

Policy Webinar

Smarter, Stronger and More Competitive Rural Areas: The Way Forward for EU policies

21 May 2025, online

Held on 21st May 2025, the AEIDL's Policy Webinar "*Smarter, Stronger and More Competitive Rural Areas: The Way Forward for EU policies*" presented the findings of FUTURAL's policy analysis on existing support for community-led innovation in rural areas, showcasing country-specific practices, and discussing policy needs, gaps, and recommendations for the 2028–2034 programming period, including a first set of proposed policy recommendations.

This is the 2nd and online segment of the FUTURAL EU Rural Innovation Forum (EU-RIF) following the in-person event held in Amorebieta-Etxano (Basque Country, Spain) on 14-15 May. The above-70 stakeholders and partners that attended the in-person segment discussed for two days some of the emerging findings and validated initial policy recommendations which were presented and discussed on 21 May online segment to a wide segment of EU officials, policy makers and experts.

Organised by the [European Association for Innovation in Local Development](#) (AEIDL) and supported by the [European Local Innovation Forum](#) (ELIF), this online webinar convened **over 140 participants** from across Europe, at a crucial moment as EU Institutions are preparing the **next Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF), to be tabled in July 2025. As such, the webinar offered an opportunity to gather input from key EU institutions —the **European Commission**, **European Parliament**, **Committee of the Regions**, and **European Economic and Social Committee**— as well as the Leaders of pan-European networks **ELARD**, **ERCA**, and **PREPARE**, to discuss how rural innovation can be better aligned with future EU policies.

This event builds from the [Political Guidelines of the European Commission](#), themselves drawing ideas from the [Letta](#) and [Draghi](#) Reports, as well as the EU's [Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#) and the recent [Vision for Agriculture and Food](#). All these points highlight the need for major changes in how EU policies are developed and delivered on the ground. The webinar also built on a series of previous policy dialogues, including the webinar on rural smartness of [European Local Innovation Forum](#) (ELIF) in November 2024, and the [RURACTIVE Forum](#) in February 2025. These events fostered the emergence of an active European policy community on rural innovation.

ORGANISER: 

Work Package Leader on Policy-Making and Governance, and Task Leader on FUTURAL EU-RIF events



142 participants

EU institutions; national, regional and local public authorities; researchers; Local Action Groups; NGOs; Smart Villages; rural networks



See the [agenda](#)

Check the [presentations](#)

Watch the [recording](#)



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Welcome and Introduction

Marta Marczis, *President of European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)*

The webinar opened with remarks from **Márta Marczis**, President of AEIDL, who reflected on the recent AEIDL's policy statement on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and particularly on **the place of the local level in a European project that faces new challenges**. AEIDL is keen to emphasise the importance of a **bottom-up approach** to support the European project and values. In a context where there is significant likelihood of centralisation at the EU and national level of the post 2027 EU funds and programmes, AEIDL advocates for **greater empowerment of local actors** and the **pooling of resources at the local level**, involving local actors in decision-making to strengthen the democratic process and the use of **LEADER/CLLD approach**.

'The dramatic challenges of recent years, such as trade wars and the war in Ukraine, are bringing new complexities to European projects [...] Now more than ever, we need Europe. Citizen commitment is critical to overcoming all these challenge'

Marta Marczis (AEIDL)

Results from the FUTURAL Policy Analysis on community-led innovation in rural areas

Carla Lostrangio, *European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)*

Carla Lostrangio (AEIDL) provided an overview of the findings from the **FUTURAL policy analysis on community-led innovation** in rural areas at EU level and within six selected countries (Austria, Belgium, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Spain). In this analysis, AEIDL worked towards identifying and assessing the impacts of existing policies and governance mechanisms on community-led rural innovation. By delivering **essential goods and services**, she stressed, community-led rural innovation **enables rural communities to stay in rural areas** and can address the **geography of discontent**.

'Community-led initiatives in rural areas are mainly innovation-driven, they cover many strategic and high-valued sectors (e.g. energy, care, digital), and have a strong public interest as they deliver goods and services where public and private actors fail to do so'

Carla Lostrangio (AEIDL)

In her presentation, Carla Lostrangio highlighted that the CAP allocates far more funds to community-led innovation than the Cohesion Policy, despite this latter one has a larger financial allocation to rural development beyond farming. She also stressed that innovation policies are often **spatially blind** and are not fit to address the needs of rural areas or communities. A few **inspiring policy instruments** from countries such as Lithuania, Austria, Italy and Belgium were presented.

