intensive sectors. To a lesser extent, the same situation can be observed in Greece, Lithuania, and Hungary. This pattern points to a localised administrative inability to provide adequate education and job opportunities outside major urban centres, but also to deeper intergenerational inequalities.

3. The spatial and administrative dimensions of well-being

Citizens' well-being is a multidimensional concept that includes income and health status, alongside access to public services, economic opportunities, infrastructure, community resources, and the characteristics of the places where people live. In other words, spatial location and connectivity to different services through infrastructure are key determinants of well-being.

Geographical location, population density, service accessibility, digital connectivity, transport infrastructure, and the administrative capacity of local authorities largely determine individuals' chances of benefiting from essential services and potential development opportunities (Brovarone et al., 2021; Perpiña Castillo et al., 2023). The central issue lies in the disconnection between the spatial and administrative dimensions of development, as there is often a gap between arbitrary administrative boundaries and the functional realities of territories. Territorial differences in well-being are therefore generated not only by geographical conditions, but also by the way in which public institutions organise and distribute resources and services across space.

Reducing territorial disparities is a fundamental objective of the European Union, as it contributes to strengthening economic, social, and territorial cohesion. Unequal access to services and infrastructure can accelerate social exclusion, regional depopulation, and development gaps between territories. This problem has become increasingly pressing over the last decade, due to digital transformation, population ageing, and the concentration of economic

activities in large cities. While rural and peripheral areas are losing their sustainability as a result of demographic decline, larger urban centres are facing major pressures related to congestion and housing costs. The persistence of territorial inequalities can generate social polarisation, feelings of marginalisation, and declining trust in public institutions. At the same time, administrative fragmentation prevents the formation of economies of scale, leading to inefficient public spending through isolated investments. Ultimately, inaction keeps vulnerable regions trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, through the continuous loss of human capital and economic attractiveness.

The problem of territorial inequalities affects a wide range of actors, but its most severe impact is felt by residents of rural areas and small towns, often mono-industrial, who are directly confronted with the degradation of basic services. Peri-urban communities around large metropolitan areas are also affected by heavy traffic and by the lack of schools, utilities, and adequate infrastructure, including as a result of rigid administrative boundaries. Mobility and connectivity deficits further increase the vulnerability of sensitive social groups, such as older people, children and young people, low-income households, and persons with disabilities. On the other side, small local governments become trapped in limited budgets and dependent on central authorities.

The first category refers to economic performance and social development, including GDP per

capita disparities, the Local Human Development Index, and the Community Poverty Index. The second concerns physical accessibility and essential services, including average travel time to emergency hospitals, high schools, or transport nodes, as well as the availability of public transport, social services, and childcare services in relation to population density and geographical isolation. The third category refers to connectivity and digital skills, including internet access and the monitoring of the general level of digital competences among the population. The fourth concerns sustainability and administrative capacity, including the administrative fragmentation index, expressed through the number of inhabitants per local administrative unit, and the share of own revenues in the local budget.

The analysis of the territorial and administrative dynamics of well-being is situated at the intersection of three interconnected strategic levels. The first is the European context, defined by the European Union's cohesion policy, the Territorial Agenda 2030, and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas 2040. The second is the national context, marked by the formal

recognition of metropolitan areas and Intercommunity Development Associations, which often function only formally, without their own budgets or real authority. The third is the regional context, where dynamics are shaped by large university and industrial cities, generating a strong brain drain from the periphery towards the centre and leaving rural areas and small towns demographically aged and trapped in a chronic lack of administrative capacity for recovery.

