

CULTIVATING RESILIENCE IN RURAL AREAS: AN AWAKENING STRATEGY

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JULY 2022

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Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Pordomingo, A.A and Tomasello, G. (2022) “Cultivating Resilience in Rural Areas: An Awakening Strategy”, The Digital Revolution and the New Social Contract series, Center for the Governance of Change, IE University, July.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Advisory Board and IE's CGC team for their constructive feedback. Special acknowledgement to Paula Oliver for her useful critique and advice in writing this piece, and to Nicole Wadley for her copy editing support.

ABSTRACT

Rural areas, despite their breadth and relevance, have been largely neglected in policymaking over the last decades. In the context of popular movements demanding the revival, reprioritization, and revitalization of rural areas, this paper offers guidance to tap into dormant opportunities. Existing initiatives have already been tested and demonstrated the viability of rural empowerment for just twin digital and green transitions. The EU Commission has proposed initiatives for the revival of rural areas by 2040. This paper presents different social economy models aligned with the Commission's goals. These models have been implemented in past years across remote and sparsely populated rural areas in Europe. Inspired by the examples that have demonstrated the highest potential to address the identified challenges and opportunities, the paper offers a methodological framework for all local rural agents of change to recreate Rural Awakening Centres. Policymakers need to adopt a "complex system" perspective to shape future policy proposals to tackle the multiple barriers that hinder rural development in today's world. Technical, financial, social, and regulatory recommendations need to be taken into account; otherwise, the objectives set by the Commission will not be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in Europe cover three-quarters of the land and are inhabited by one-third of the population.¹ The uptake of the urban-industrial model of economic development within the past 30 years and the lack of political will to cultivate the necessary resiliency left such areas underdeveloped and with little access to critical services like mobility, education, culture, and digital infrastructures. This limited the opportunities for innovation in key sectors for a just transition to a bio-economy² and the envisioned improvement of the social economy environment. As a consequence, entire regions now experience stagnating salaries (lowering in some cases) and increasing inequality due to

¹ [Rural innovation: Developing real solutions for smart and resilient rural areas in Europe | Results Pack | CORDIS | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#) accessed on 02/03/2022

² [Bioeconomy & European Green Deal | Knowledge for policy \(europa.eu\)](#) accessed on 09/03/2022

a widening digital and educational gap, creating a trend where natural population change is not compensated by a sufficient net migration movement, leading young people (especially women) to abandon such areas.

The pandemic brought to light the many opportunities and advantages of rural areas; many even re-discovered them as places where a higher quality of life is attainable at a lower cost. Politically, the EU Commission also started to consider them in a new light, incorporating rural areas into the Commission's strategies to achieve a just green and digital transition. However, many challenges need to be addressed before rural opportunities can be tapped.

Based on our experience and research, the specific objectives of this paper are to:

- Propose a modular and replicable social economy implementation strategy for the creation of a collaborative ecosystem in rural areas. This strategy involves the different stakeholders included in local rural communities and urban areas; and aims to support the development and implementation of the validated, resilient “triple impact” opportunities based on a specific success story: the [Despertadores Rurales](#), in Spain.
- Provide a set of policy recommendations to lower financial, regulatory, social, and technical barriers to implementation of the above model to provide rural areas in remote locations and with rapidly shrinking populations with the necessary conditions to develop an improved social-economy ecosystem.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL AREAS AND CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

The pandemic made the relevance of rural areas evident and forced a change in perceptions both within institutions and among policymakers. A clear example is found in the EU Commission, which revised and integrated rural areas in its strategies. In 2021, the Commission issued the document “*A long-term vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*”. The document proposes four levers of change:

1. stronger rural areas
2. connected rural areas
3. resilient rural areas that foster well-being
4. prosperous rural areas

For each of the levers, the Vision included a set of high-level flagship initiatives. Such initiatives would be an opportunity to counter the slow-down in trade and global aggregate demand; sustainably reshape supply chains and tradable activities (e.g. tourism); close the digital and educational divide; ensure the delivery of basic services and the mobility of temporary workers for the maintenance of different crops, grant the protection of biodiversity and CO₂ capture and increase the attractiveness of such areas for companies and families.

