

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Good morning

My name is Ana Seixas and I am the Deputy Director at Directorate-General for Territory, at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Action, and on behalf of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, I'm honoured to welcome you all to this "fringe event" "the Territorial Agenda 2030: a future for all places, a future for rural areas".

We had about 100 registrations, from all EU countries, with different backgrounds and from different organizations and we are looking forward to your participation and inputs into the debate.

'Time to act: for a fair, green and digital recovery'

This is the motto of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union. During the first half of 2021, Portugal is taking over the presidency committed to put the Territorial Agenda 2030 in motion in its multiple levels of action.

We believe that combining this commitment with the four strategic challenges that the Portuguese Government wants to address – Climate change, Demography, Inequalities and Digital Society, is the right framework to address rural areas in all its dimensions, will contributing to EU initiative "long-term vision for the Rural Areas" debate.

Today, we will hear about Rural Areas from a Territorial Agenda 2030 perspective, highlight possible contributions of "pilot action" implementations, and hear the presentation of a "policy brief" prepared by the Portuguese Presidency and ESPON ("Contributions to the future of rural areas") emphasizing the importance of territorial evidences.

The potential synergies between the Territorial Agenda and the "Long-Term Vision for rural areas" initiative are clear. Now is the time to act and build a future for rural areas, knowing that the *Long-Term Vision* framework really is a continuous process.

This process is linked to several EU guiding documents, priorities and initiatives:

- It is rooted in President Ursula von der Leyen's priorities on Democracy and Demography, in the report on the impact of demographic change and in the Green Paper on ageing;
- Linked to the implementation of the European Green Deal, as it must;
- Linked to the Conference on the future of Europe, a discussion forum meant to give citizens the chance to shape how the European Union will look in the future; and
- To all documents and strategies that addresses rising inequalities between people and places and the sense of "being left behind".

LTVRA is deeply connected to Europe's current demographic challenges, particularly with regard to the provision of services in shrinking and ageing rural areas, as we aim to achieve territorial cohesion, where equal opportunities are available regardless of where you live.

But allow me to add two more challenges, following the four strategic challenges that the Portuguese Government wants to address:

The **climate change challenge**:

We cannot underestimate the role that rural areas play in the CO2 mitigation process. We, also, cannot forget that rural areas are the major reservoir of our natural resources (water resources, soil, as the support of food production, forests) as well as the severe threatened biodiversity in all its essence.

Therefore, when we think about the established priorities under the "Just Europe" objective, **we must acknowledge and value the socio-ecological diversity of our rural areas** and pursue more functional approaches.

Let me give you an example: natural resources need to be recognized as assets by the market - a "natural capital" that needs to be valued by society.

When we think of Green Europe, we also understand that rural areas and urban-rural relations play a major role in assuring better ecological livelihoods and climate-neutral regions, how they must be engaged in the transition to circular economy and connected both physically and digitally.

Thus, from our perspective, when building up the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, all these dimensions should be considered.

It may seem that we are adding more complexity to the process, but dealing with nature and rural processes is rather complex. And those who are acquainted with territorial planning know that dealing with complexity is part of the job!

Second: Spatial Planning

A few years ago, bringing spatial planning into the equation would have been a very difficult task, but today it has gained a particular political focus, specially, in Portugal.

There is a strong public consensus, due to the 2017 massive forest fires that occurred in our country that we need to assure climate adaptation and resilience of our rural landscapes as well as for our urban-rural interfaces, just because things are not going to get better! We recognized that this is not only a task for fire fighters, but for territorial planner as well!

So Spatial planning and territorial cohesion have gained a particular focus in assuring a sustainable and inclusive development perspectives to our inner areas (that happen to cover most of the country).

This is how we will bridge divide for all rural areas in Europe!

Even with their diversity, uniqueness and authenticity, rural areas still manage to keep territorial features that enable them to overcome such particular/common challenges.

We can move forward knowing that the territorial dimension is the stage where all actors play their role and that the result of working together across policies must be driven by a long-term vision.

This requires crosscutting sustainable enhancement of living standards and investments, achieved only with social trust. Given that moving to rural areas needs to be a life lasting decision, trustful policies are required.

This means that a common understanding needs to be achieved, acting as support for long-term cooperation and coordination between places, government levels, policy sectors and societal groups, when addressing complex issues with the goal of benefiting from their diverse potential.

Cross sectorial approaches and better governance need to be set in place, not only in projects and proposals but above all implemented and with unquestionable results.

In fact, it is all about territorial cohesion, and no matter where governmental framework places it, it is a crosscutting portray of environment, social and economic issues, concerning resources management, risks, vulnerabilities, rural development, urban policies and social and economic challenges.

Developing European territory, as a whole, along with all diversity of its places is a sustained intent, that seeks to promote an inclusive and sustainable future for all places, that will help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Europe.

Only by learning from each other and with all stakeholders on board, focusing on the debate and action on intersectorial articulation of policies, European rural areas can reach a new life, roaming the long-term vision process that is meant to be built together.

Thank you very much for choosing being with us today!