Rural Innovation and competitiveness in EU policies

Alexia Rouby, DG AGRI – European Commission

Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI – European Commission) offered insights into the EU-level policy framework for rural innovation and competitiveness. She underlined the **need for communities to "invent new solutions to the challenges they face,"** building on the extensive opportunities provided by the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, the EU Rural Action Plan and the EU Vision for Food and Agriculture, emphasising that skills development and investments are vital enablers to rural innovation. She also invited actors to engage with the Commission providing ideas for the update of the Rural Action Plan due by 2025 or early 2026.

Anton Schrag, DG REGIO – European Commission

In the same line, Anton Schrag (DG REGIO – European Commission) stressed that Europe is facing an issue with competitiveness and underlined that “only 4% of the total value added created in rural areas comes from agriculture and forestry, whereas 30% of the GDP in these areas comes from industry and construction”. In this framework, Cohesion Policy has a big role to play to strengthen rural innovation. He stressed the importance of strengthening the innovation ecosystems, by developing a large-scale strategy, investing in technology infrastructure, creating environments for testing new ideas, and addressing regulatory barriers to promote economic development. He also noted that while part of the future EU budget will support the European Competitiveness Fund, the European Commission President has assured that there will be a **dedicated focus on cohesion, support for farmers, and continued investment** in research and innovation.

‘I would like to underline the importance of connectivity and investments in research and innovation for rural areas’

Anton Schrag (DG REGIO)

Rural Innovation and competitiveness in EU policies

Serafin-Pazos-Vidal, European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)

Serafin-Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) presented the initial FUTURAL policy recommendations, validated at the first meeting of the [European Rural Innovation Forum](#). These **8 recommendations** aim to strengthen smart, community-led innovation in the post-2027 EU policy landscape:

- Formal recognition of the transformative role of community-led innovation.
- Mainstream political and financial support with 8% mandatory earmarking and territorially proof all EU policies.
- Apply the ‘Do not harm to EU Cohesion’ principle across all territorially relevant EU policies.
- Align rural development with sectoral policies reinforcing existing governance mechanisms.
- Shift the focus to rural innovation ecosystems rather than individual solutions.
- Allow regulatory flexibility to allow innovation to happen now.
- Enhance digital skills and infrastructures, with caution on marginalised communities.
- Systematise inclusion of local voices beyond token approaches.

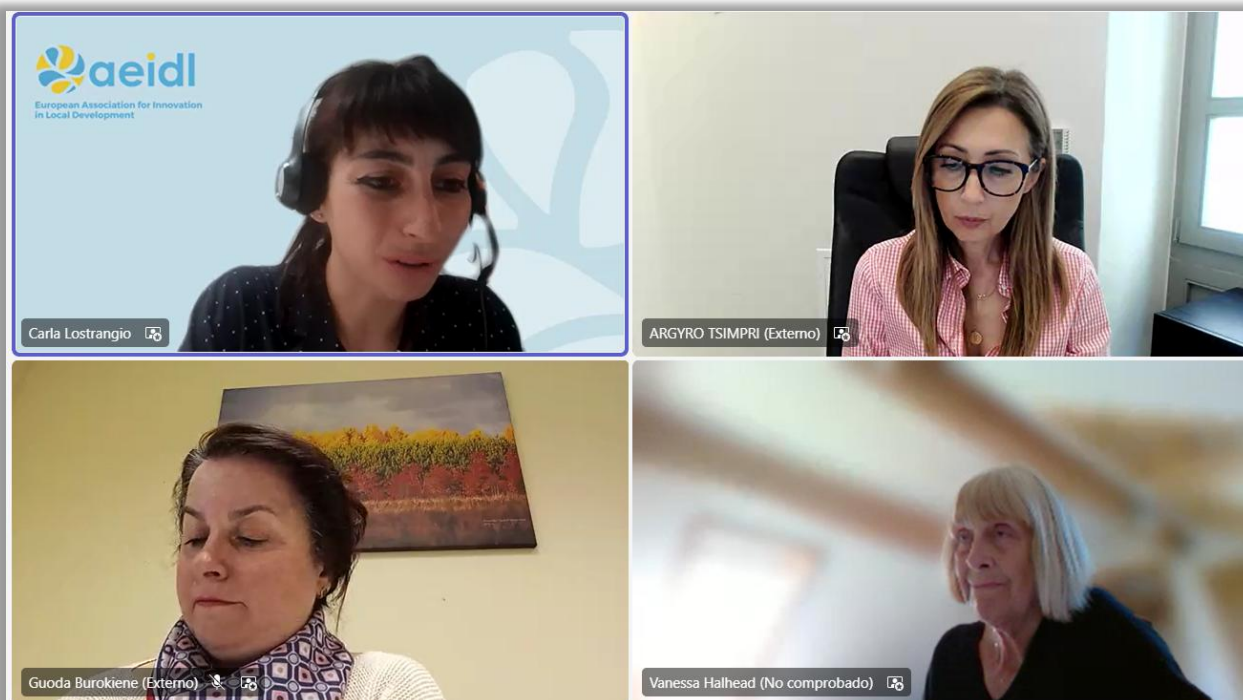
Round Table: Rural Innovation Practices

Argyro Tsimpri (*Vice-President of ELARD*), Vanessa Halhead (*Coordinator of ERCA*), and Guoda Burokiene (*President of PREPARE*) shared concrete examples of rural innovation practices from across Europe

