

Bridging the rural–urban divide: Addressing inequalities and empowering communities

Introduction

This report documents differences in social, political, cultural, economic and living conditions between rural and urban areas and considers whether such differences may pose a threat to social cohesion in Europe. To begin, it considers rural–urban gaps in income and living conditions, employment opportunities and human capital. Because differences in socioeconomic conditions can have an impact on people’s attitudes and behaviours, the report considers whether rural and urban residents have different perceptions of the respect that they and their communities receive. It assesses their attitudes towards gender equality, acceptance of immigrants and other metrics of social tolerance. Because feelings of disrespect and neglect pose a threat to social cohesion, the report also investigates rural–urban gaps in political participation and satisfaction with democracy. Finally, the report investigates gaps in the provision and quality of public services between urban and rural areas, and highlights some innovative solutions to public service delivery currently being implemented across Member States.

Policy context

The Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007, established territorial cohesion as the third dimension of European cohesion. It put forward the objective of ensuring geographically balanced development across European regions in order to reduce spatial inequalities across and within Member States. Eliminating inequalities between places with different degrees of urbanisation is an important element of promoting territorial cohesion.

In May 2007, the first ‘territorial agenda’ was agreed. The agenda highlighted the importance of promoting sustainable, polycentric development, ensuring equal access to infrastructure and knowledge. It also emphasised the importance of strengthening regional identities and making better use of the territorial diversity of Europe.

The territorial agenda was updated in 2011; the Territorial Agenda 2030 was adopted in 2020. According to this new agenda, inequalities between people and places in Europe

had reached a critical level. It set out actions that would be taken to pursue territorial cohesion under the overarching objectives of building a just Europe and a green Europe.

In addition to being at the centre of broader cohesion policy, the challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas receive specific attention in the Rural Pact. The pact was launched by the European Commission in 2021 and established a framework for cooperation among stakeholders at European, national and local levels, with the aim of amplifying the voices of rural communities.

Cohesion policy is delivered through several specific funds, including the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

Key findings

- On average, incomes are higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and the rural–urban income gap has increased by approximately 19% over the past decade. But this average increase masks the fact that rural–urban inequalities in income have been falling in some Member States, including Germany and the Netherlands.
- While the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion is higher, on average, in rural areas than urban areas, the rural–urban gap in this metric has narrowed by approximately 0.4 percentage points over the past decade.
- The different trajectories of the gaps in income and the at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate may be related to underlying differences in living conditions, of which one component is housing. The housing cost overburden rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and urban neighbourhoods suffer more with the problems of pollution and crime.
- The employment rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. While there has been a general increase in the employment rate over the past decade, the rate has increased faster in urban areas than in rural areas, resulting in a slight increase in the rural–urban gap.

- A higher percentage of young people are not in education, employment or training in rural areas than in urban areas, while in urban areas the rates of attainment of tertiary education are higher.
- There is evidence of a digital divide between rural and urban areas. Rural residents are less likely to have digital skills, are less likely to own a computer and have slower internet connections than those in urban areas.
- The socioeconomic gaps between rural and urban communities can have profound implications for how rural and urban residents feel. Rural residents are more likely than those in urban areas to feel that they themselves or their communities are mistreated, disrespected or ignored by their government.
- Attitudes are also, on average, more conservative in rural areas than in urban areas. Rural residents have less favourable views towards gender equality, they are more cautious about accepting immigrants, and they generally have lower levels of social tolerance than urban residents.
- Rural residents are less likely to be politically engaged than urban residents, but only when it comes to informal political engagement, such as attending protests or signing petitions.
- Rural residents have lower levels of trust in their governments and in the European Union, and express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, than those in urban areas.
- Gaps in the provision of public services between rural and urban areas are increasing. Declining and ageing populations pose challenges to future service provision, especially in rural areas. However, across Member States, there are many examples of innovative solutions to providing public services to those living in remote areas.
- Rural areas have many advantages in terms of quality of life, space and natural surroundings, and lower living costs. They also provide opportunities to pursue climate neutrality. The natural advantages of rural areas should be fostered and promoted in a sustainable way.
- The general lack of trust in government among residents in rural areas is very concerning. Inequalities in economic development and declining public services may be driving this. Good quality public services should be made available in all areas to build trust amongst those citizens who feel their communities are being left behind.
- There is a great diversity of challenges between and within each degree of urbanisation. To design appropriate and targeted policy responses, reliable data should be collected and made available across all countries and regions.
- The voices of rural communities must be amplified. Their residents should be included in development plans, and their concerns should be listened to and respected. Giving a voice to local communities has been shown to be instrumental in the successful implementation of local economic development projects. Equally, attention must be paid to the opinions of populations in urban and suburban areas who feel that they are being left behind in the process of globalisation.
- The use of innovative solutions to provide public services in rural areas is already widespread across Europe. These have included the successful delivery of telehealth services, the repurposing of abandoned buildings and the provision of public transport. Local governments and Member States must learn from each other how to scale up these programmes or tailor them to other contexts.
- Women in rural areas face additional challenges, as the gender employment gap is higher in rural areas and rural residents are less likely to voice strong views in favour of gender equality. Policies should focus on encouraging women in rural areas to enter and remain in the labour force. An important component of this is ensuring that good-quality childcare facilities are available in rural areas.
- The provision of childcare facilities in rural areas, as well as good quality physical and digital infrastructure, and the availability of cultural amenities could boost the attractiveness of rural areas to young people of working age who may otherwise choose to relocate to cities.

Policy pointers

- Investing in education and training for rural communities needs to be prioritised. Urban areas with young, educated populations have been able to reap the advantages of globalisation. It is essential that rural communities foster the necessary human capital to be resilient to changing macroeconomic conditions.
- The rise in remote work triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to turn back the tide of rural depopulation. Across Europe, less densely populated areas have become more attractive to those who can work remotely and those who are attracted by the lifestyle offered outside large cities. To ensure the continuation of this trend, high-speed broadband access needs to be available in all areas.
- A shift in public service provision to online methods could bridge the growing gap in service provision between urban and rural areas. Digital connectivity is also essential for this alternative method of service delivery.

Further information

The report *Bridging the rural–urban divide: Addressing inequalities and empowering communities* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef22027>

Research manager: Massimiliano Mascherini

information@eurofound.europa.eu