However, for these opportunities to be realized, there are challenges that need to be addressed. They can be broadly classified into four groups. Firstly, the **lack of a collaboration and coordination framework**. The absence of the right collaboration framework, where connections and linkages between local stakeholders are strong, makes the definition of a common long-term vision for rural areas considerably more difficult. This is crucial for the uptake of triple impact initiatives (local economic initiatives that besides creating job opportunities have a positive social and environmental impact on the local ecosystem. e.g. the creation of an energy community) and to facilitate interdisciplinary coordination between local, regional, national, and European institutions and agencies.

Secondly, there is a **lack of perennial activities** that will ensure that counter-migration and reversed urbanization trends last over time. This is even more important in the current context of the widespread introduction of hybrid working models (vis-à-vis completely remote arrangements). These models imply that employees work partly from home and partly from the office during the same week. Thus, the possibilities for lasting migration to the countryside, while remaining employed by corporations located in cities, are lowered. At the same time, national social security and insurance regulations are not up to date with the current reality and do not consider the cases where a worker might work remotely from a different EU member state.

Thirdly, **remoteness and depopulation**. The EU's long-term vision for rural areas underestimates the circumstances in some sparsely populated areas in Europe. This is the case, especially for rural villages with less than 1,000 inhabitants (4,991 municipalities in Spain, Figure 1), where the average inhabitant is 60 years old, the villages are widely spread throughout mountainous terrain with difficult logistical access and low population density (less than 5 persons per km²). Spatial inequality hinders the chances of exchange and lowers the possibility for the provision and access to key basic services (e.g. health care, education, public transport, connectivity...etc).

4.991 municipalities have less than 1,000 inhabitants

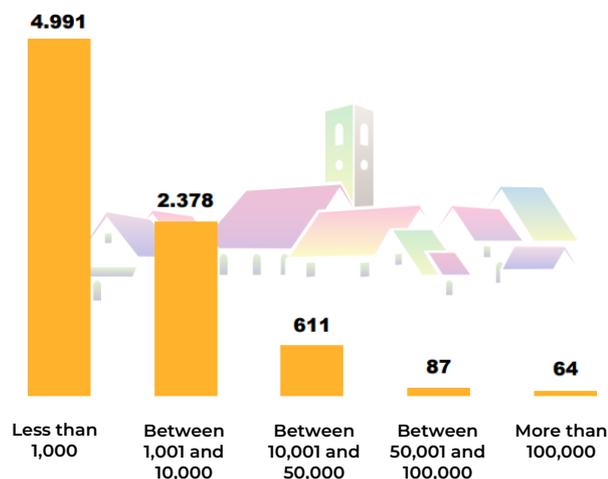


Figure 1.0. INE. España Municipal 2021³

Figure 2.0 shows how Spain is an extreme case of remoteness and depopulation, with 3,403 municipalities (42% of all Spanish municipalities and 1.118.504 people) that have a population density of less than 12.5 persons per km², and negative population growth⁸.

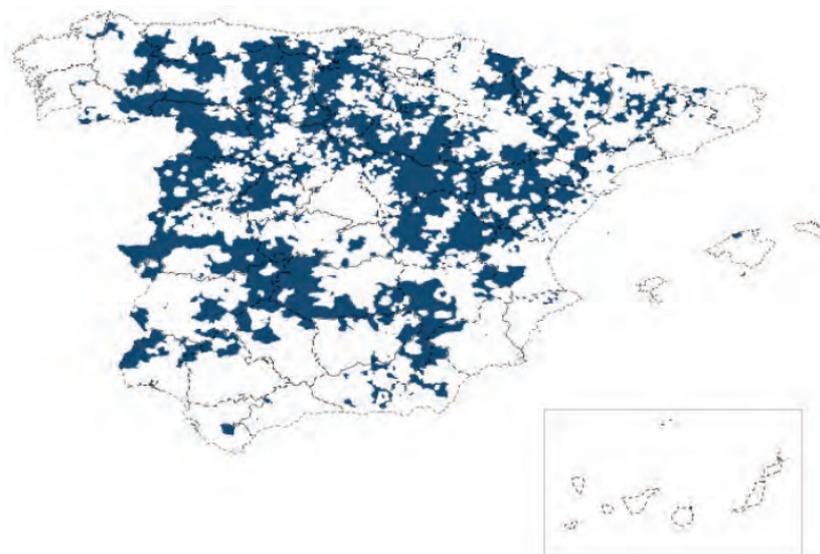


Figure 2.0. Depopulation in Spain, 2020⁴

³ [infografia_padron_2021.cdr \(ine.es\)](#) accessed on 08/03/2022

⁴ [Informe Anual 2020. \(bde.es\)](#) accessed on 13/03/2022

Lastly, another challenge is the **weak sense of community** in these areas. The Commission acknowledges that rural innovation is community-led, even though the necessary collaborative and supportive communities within rural areas are mostly missing. The current rural development ecosystem in most rural areas is fragmented⁵, characterised by the lack of clear and inclusive leadership, uncoordinated actions from different actors that work in silos, and deliver uneven impacts on similar problems based on the level of commitment and collaboration of the actors that create the local community.