Moderated by Carla Lostrangio, *European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)*

This round table gave the floor to three rural network organisations steering the **European Rural Parliament**. Representing a large span of rural actors across Europe, these organisations are key into **raising the voices** of rural communities to policy makers at local, regional, national and European levels. During the discussions, speakers highlighted **emerging trends influencing rural innovation** — such as digital transformation, demographic decline and ageing populations, green transition and the need for bottom-up governance— and identified **key barriers and gaps** that persist across EU regions, including limited digital infrastructure, bureaucratic complexity, insufficient support for voluntary local initiatives, and fragmented or poorly aligned policies.

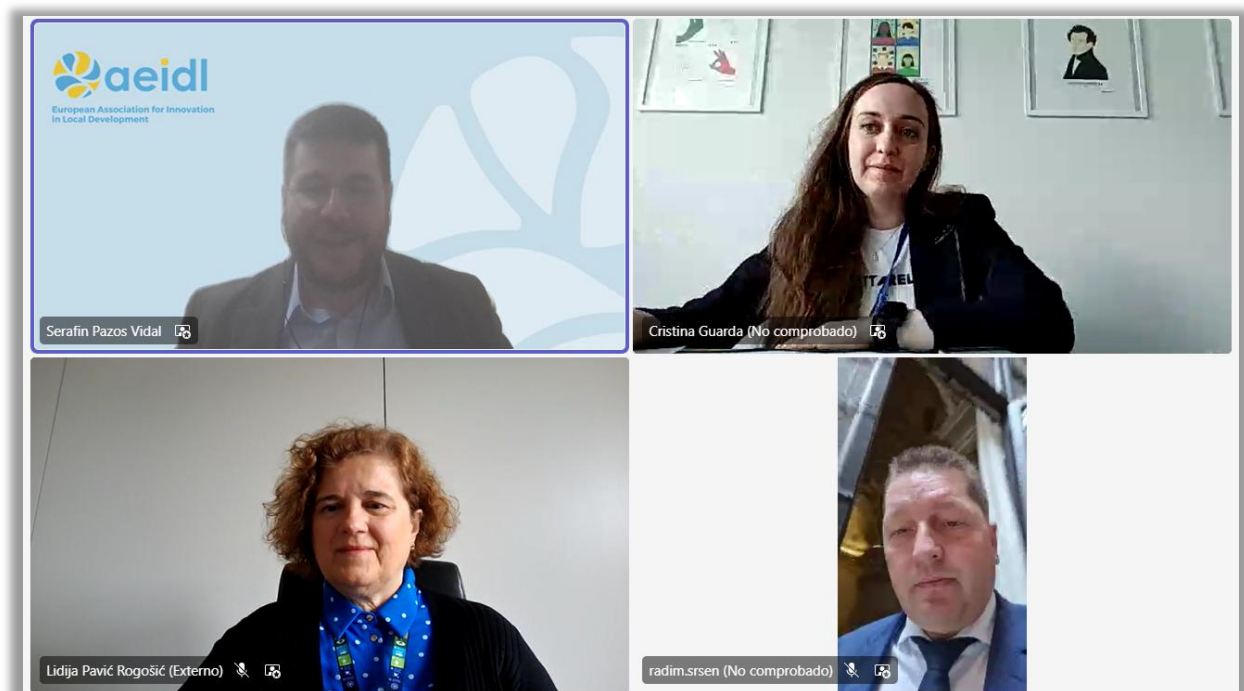
The speakers also offered recommendations for **future EU programming**, calling for dedicated budget financing rural programmes beyond agriculture, simplified and harmonised funding rules, and the recognition of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and existing rural networks as rural innovation hubs. They advocated for greater support for civil society organisations, transnational cooperation, and institutionalised rural proofing. They also pleaded the continuation of the **EU Rural Pact** and called for stronger implementation at a more granular scale.



Round Table: What post-2027 policies for rural innovation?

Cristina Guarda (*Member of the EU Parliament*), **Lidija Pavić-Rogošić** (*European Economic and Social Committee*), **Radim Sršeň** (*European Committee of the Regions*)

Moderated by Serafín Pazos-Vidal, *European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)*



In a final round table, representatives of EU institutions reflect on what post-2027 EU policies should look like to further support community-led innovation. **Cristina Guarda (MEP)** underlined that Cohesion Policy still does not provide sufficient support to rural innovation, noting that even though some helpful tools like CLLD and smart solutions exist, they often don't reach the most vulnerable or innovative areas. She stressed **the need for a “genuine EU strategy” for community-led rural innovation**, built on local participation, dedicated funding, and stronger rural proofing mechanisms across EU policies.