At European level, policies such as the Territorial Agenda 2030 and cohesion policy promote integrated territorial development and the strengthening of rural–urban relations. However, their implementation in Romania is limited by administrative fragmentation and unequal institutional capacity. Current policies do not effectively reduce territorial disparities because they are based on rigid administrative boundaries that do not reflect real mobility flows or the population’s actual access to services. The financial dependence of many small communes and the lack of coordination between sectoral areas such as transport, health, and education contribute to the deepening of regional gaps. Examples such as the Oradea Metropolitan Area demonstrate that functional intercommunity cooperation can improve access to services and local economic development. Consequently, reducing spatial inequalities requires stronger territorial cooperation, increased administrative capacity, and funding oriented towards concrete outcomes in terms of well-being and quality of life.

4. Legal dimensions: From territorial cohesion to enforceable service rights

In the European Union, the legal foundations of territorial well-being do not take the form of an explicit and autonomous “right to well-being”. Instead, well-being is embedded within a broader legal architecture that seeks to guarantee equal opportunities and living conditions through territorial cohesion, social protection, access to public services, and non-discrimination. **From this perspective, well-being emerges as a legally mediated outcome of rights and policies designed to ensure that citizens can effectively access essential services regardless of where they live.**

A central pillar of this framework is Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which establishes economic, social, and territorial cohesion as a fundamental objective of the Union. The provision requires the EU to promote harmonious development across its territory and to reduce disparities between regions. Particular attention

is directed toward rural areas, regions affected by industrial transition, islands, mountainous territories, and other areas facing structural disadvantages. Although Article 174 does not create individual rights that citizens can directly invoke before courts, it provides an important constitutional basis for cohesion policies and territorial development strategies. By recognizing territorial disparities as a matter of Union concern, the provision links spatial inequalities to broader questions of social justice and well-being.

Together, these provisions demonstrate that well-being is legally operationalized through enforceable social and economic rights rather than through a standalone constitutional guarantee. Access to healthcare, social assistance, education, transport, energy, and communication services contributes directly to individuals' quality of life and ability to participate fully in society. The Charter therefore provides an important bridge between abstract territorial objectives and concrete social entitlements.

The European Pillar of Social Rights further strengthens this approach. Although not legally binding in the same way as the Treaties or the Charter, the Pillar has become an influential normative framework for EU social policy. Particularly relevant is Principle 20, which affirms that everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services, and digital communications. The principle emphasizes affordability and accessibility, highlighting the idea that territorial location should not determine whether individuals can benefit from services necessary for a dignified life. Through subsequent legislative initiatives and funding mechanisms, the Pillar has contributed to transforming social inclusion from a policy aspiration into a more concrete governance objective.

Recent developments in the digital sphere illustrate how territorial well-being is increasingly linked to connectivity rights. Digital infrastructure has become essential for accessing education, healthcare, employment opportunities, public administration, and social participation. Recognizing this reality, the EU has progressively developed a digital-rights framework that promotes universal access to affordable, high-speed internet connectivity. Instruments such as the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles and the Digital Decade policy agenda affirm that everyone in the Union should be able to benefit from reliable digital connections regardless of geographic location. This reflects a broader understanding of territorial cohesion in which digital inclusion is treated as a prerequisite for equal citizenship and social participation.

The growing emphasis on digital access also reveals an important characteristic of contemporary legal inequalities. In many cases, exclusion does not arise because rights are formally denied. Citizens across the Union generally enjoy the same legal recognition of social rights, healthcare access, educational opportunities, and essential services. However, the practical realization of these rights often varies significantly between territories. Rural communities may face shortages of healthcare professionals, peripheral regions may have weaker transport networks, and remote areas may still experience lower levels of digital connectivity. As a result, formally shared rights can produce unequal outcomes depending on local conditions and territorial capacities.

From this perspective, territorial well-being is best understood not as a single legal entitlement but as the cumulative result of multiple rights, policies, and institutional commitments. Article 174 TFEU, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and emerging digital-rights instruments collectively establish a legal framework aimed at ensuring that citizens can enjoy essential services and opportunities wherever they live. The principal challenge for the future is therefore not merely the recognition of rights, but their equitable territorial implementation. Legal inequality increasingly manifests itself not through formal exclusion, but through uneven territorial realization of rights that are, in principle, shared by all.