WHAT SHOULD BE ACHIEVED?

To overcome the aforementioned challenges, we will build on one of the Commission's flagship initiatives in its rural action plan: the social economy. This is the most interdisciplinary and functional initiative, as it focuses on leveraging collective action for key local triple impact initiatives. However, this is an area of work that has not been cultivated deeply enough by the Commission: the implementation roadmap barely offers a short, outdated communication document (14 pages) from 2011 on how a social business initiative⁶ could be supported, without any mention to the rural environment.

As indicated by the Commission, affordable housing is a key element for a local social economy. Nevertheless, this topic is mentioned only once and from a high-level perspective in the EU's long-term vision for rural areas. It is labelled as a job creation opportunity rather than a requirement to reverse negative natural population changes with the necessary positive net migration to reverse depopulation rates.

The creation of a social economy and the access to affordable housing is a co-dependent problem: no job can be accessed if housing and basic services are not available, while there will be no housing and services offered without job creation. In this case, the effort of a single actor is not enough, and the necessary degree of innovation is not achievable if only a small part of society is involved. What is needed are transdisciplinary approaches and open innovation methodologies to gather people from different sectors of society that would not interact under normal conditions and have hardly ever collaborated. The idea is to analyse and leverage the collective intelligence of participants. It is crucial to have a common understanding of the problem from the perspective of all stakeholders and their roles in the ecosystem. This shared

⁵ As reflected by Tool #24: Territorial Impacts of the 2021 Better Regulation Toolbox of the EU Commission([br_toolbox-nov_2021_en_0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/better-regulation/br_toolbox-nov_2021_en_0.pdf) page 299 of 604 accessed on 10/03/2022)

⁶ [MARKT-2011-80050-05-00-EN-TRA-00 \(FR\) \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/better-regulation/br_toolbox-nov_2021_en_0.pdf) accessed on 09/03/2022

understanding is helpful to engage participants in interactive sessions where collaborative solutions can spur.

If we aim to facilitate and accelerate (1) the adoption rate of digital, social, and economic solutions instrumental for new circular business models; (2) new participatory spaces for collaboration between different social stakeholders to bring different inputs; (3) international knowledge transfer; (4) the sharing and sustainable procurement of resources; (5) new ecosystem services around health, mobility, energy, food, and the housing system, etc., collective analysis and mappings of needs and roles are necessary. The key is that digitalization by itself is not sufficient to attract people and businesses to the countryside, there must be something tangible to build on and a policy working towards the same goals, along with a cohesive community managing this complex mix.

Therefore, academia should focus less on discovering trends and putting forward meta visions (though useful in many contexts) and focus on the development of accessible tools to a) facilitate the transition from discourse to action for the short and medium-term development of remote rural areas by adopting a critical thinking approach to the proposed EU rural action plan; b) inspire structured and coordinated action by local actors.

FROM DISCOURSE TO PRACTICE: *DESPERTADORES RURALES*

Eight years ago, a group of young social entrepreneurs launched the [Apadrinaunolivo.org project](https://apadrinaunolivo.org).⁷ An initiative to revalue and regenerate 100,000 centenary olive trees between 100 and 1,000 years old that lay abandoned due to lack of care, absence of the generational change of their previous caregivers, and low economic profitability of traditional and little mechanised crops. Entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation, and the use of ICT and digital tools, allowed the initiative to apply a new logic to traditional processes and demonstrate that sustainable development is possible, even in an area with less than three inhabitants per km².

Out of the experience developed through [Apadrinaunolivo.org](https://apadrinaunolivo.org) and building on the learnings of other social economy success stories in remote and sparsely populated areas elsewhere, *Despertadores Rurales* (Rural Awakeners, or RA) was born. Rural Awakener centres enable the creation of remote rural ecosystems where entrepreneurship and innovation is at the core. These centres are coworking and co-living sites that host

⁷ [Apadrinaunolivo.org | Home](https://apadrinaunolivo.org) accessed on 03/04/2022

digital nomads and attract talent. The project shares the commitment to implementing new forms of flexible work in rural areas.