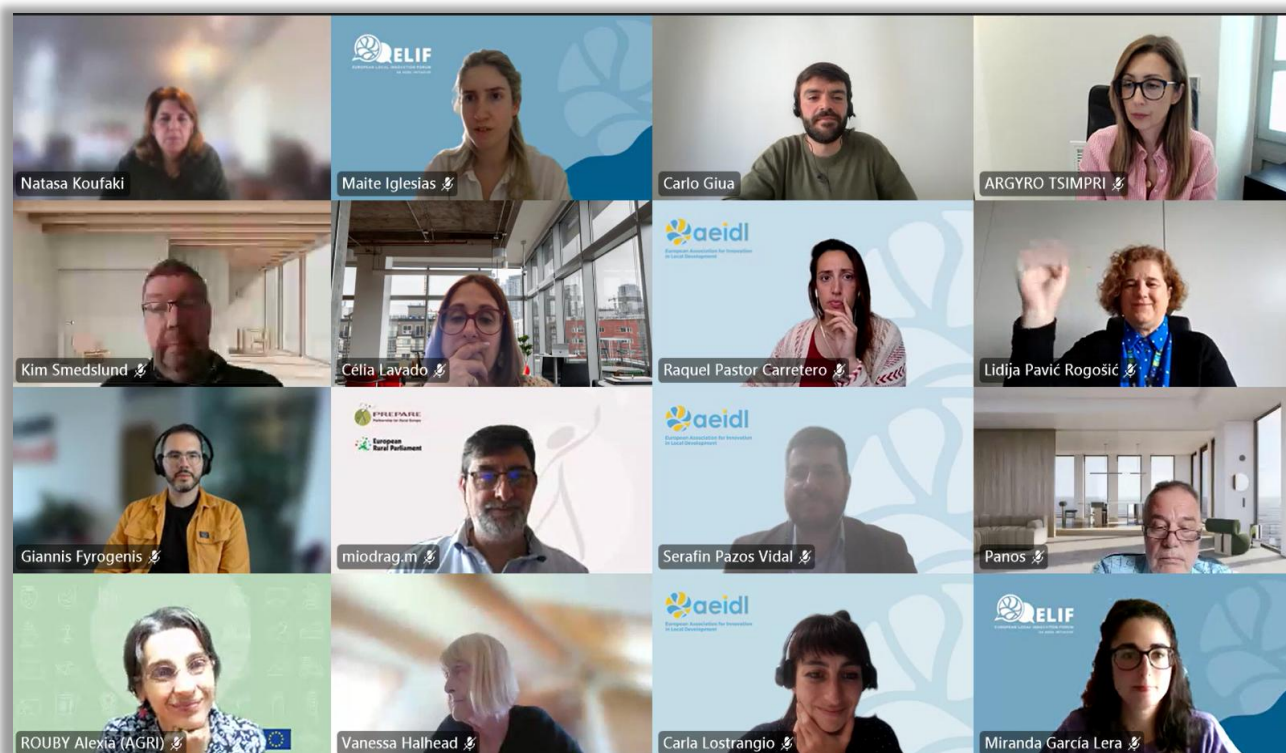
Lidija Pavić-Rogosić (European Economic and Social Committee) pointed out that **EU rural policy is too divided and not well coordinated**. She said that areas like agriculture, digital technology, skills, cohesion, and research should work more closely together. She called for **mandatory rural proofing**, simplified access to EU funds, and stronger support for civil society and intermediary organisations.

Radim Sršeň (European Committee of the Regions) stressed the importance of focusing on solutions rather than obstacles, urging policymakers to make better use of existing tools to support innovation in rural areas. He noted that challenges like energy and population changes can also bring new opportunities if the right tools are used. However, he warned that upcoming allocation negotiations risk weakening the partnership principle and subsidiarity, and called for place-based, tailor-made approaches, such as the LEADER programme.

Conclusion

Serafin-Pazos-Vidal and Márta Marczis, *European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)*

The findings and recommendations discussed at the EU-RIF will now be used to advocate for stronger policies in the next EU programming period, whose proposals will be tabled in July 2025. More detailed proposals are being elaborated and will be discussed at the next EU-RIF tentatively scheduled for May 2025 in time to engage in the legislative discussions on the new EU programmes that will be taking place.



Some of the participants at the end of the event.

**LEARN MORE ABOUT THE
FUTURAL EU-RIF**

www.futural-project.eu