5. The social dimensions of well-being: Lived experience, vulnerability, and territorial stigma

To design effective frameworks aimed at mitigating rural–urban gaps within Europe, contemporary public policies must look beyond standardized economic growth variables to target the deeply entrenched sociological underpinnings of geographic disparity. Disparities in localized well-being are not merely static structural deficits or automated byproducts of distance; they are continuously reproduced through complex, multi-level systems that intertwine objective material conditions with subjective perceptions, identity devaluation, and uneven power dynamics (Abdi et al., 2026). In European states undergoing rapid modernization, macro-level economic trends frequently disguise profound demographic

fractures. As observed in empirical regional trajectories, a nation may achieve macro-level income convergence toward European Union averages while simultaneously suffering an intense demographic and spatial divergence, a phenomenon conceptualized as the “forgotten transition” (Albu et al., 2025). This disconnect highlights a critical conceptual boundary between standard infrastructural interventions and a more comprehensive relational understanding of well-being, as conceptualized in the Relational vs. Deficit Matrix below.

Matrix dimension	The infrastructure - deficit approach	The relational - capabilities approach
Primary assessment	Quantifies missing infrastructure (e.g., roads, digital broadband lines) (Veréb et al., 2024).	Maps relational harms, devalued local identities, and institutional distrust (Abdi et al., 2026; Meade, 2021).
Policy endpoint	Material equalization according to standardized urban benchmarks (Albu et al., 2025).	Eradication of geographic stigma and structural vulnerability via local agency (Pearce, 2012; Malatzky & Couch, 2023).

By separating these policy approaches, it becomes clear that true well-being is highly context-dependent and multi-layered; local satisfaction cannot be forced through standardized urban benchmarks but must be anchored in the qualitative lived experience of residents (Veréb et al., 2024).

A major social mechanism actively producing spatial exclusion across geography is territorial stigmatization, often referred to as the “blemish of place” (Pearce, 2012). Derived from classic stigma theories, territorial stigmatization occurs when a specific geographic area is discursively framed as backward or dying, which functions as a relational power imbalance that actively generates socio-economic decline and is deterring capital investments and severely damaging the recruitment of professionals (Malatzky & Couch, 2023). When a community is systematically categorized as a problem space, its inhabitants experience a profound feeling of being territorially overlooked by core political entities (Meade, 2021). This relational harm erodes basic institutional trust and diminishes localized dignity. Over time, prolonged exposure to negative spatial stereotyping can lock peripheral populations into a collective positioning of powerlessness, which directly compromises local agency and undermines community-led development initiatives (Biddau et al., 2023).

Furthermore, these spatial inequalities intersect with acute structural vulnerabilities. In regions suffering from severe economic restructuring, territorial inequalities manifest through

a specialized Social Disadvantage Index (SDI), where high agricultural dependency, weak educational access, and substandard dwellings concentrate systemic precarity in specific geographic clusters (Mitrică et al., 2020). These overlapping layers of marginalization trigger severe demographic shocks, particularly the outmigration of youth and working-age cohorts, leaving behind an increasingly fragile and isolated elderly population. This demographic drain results in a deep domestic care poverty, characterized by high rates of social exclusion, unmet physical needs, and a collapse of informal relational networks for older adults who are left to reside alone in remote communes (Hărăguș & Földes, 2026).

Crucially, when bottom-up European Union financing instruments, such as the LEADER program, are deployed to heal these divides, they frequently collide with localized inequalities in institutional capacity. Rather than operating as fully inclusive tools for rural revitalization, such community-led local development mechanisms risk becoming selective instruments (Opria et al., 2021). Because funding distribution patterns and project management performance are heavily dependent on pre-existing local development baselines and public administration resources, the most highly developed rural spaces end up capturing a disproportionate share of funding per capita, while the most vulnerable, marginalized peripheral communities are structurally left behind (Opria et al., 2021).