To develop the Rural Awakeners methodology, three success stories that seek to create resilient rural areas in the medium and long-term were considered for inspiration: the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIIE) in the United Kingdom, Connected Laponias in Finland, and Apadrinaunolivo.org in Spain.

Firstly, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIIE), in the United Kingdom. The project is managed by an independent public agency with the authority to carry out short-, medium- and long-term plans to address the “specific constraints” of the territory. HIIE includes several projects, with one of the greatest successes being the creation of the University of the Highlands and Islands.⁸ HIIE elements that inspired the development of the RA methodology are 1) the creation of an autonomous and apolitical organisation; 2) medium and long-term planning in the promotion of rural entrepreneurship, innovation, and the provision of constant support to the territory and its communities; 3) presence and specific action on the ground; 4) attraction and retention of talent in rural areas, which involved recovering the sentiment of “rural pride”; and 5) efficiency, responsibility, and control in the management of the entire initiative as well as the individual projects.

The second project inspiring RA was Connected Laponias.⁹ Through five clusters, Connected Laponias implemented new local and European initiatives with a common denominator of quality internet for all. Some of the key learnings drawn from Connected Laponias are: 1) the relevance of supporting competitive product and service development; 2) the existence of support networks for all projects and actors; 3) the existing advantages of industrial expertise and sustainable endogenous resources and opportunities located in sparsely populated areas; 4) the need for regional and intra-regional cooperation and sharing of success stories for replicability; and 5) the centrality of quality internet access to anyone in any territory as an enabler, not a guarantor of rural development.

Lastly, Apadrinaunolivo.org is a social entrepreneurship project that draws on the endogenous resources of Oliete (Spain): abandoned centenary olive trees, to generate triple impact opportunities in the region. The project generates employment in a land stewardship model, where “godfathers/godmothers” (patrons) sponsor an olive tree for

⁸ [Campuses \(uhi.ac.uk\)](https://www.uhi.ac.uk) accessed on 05/03/2022

⁹ [El Hueco – Proyecto Laponias Conectadas: qué podemos aprender de la Inteligencia Ártica](#) accessed on 05/03/2022

it to be taken care of with their monetary support. The emotional connection that links the olive tree and the godfather/mother has proven to be pivotal for the project's success. Not only does the project protect the environment and biodiversity of the region, but it promotes the employment and care of groups experiencing social and economic exclusion, and transforms sponsors into ambassadors, consumers & visitors of the sites where the olive groves are located. These dynamics have allowed basic service provisions to remain available in the region, such as the local school, due to the presence of families whose employment depends on the project.

Rural Awakening Centres

Rural Awakening Centres is an initiative that integrates elements of both the green and digital transitions. The centres prepare remote rural ecosystems for the development of entrepreneurial and innovative activities, hosting digital nomads and attracting talent to the awakening centre, together with a commitment to implement new forms of flexible work in rural areas. Humane Technology¹⁰ design is at the core of the project, and guides the development of inclusive digital solutions and ICTs to offer people at risk of social and economic exclusion (or with different skill sets) the chance to become part of the collective local social economy (e.g. farm to fork supply chains can be created and managed by such a target group). In addition, the adoption of the concept of the “smart village” through EU programs, such as [Smart Villages 21](#),¹¹ provide these centres with territorial intelligence (technical assistance and capabilities) to advise local projects that utilize technology and digital skills in building for the future.

The promoters of this initiative believe in an autonomous and apolitical entity with a certain budget to achieve the objectives of the different projects they coordinate. This entity needs to have leeway to design medium and long-term entrepreneurial initiatives in the rural environment. The aim is to promote projects that sustainably work with endogenous rural resources and the opportunities of the surrounding environment, and implement initiatives that have local, innovative, social, and environmental components to empower an ecological transition.