Ultimately, inequalities in well-being reflect an uneven territorial realization of formally shared citizen rights (Abdi et al., 2026). While top-down frameworks grant equal legal entitlements, the lived experience of rural populations reveals a stark mismatch between formal rights and spatial realities. Public strategies must

actively dismantle territorial stigma, elevate the epistemic authority of vulnerable local populations, and eliminate selective funding biases by directly compensating for weak local state capacity (Abdi et al., 2026; Opria et al., 2021).

Governments must treat rural well-being not as an isolated material deficit to be solved via top-down resource allocation, but as a political challenge.

6. Governance and policy delivery: how Europe can reduce the gap

The rural–urban gap in development is considered nowadays to be more visible than ever, with rural areas still facing considerable challenges in accessing services of general interest such as healthcare, education, public transport (Stojanova et al., 2021). These challenges lead to lower quality of life of individuals living in rural areas, an issue that appears to be influenced not only by their personal circumstances, but also by the features of the places where they live. Consequently, the last years were marked by a call for place-based policies, that should acknowledge the differences between territories in terms of characteristics, needs, opportunities or challenges. However, place-based approaches are not free from criticism, as some argue that a rather homogenous conceptualization of rural space in the process of policy making might sometimes prevent the effective implementation of such policies, and implicitly prevent real improvements of rural community wellbeing (Winterton et al., 2014).

Rural stakeholder engagement should result in a greater relevance and impact of the adopted policies, as their knowledge and perspective can add to that of the government from national, regional and local levels.

In the context of these persistent rural–urban inequalities, the concept of rural proofing, while not a new one, gained wider international attention. Rural proofing is considered to have the potential to improve the policy coherence for rural regions and to contribute to avoiding any unintended negative impact that might result from policies in rural regions (OECD, 2024). More precisely, rural proofing is considered an essential governance tool for identifying and mitigating policies that could

determine rural disadvantages and unintentionally widen territorial inequalities. The process of rural proofing aims at determining decision-makers to “think rural” and mainly implies that the impact of the policies will be assessed before the policy is implemented, in order to prevent any negative outcomes in rural areas and if possible even to determine positive outcomes (OECD, 2024). At the centre of rural proofing are the rural stakeholders, which should include both public and private stakeholders, belonging to public authorities, businesses, research institutions and the civil society.

At a European level, rural proofing has constantly featured in various frameworks and initiatives during the last decade, such as the EU Rural Action Plan (or European Commission's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas) or the OECD Principles on Rural Policy. Rural proofing actions vary significantly across regions and countries in terms of how they are applied as well as in terms of their effectiveness (McEldowney, 2021), the differences being influenced by governance traditions, administrative capacity or importance of rural issues in national policy agendas.

Encouraging rural proofing as a priority across Europe is not the single key action meant to ensure the reduction of rural–urban inequalities. Two illustrative examples are those of the Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and the Community Led Local Development (CLLD), which are since 2014 central mechanisms for the implementation of the European Cohesion Policy funding in an integrated and place-based manner. An ITI represents an instrument which enables investments under more than one priority axes of one or more operational programmes, one of the types of ITI being the urban-rural ITIs, meant to strengthen the linkages between urban and rural areas within a functional urban area (URBACT, 2014). On the other hand, the CLLD is an approach which places local communities at the centre of planning and implementing development initiatives, focusing on sub-regional areas and taking into consideration local needs and potential (European Commission, 2014). The LEADER programme is the best-known application of CLLD, through the Local Action Groups which bring together representatives of local public and private socio-economic interests with the purpose of designing local development strategies. CLLD is essential in rural development and wellbeing, as it encourages local stakeholders' participation and collaboration in the process of developing strategies tailored to the precise needs of their territories.

7. Policy recommendations

The complex relationship between rural and urban areas, as well as their persistent differences, development potential, and strategically distinct trajectories, requires any European-wide policy aimed at addressing well-being to carefully consider the urban-rural divide. This should be done not only with increased attention to territorial specificities, but also to the dynamics between these territories and to the way in which they can be integrated into a long-term vision.

The first point of action is to avoid a purely rural–urban binary distinction, as even official documents of the European Commission and the World Bank acknowledge the existence of an intermediary layer between the two. We would go even further and support the idea that the rural–urban dichotomy should, in fact, be understood as a continuum, ranging from remote, peripheral, and sparsely populated rural areas to densely populated metropolitan areas, with several intermediate territorial configurations between them. The recommendations therefore treat the urban–rural continuum as the relevant territorial frame and identify feasible starting points for policies that can be adapted to different national and regional contexts.

Policy measure 1. Local vocational academies for youth employment and the Green and Digital Transitions

A first actionable intervention concerns the creation of local vocational academies in towns, small urban centres, and rural areas affected by high NEET rates, particularly in regions where young people face limited access to education, employment, or training opportunities. This measure is especially relevant for countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Lithuania, and Hungary, where disparities between cities and non-metropolitan areas remain visible. While large cities increasingly benefit from the growth of ICT, knowledge-intensive services, and innovation-driven activities, many towns and rural territories remain disconnected from these new labour market dynamics.

The proposed measure consists of launching locally embedded vocational academies based on dual learning systems, developed through partnerships between municipalities, schools, colleges, local SMEs, and private industrial consortiums. These academies should focus on skills directly connected to the green and digital transitions, including solar panel installation, wind-energy maintenance, smart grids, smart irrigation systems, circular economy practices, organic agriculture, energy efficiency, digital public services, and basic industrial digitalisation. The measure would connect youth employment policies with long-term regional competitiveness.

The intervention should be structured around a 12-month paid apprenticeship model. EU Cohesion Policy funds could subsidise between 25% and 75% of the apprentices' wages during the first year, depending on the relevance of the skills acquired for green and digital transition objectives. This would reduce the hiring risk for local SMEs, which often lack the financial and administrative capacity to engage in training initiatives. The curriculum should be modular

and micro-credentialed, allowing young people to complete training blocks of different lengths, from 12 weeks to 12 months, according to their needs and local labour market demand.

This measure can build on existing European experiences, particularly the dual education systems in Germany and Austria, but also on pilot initiatives in Spain, Italy, and Romania. However, the proposed model should correct some of the limitations observed in previous initiatives, especially the insufficient involvement of SMEs, limited financial support, and weak orientation towards future-oriented economic sectors. Unlike traditional vocational schemes focused mainly on existing occupations, local vocational academies would link education, employment, innovation, and territorial resilience.

The expected impact is twofold. First, the measure would reduce youth inactivity and support the integration of young people into local labour markets. Second, it would help towns and rural areas participate in the green and digital transitions, rather than remaining passive recipients of change. In this sense, vocational academies should be understood not only as education and employment instruments, but also as territorial development tools capable of improving local well-being, reducing intergenerational inequalities, and strengthening the economic future of peripheral regions.

Policy measure 2. Rural citizen well-being panels for participatory funding allocation

A second policy measure focuses on the creation of rural citizen well-being panels, designed to provide rural communities with a direct and institutionalised voice in regional development and funding decisions. One of the major limitations of current policy design is that national and European funding priorities are often based on aggregate economic indicators, administrative reporting, and top-down planning procedures. While such data are necessary, they frequently fail to capture the lived realities of rural communities, including isolation, weak access to services, declining trust in institutions, lack of transport, youth outmigration, and the daily difficulties faced by vulnerable groups.