¹⁰ [Foundations of Humane Technology Course](#) accessed on 14/03/2022

¹¹ [Smart Rural project – Smart Rural Areas \(smarrural21.eu\)](#) accessed on 11/03/2022

The Methodology: Replicating Rural Awakening Centres

We believe that Rural Awakening centres, which build on battle-tested best practices from the examples presented above, should become a replicable endeavour. Therefore, in the following sections we develop a methodology that addresses the four challenges identified in Section 2 on the obstacles that rural areas face (lack of a collaboration and coordination framework; lack of perennial activities; remoteness and depopulation leading to lack of basic services and exchanges; and ensuing weak sense of community).¹²

The Rural Awakening centres methodology is structured around six working packages with a human-centred design perspective. The working packages (WPs) try to define the desired outputs of the identified challenges. In all WPs, a design thinking process is applied at the community level to create a positive feedback loop among all actors of change, allowing for coordinated actions based on a constantly updated co-defined vision. The working packages are:

- WP 1: Turning ideas into sustainable projects to generate an impact in depopulated rural areas that are local, innovative, social, and lead to positive change for the environment.
- WP 2: Promote remote work in rural areas by establishing RA centres that act as a co-working space and test solutions in an innovative and creative multidisciplinary environment where things are always happening.
- WP 3: Host digital nomads and incorporate people at risk of social inclusion through agreements with local public administrations to enable physical spaces where a bonded and inclusive community can be created, and affordable medium-term housing solutions can be offered.
- WP 4: Train new entrepreneurs and the existing productive sector while exploring new pathways of community building.
- WP 5: Develop smaller Territorial Intelligence Units that connect RA centres.
- WP 6: Develop Smart Village offices to join Smart Village Networks for knowledge transfer and community-building.

¹² Annex 1 presents a table with the summarized proposed methodology for the replication of Rural Awakening centres in Europe. It maps the different steps, activities, forecasted impact and indicators to measure and promote the necessary dynamics and local community engagement activities for rural transformation.

Challenge: lack of a collaboration and coordination framework

WP 1 aims to foster the dynamics of collaboration and cooperation in rural areas, involving local stakeholders in the necessary transformation process. It involves the collection of ideas from the local population for new project development in their area. Through co-creation sessions, open calls, and shared spaces, all local stakeholders participate by sharing and prioritizing potential business ideas that fulfil the triple impact criteria. This WP engages the entire community in the creation and ownership of the solutions and the projects to be undertaken.

Challenge: lack of perennial activities

The lack of activities that have continuity in time is perhaps the biggest hurdle to developing the sustained efforts needed for the socioeconomic revitalization of rural areas. Therefore, to allow talent to remain in rural areas, the RA methodology aims to provide rural areas with some key features that will ensure the viability of the projects and business ideas identified. Three working packages address this challenge: WP 2, WP 3, and WP 4.

WP 2 focuses on the refurbishment/building of unutilized infrastructure that can act as a rural lab for pilot projects, as the headquarters of the RA team, and as a remote working space for professionals who want to continue their professional activity in rural areas. This physical space should promote knowledge exchange among users of the infrastructure, the learning of new methodologies and digital solutions, and the efficient management of endogenous and underutilized resources.

Having an adequate working infrastructure and “office space” is not a sufficient condition to promote the permanent relocation of innovators and workers to rural areas. Housing solutions are also needed. Therefore, WP 3 involves an agreement with the local public administration for the provision of a physical environment where a bonded and inclusive community is fostered. WP 3 also entails the engagement of the entire community through activities such as intercultural food events that help workers create bonds with local communities.

Lastly, the stickiness of activities, worker engagement, and socioeconomic development will also depend on the skills, knowledge, and competencies in the local environment. Therefore, WP 4 aims to create a solid entrepreneurial environment through training on digital competencies, circular design tools, and business development courses for the new and existing entrepreneurs based on specific local and network-related challenges.

Challenge: remoteness and depopulation

The spatial distance between some rural areas, as well as the negative population growth trend, makes basic public service provision harder and discourages exchanges between different populations that might face similar situations. Therefore, this needs to be addressed. As mentioned above, WP 4 provides local actors with training that will provide stakeholders with the necessary tools to devise convenient solutions for their problems, which can result in the emergence of innovative business models that solve the lack of access to key basic services.

At the same time, WP 5 connects RA centres, facilitating exchanges that allow for best practices and success story sharing, joint identification of new challenges, and collective design of solutions. This working package involves the creation of Territorial Intelligence Units¹³ (TIUs) that connect RA centres. TIUs obtain and analyse information about a certain territory to then design and implement strategically planned and concrete action projects. They are inclusive networks that promote collaborative exchanges and the replicability of successful initiatives. Therefore, TIUs could support the creation of additional RA centres in other areas. A secondary objective of TIUs is the development of a sense of community among the participants, which is crucial for the success of a strong social economy in rural areas.