The proposed measure would require all regional development agencies, or equivalent territorial authorities, to establish permanent rural citizen well-being panels at county or sub-regional level. These panels should function as consultative but institutionally recognised bodies, directly connected to regional development planning and Cohesion Policy

implementation. Their role would be to identify local priorities, assess the social relevance of proposed investments, and produce an annual local reality report reflecting the needs of rural residents.

To ensure that lived experience remains the dominant basis of deliberation, at least 60% of panel members should be ordinary rural residents rather than institutional representatives. This threshold is high enough to prevent public authorities and organised stakeholders from controlling the agenda, while still leaving sufficient space for institutional and technical expertise. Within this majority, reserved seats should be allocated to isolated older citizens, low-income farmers, young people, women, people with disabilities, and members of marginalised communities. Participants should be recruited through stratified random selection from local population registers, supplemented by targeted outreach where certain groups are underrepresented or difficult to reach. The remaining seats may be occupied by representatives of local authorities, civil society organisations, schools, health services, and local businesses. Membership should rotate at fixed intervals, with staggered terms and limits on consecutive service, to broaden participation and prevent the consolidation of influence. Rural residents should receive compensation for their time, travel, care responsibilities, and any income lost through participation, so that membership is not restricted to those who can afford to volunteer. To guard against capture by organised interests, all affiliations and conflicts of interest should be publicly disclosed, institutional representatives should be subject to numerical limits, lobbying contacts should be recorded, meetings and selection procedures should be transparent, and an independent body should oversee recruitment, rotation, complaints, and compliance. This structure would combine lived experience with institutional and technical knowledge while preserving the panel's independence and social representativeness.

From an implementation perspective, the measure could be financed through a small, ring-fenced allocation from the national Cohesion Policy technical assistance budget. An indicative scenario would reserve 0.5% of that budget for participant recruitment and compensation, facilitator training, meeting logistics, accessibility measures, report preparation, and independent oversight. This level is proposed as a proportionate starting point because the panels would rely largely on existing administrative structures while requiring dedicated resources to ensure meaningful and inclusive participation. However, the final percentage should be determined through a national cost assessment that considers the number of panels, their geographic coverage, meeting frequency, participant support needs, and administrative capacity.

Independent facilitators should be trained to ensure that discussions are inclusive, non-partisan, and focused on concrete well-being outcomes. The resulting local reality reports should not remain symbolic or purely consultative documents. National and regional authorities should therefore be required to link a defined share of relevant regional infrastructure and territorial development funding to priorities identified through these citizen-led reports. For example, an indicative scenario could reserve 15% of eligible funding for projects that respond directly to panel recommendations. This percentage should not be treated as a fixed universal threshold, but as a policy option to be tested against regional investment needs, fiscal constraints, and evidence from pilot implementation. A lower or higher share could be adopted where justified by local conditions, provided that the allocation remains substantial enough to give citizen participation a credible influence over investment decisions.

The added value of this measure lies in its capacity to reconnect funding decisions with real human needs. It would also contribute to rebuilding institutional trust in territories where residents often feel ignored or politically invisible. Rural citizen well-being panels would help move policy design beyond purely technocratic assumptions and towards place-sensitive governance. Ultimately, this measure would strengthen democratic legitimacy, improve the targeting of investments, and ensure that rural development policies respond more directly to the priorities of the communities they aim to serve.

Policy measure 3. Strengthening the administrative capacity of small local authorities

A third strategic recommendation concerns the strengthening of administrative capacity in small local authorities, especially in rural areas and small towns where institutional weakness remains one of the main barriers to territorial well-being. Many small municipalities face chronic difficulties in preparing projects, accessing European funds, managing public procurement, coordinating infrastructure investments, and delivering basic public services. These limitations are not merely technical; they directly affect citizens' quality of life by delaying investments in roads, schools, water networks, public transport, health infrastructure, digital services, and social care.

The proposed measure consists of creating a national and regional programme to strengthen administrative capacity, focused on standardising procedures, providing technical

assistance, and professionalising local public administration. A central objective should be the annual training of at least 10,000 local civil servants, with a particular focus on small municipalities, intercommunal associations, and local authorities from peripheral areas. Training should cover project writing, EU fund absorption, public procurement, digital administration, spatial planning, mobility planning, service delivery, and impact evaluation.

In parallel, the measure should establish a Technical Corps of Territorial Experts, financed through European funds and coordinated strategically by the Ministry of Development or an equivalent national authority. This corps should include specialists in urban and territorial planning, mobility, digitalisation, public finance, administrative law, environmental infrastructure, and social services. Its role would be to provide direct technical assistance to small municipalities and intercommunal structures, especially in preparing integrated project portfolios. Rather than expecting every small municipality to develop advanced technical expertise internally, this structure would create shared expert capacity available across territories.

The measure should also include the standardisation of administrative procedures and the development of model documents, templates, digital tools, and project pipelines that can be easily adapted by local authorities. This would reduce transaction costs, limit administrative errors, and increase the capacity of small municipalities to participate in funding programmes. Digital tools and government cloud infrastructure should be used to simplify reporting and coordination, but they should not replace the need for human expertise and territorial support.

The expected impact is a significant improvement in the absorption of European funds at local level. It would also support a shift from isolated, fragmented investments towards coherent territorial development portfolios. This policy would address one of the structural roots of spatial inequality and would provide small municipalities with the tools needed to transform development opportunities into concrete improvements in well-being.

Policy measure 4. Mobile public services, telemedicine, and demand-responsive transport for isolated communities

A fourth policy measure targets the direct protection of isolated communities through the implementation of mobile public services, telemedicine, and demand-responsive transport. In many rural and peripheral areas, well-being deficits are not caused only by low income or weak

local economies, but also by poor access to essential services. Older people, children, low-income households, persons with disabilities, and residents of remote villages often face long travel times to reach hospitals, schools, administrative offices, social services, or transport nodes. In such contexts, the absence of proximity becomes a major form of inequality.

The proposed measure consists of developing integrated service packages for isolated localities, combining mobile public service units, telemedicine infrastructure, and flexible transport solutions. Mobile public service units could periodically provide administrative assistance, social support, employment counselling, digital support, and basic health screening directly in remote communities. Telemedicine facilities should be installed in local service points, schools, community centres, or town halls, allowing residents to access medical consultations without having to travel long distances for every interaction with the health system. Demand-responsive transport should complement these services by offering flexible mobility options for people who need to reach hospitals, high schools, administrative centres, or regional transport hubs.

The measure should target at least 500 isolated localities in its first phase, selected according to clear criteria such as distance from essential services, demographic ageing, lack of public transport, poverty levels, and low administrative capacity. Implementation should begin in 2027 and be coordinated by national authorities in partnership with county councils, municipalities, health institutions, transport operators, and intercommunity development associations. In the period 2027-2029, the technological pillar should focus on extending high-speed digital infrastructure and launching unified e-government platforms adapted to rural communities. However, digitalisation should be accompanied by assisted access, because many vulnerable citizens require support in using online services.

Funding should come from a combination of Cohesion Policy instruments, national budgets, health programmes, and rural development funds. From 2028 onwards, budgetary allocations and structural funds could be increasingly conditioned on the existence of intercommunal project portfolios, encouraging municipalities to cooperate in service delivery. Performance should be measured through annual monitoring, an intermediate evaluation in 2030, and a final impact audit in 2033.

The expected results should be concrete and measurable. The policy should aim to reduce by at least 15% the difficulties of access perceived by residents of isolated communities and to reduce by 20-25% the average travel time of rural citizens to emergency hospitals, high schools, or administrative nodes. It should also contribute to increasing internet connectivity above 97%

and to rebalancing local budgets in favour of investment. By bringing services closer to citizens and adapting delivery to territorial realities, this measure would transform the geography of well-being into a more equitable and functional reality.

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