Challenge: a low sense of community

WP 6 involves alignment with the concept of Smart Village.¹⁴ The Commission (DG AGRI) has launched a project called Smart Rural 21¹⁵, whose overall aim is to ignite, promote and inspire rural communities to develop and implement smart village approaches and strategies across Europe, and to draw conclusions and support future policy interventions for smart villages. The implementation of Smart Villages would allow the RA centre to showcase (as a real-life example, key for the engagement of the local community) real and effective ways of how emerging technologies could add value to the territory. Smart Villages engage the local population to participate in the design of triple impact activities through cooperation and social innovation with diverse groups to solve their economic, social, and environmental challenges. Each Smart Village office defines the strategy, involves local actors, and attracts funding for the economic and social strengthening of their area. Not only do Smart Village offices promote the

¹³ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XgLd7RwYT_wWpW3RwR2hZy2JfCq5XN9e/view

¹⁴ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)689349](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2021)689349)

¹⁵ [Smart Rural Areas – in the 21st Century \(smartrural21.eu\)](https://www.smartrural21.eu)

engagement of local stakeholders, but they also can associate and create Smart Village networks, where different offices share, absorb, and transfer knowledge across similar development centres, raising local technical capabilities as well. This is particularly beneficial because it also generates a sense of social belonging and brings to the fore the common challenges and joint efforts many rural areas are making.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural areas—remote and sparsely populated rural areas in particular—are suffering. Demographic dynamics have led to the marginalisation of rural inhabitants who do not have adequate access to basic services or to the technological advances that will shape the future and are already shaping our present. In the last few years, rural communities have raised their voices to put the spotlight on the challenges they are facing. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the relevance of rural areas and their untapped potential.

Despite the recent inclusion of rural areas in political programs and strategies, additional concrete measures are needed to enable and facilitate local action. Grand strategies need to be translated into action that directly impacts, connects, and empowers local rural communities to be the main characters in the socio-economic transformation of their villages.

Rural Awakening centres are an example of a concrete initiative that directly empower local communities. They provide a scalable, modular, and replicable methodology that allows villages to incorporate social innovation projects, new business ideas, and integrated ecosystems into their social fabric. However, some challenges need to be addressed by policymakers to lower the social, financial, regulatory, and technical barriers that rural areas face, and for RA centres to be successful.

The following policy recommendations should be understood as a non-prioritized compendium of desirable policy actions to promote the prosperity of rural areas. They reflect the complexity of the issue and require a “complex systems thinking” approach. Different countries will face distinct levels of difficulty in the implementation of the proposed measures, which will depend to a large extent on the level of political will. Nevertheless, they should be acknowledged either way.

To lower social barriers:

- Active policies to foster a positive positioning, narrative, and framing of the rural environment as the key actor of change to address the multiple challenges that derive from globalization.
- Greater effort should be made to create offline and online spaces that support the transfer and exchange of knowledge on technological, environmental, social and different technical developments in traditional sectors such as agriculture, livestock, social services, mobility, energy, and education. This will empower local and external actors to make a more informed decision in shaping the future of their ecosystem. (For example, basic university courses could be made available to the local community at the Rural Awakening centre under the concept of "University for rural areas").

To lower financial barriers:

- Increase positive discrimination for micro-entities in remote and scarcely populated rural areas with less than 10 workers in the allocation of public funds (e.g. [A related success story: Castilla y La Mancha's new policy](#))¹⁶. More direct channels to EU funding are needed, rather than the current model that heavily relies on the member states' apparatus. Include pre-financing percentages in EU projects (especially for NGOs) in national funding opportunities.
- Establish special fiscal areas in remote and sparsely populated rural areas to incentivize the creation of economic entities and groupings of organisations that conduct triple impact activities.
- Implement an economic incentive plan to apply deductions in the social security contributions, corporate taxes, etc. for large and medium-sized companies who encourage their employees to work remotely from rural areas.

To lower regulatory barriers:

- Develop the necessary household regulation in rural villages to facilitate the re-purpose and regeneration of abandoned properties. Incentivize the cession of abandoned and falling buildings to the public administration for them to be regenerated and reconstructed by local NGOs, and allow the possibility of

¹⁶ [Regional Law to combat depopulation - YouTube](#) accessed on 15/03/2022

requesting special architectural plans for the enlargement of urban buildable soil following the Do No Significant Harm principle¹⁷ of the Commission.

- Implementation of “rural proofing” in policymaking in the digital and technology areas. Policymaking needs to consider whether there is sufficient preparedness and technical ability to adopt technological advances in rural areas. It is also needed that technology policy analyses assess whether the implementation of a new technology may deepen the problem arising from digital illiteracy and the digital divide between urban and rural areas.
- Incorporation of a rural ‘check’ for new policy design. The check will imply that all public policies must consider the specificities of rural areas and the legislator must take these realities into account to avoid unwanted negative spillovers in these territories. Key to the implementation of this proposal is, considering the high diversity of rural areas across Europe, to establish a direct link between policymakers and local organisations dedicated to gathering and analysing local qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, each policy affecting rural areas should allow for fast revision and adaptation based on local feedback accounting for the endogenous diversity of each area.

To lower technical barriers:

- The rural environment is responsible for the care of our rivers, forests, agriculture, livestock, and natural heritage, etc. To ensure that these territories can keep up with the economic and technological development of urban areas, a regional fund to compensate rural-urban imbalances¹⁸ is needed. The national and regional fund should finance sustainable rural development action in scarcely populated areas and to support social entrepreneurship models such as the Rural Awakening Centres.
- Incentivize neighbouring universities and companies to co-ideate and test initiatives in nearby rural areas. This will facilitate a local and modular impact assessment matrix that tracks the benefits from a social, economic, and environmental point of view.
- Offer a funding scheme and technical assistance to micro municipalities (less than 500 people) that lack the capacity to employ technical assistance

¹⁷ [2021_02_18_epc_do_not_significant_harm -technical guidance by the commission.pdf](#) (europa.eu) accessed on 16/03/2022

¹⁸ [Fondo de Inversiones de Teruel \(FITE\). Gobierno de Aragón \(aragon.es\)](#) accessed on 15/04/2022

personnel for the implementation of long-term strategies for innovation and new business model development in the municipality, with clear KPIs and the creation of a specialised agency to which they should report (e.g. EU contact point in the area).

**ANNEX I:
A PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR THE REPLICATION OF RURAL AWAKENING CENTRES**

Working package (WP)	Output	Outcome	Indicator
<p>WP 1: Turn ideas into sustainable projects to generate an impact in depopulated rural areas that are local, innovative, social, and lead to positive change for the environment (in line with SDGs objectives and SDGs and Ecological Transition).</p>	<p>Generation of a bank of ideas/opportunities thanks to open innovation methodologies sessions that include all local actors (local community, municipality, self-employed, SMEs, territorial public administration (province and region), Europe contact points in the area, digital natives (kids between 13 and 18), closest university, etc.)</p> <p>Show the link between local action and SDG objectives and how far perceived megatrends like climate change and digitalization are affecting the territory.</p>	<p>Convergence of all stakeholders over the understanding of the common problem they face and their inability to deal with it alone.</p> <p>Identification of potential initiatives that exploit endogenous resources with the support of local actors and digital tools allowing the engagement of a broader customer base.</p> <p>Engagement of the local community from day 1 through the involvement of the external community.</p> <p>List of selection criteria for the implementation of short/medium term initiatives that deliver triple impact.</p>	<p>2 open calls to gather bottom-up identified initiatives.</p> <p>4 co-creation sessions over 2 months (one every two weeks) per each village that starts a RA initiative.</p> <p>Identification of at least 5 business ideas to develop during the year to have 20% of them transforming into a business/ economic/other activity selected through positive triple impact criteria.</p> <p>Creation of a digital space where people that cannot participate in the co- ideation sessions could contribute to the post-workshop.</p>

<p>WP 2: Promote remote work in rural areas by establishing the RA centre as a bridging place to work and test in an innovative and creative multidisciplinary environment where things are always happening.</p>	<p>Creation of a rural lab (for pilot project creation and management) and as headquarters of the DR team which is open to the whole local community (which can lead to further initiatives, more engagement, asking for help, etc.) A place where innovation, emerging technologies, and disruptive ideas are explored and tested in small controllable environments.</p>	<p>Concession of a space (e.g., under-used public building) by the municipality through new and old forms of contract (e.g., land concession, reverse mortgage) for the RA group to refurbish and enable renewable energy powered internet connection.</p> <p>The provision of space with a calendar of multichannel activities (thematic workshops on business development and validation) led by a center manager to attract digital nomads and people teleworking in the area that people can also attend online.</p>	<p>Refurbishment of at least one construction in a range of 40 km where the RA initiative started with biomaterials and sustainable techniques.</p> <p>A central information processing site that relies on a distributed network of contact points (i.e., other villages and organizations across the territory) that are a maximum of 30 minutes away by car from each other.</p>
<p>WP 3: Host digital nomads so they can contribute their vision to local initiatives and participate through networking in the RA projects.</p>	<p>Creation of awareness-raising activities (e.g., intercultural food events) for the need to create a space where people that are willing to spend at least 3 months in the area can stay.</p> <p>Construction activities to enable a co-living space where people that stay temporarily can sleep and shower</p>	<p>Agreement with municipality and hospitality services to ask for public and private funding to repurpose unused buildings.</p> <p>The headquarters of the RA initiative can fit the purpose if it is big enough.</p>	<p>Engagement of the RA community in at least 2 awareness-raising events (e.g., success stories from other places) per month.</p> <p>Refurbishment of at least one building in each village where the RA initiative started, with biomaterials and sustainable</p>

<p>Incorporate people at risk of social exclusion in their stay in the territory, through co-living solutions (migrants, refugees, victims of violence, etc.)</p>		<p>Incorporation of talent of people at risk of social and economic exclusion during the mentoring programs.</p>	<p>techniques that can host at least 20 people.</p>
<p>WP 4: Train new entrepreneurs and the existing productive sector in the area (entrepreneurs, self-employed and SMEs, town councils, associations, etc.) in digital and design skills.</p> <p>Explore new pathways of community building through innovative educational programs.</p>	<p>Engagement of local and external actors (especially people at risk of social exclusion) through incubation programs.</p> <p>Raise awareness over circular design and business models.</p> <p>Engagement of local educational organizations and universities to test validated educational programs.</p>	<p>Empowerment of the participants of WP 1 with digital competencies, circular design tools, and business development capacity thanks to a tailored mentoring plan for each initiative over a mentoring course of 3 months.</p> <p>For existing businesses: specific courses focused on increasing scaling capacity can be given on KPIs, online strategy (e.g., SEO, growth hacking, coding courses,</p> <p>Become a lighthouse demonstration of nature-based, explorative, and inclusive educational programs.</p>	<p>Incubate at least 5 businesses (with a team of at least 3 people) through a 3-month-long yearly course, giving professional mentoring over the validated ideas of WP1.</p> <p>Enabling at least 2 financially independent initiatives within 1 year of incubation.</p> <p>Presence of at least 2 new families after one year from the ignition of the experimental educational program.</p>

<p>WP 5: Develop Territorial Intelligence Units to provide advice on digitalization to entrepreneurs, the self-employed, SMEs, local councils, associations, etc.</p>	<p>Creation of an inclusive network through the organization of events, participation in consortiums for projects, research collaborations with universities, open debate sessions with the local population, etc.</p>	<p>Inspire future social entrepreneurs to create RA centres and re-establish the rural-urban bridge/connection.</p> <p>Enable a modular and replicable model for the expansion of a RA initiative.</p>	<p>Replication of at least one new RA centre inspired by the created one in a range that exceeds 100km from the location of the RA headquarters.</p> <p>Presence in at least 30 project consortiums per year.</p>
<p>WP 6: Develop Smart Village offices to showcase real developments in the villages.</p>	<p>Define a Smart Village strategy involving the main actors in the area.</p> <p>Define a communications and outreach strategy for multidisciplinary engagement.</p> <p>Define a strategy to attract funding.</p>	<p>Enabling the RA headquarters to become a testing site for digital solutions for the harnessing of endogenous resources in the territory.</p> <p>Involvement of the business and social sector in the smart rural strategy.</p> <p>Obtaining public and private funds to exemplify real IoT developments, Smart solutions and involve the productive sector of the area in the use of these advantages.</p>	<p>Co-define a roadmap with the related milestones to become a Smart Village.</p> <p>Minimum 4 new Smart projects/solutions implemented in the area of RA.</p> <p>Prepare and submit 20 funding proposals per year (e.g., Erasmus+; LEADER; Horizon Europe; NEXTGEN, etc.).</p>