



FUTURAL

Empowering the **FUT**ure through innovative Smart
Solutions for **rURAL** areas

Policies and governance mechanisms for community-led
innovation in rural Belgium

Lead Author: Carla Lostrangio (AEIDL), Serafin-Pazos Vidal (AEIDL)



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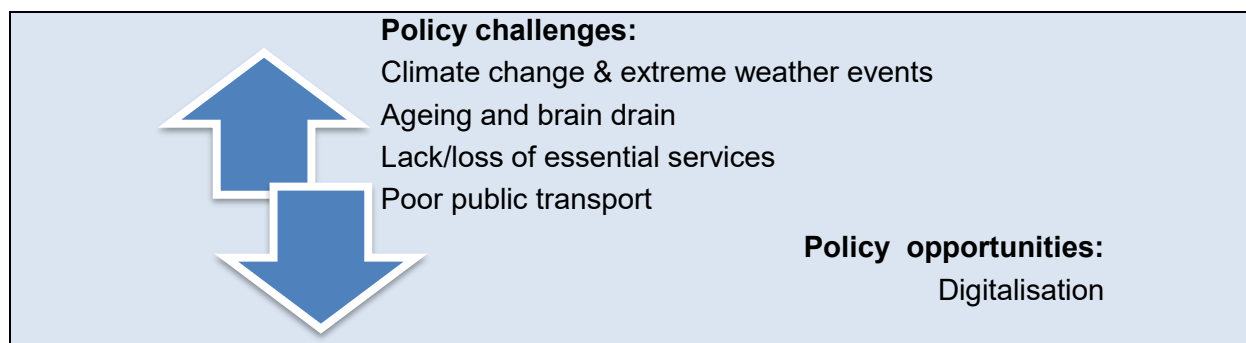
FUTURAL Case Study in Belgium

The **FUTURAL Pilot** is situated in the **Westhoek region**, which is the west corner of Belgium flanking by the North Sea and the French border. The Pilot area extends across 18 municipalities and over 220,000 residents. The agrifood sector is the main economic sector for Westhoek. Since 2016, this sector has been seriously challenged by extreme weather events.

This Pilot area faces obstacles linked to **climate change** and **extreme weather events**, on one hand, which challenge agriculture. On the other hand, rural areas suffer from an **ageing population** and **brain drain**, **loss of essential services** and **public transport**. In FUTURAL, two community-led innovations are being piloted to address these challenges in the rural Westhoek:

- An **online platform for delivery of Hydrological Models** to support climate change adaptation
- An **accessibility analysis platform** to evaluate the accessibility to basic services (health, infrastructure, social services etc.) in rural areas.

Public policies could unlock transition of this region by supporting **digitalisation** of rural areas.



Rural areas and innovation in Belgium

In Belgium, rural land surface equals to **approximately half** of the country surface (mostly situated close to urban areas), but it hosts **less than a fifth** of the country population (Rural Observatory, 2021). The country is considered a **strong innovator**, with above EU average indicators of digital skills and internet take-up, but below average broadband penetration.

Table 1. Rural Areas in Belgium. Source: FUTURAL Policy Analysis (2025).

	Rural Population	Rural Surface (Close to City)	Rural Surface (Remote)	Rural Surface (Total)
Belgium	15%	41.2%	6.64%	47.8%
EU27	25.8%	34.2%	41.5%	75.7%

Table 2. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) in Belgium. Source: FUTURAL Policy Analysis (2025).

	DESI Index			
	Broadband penetration	Basic digital skills	Above basic digital skills	Internet take up
Belgium	109.9	59.4%	28.3%	94.5%
EU27	122	55.6%	27.3%	93.1%

Governance framework for enhanced community-led rural innovation

Belgium is one of the **most complex administrative structures** in the EU. Since 1970, the country transitioned to a **federal state** consisting of 6 federated entities, 3 regions (Brussels Region, Flanders and Wallonia) and 3 communities (French-speaking, Flemish-speaking, German-speaking) – with 5 governments and 5 parliaments.

Belgium is quite unique in terms of administrative and legislative functioning. For instance, it is the only country in the world where an **‘equipollence of norms’** applies among communities, regions and the federal state. This means that laws made by the federal government and those made by the communities and regions have equal legal force within their respective jurisdiction. Another specificity of Belgium is that **territories** covered by regions and communities overlap each other. Yet, the difference stands in the **policy competences** they deal with. Notably, communities are mostly responsible for linguistic and societal policies, whereas regions cover economic and territorial policies.

Since the 1988-89 constitutional reform, local territories follow the provisions of **regional legislative frameworks** (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels). In practice, this means that different rules apply to municipalities and provinces within the same country, as their organisation, responsibilities and finances depend on different regional policies. For instance, in the 2023-2027 period, Wallonia and Flanders had two separate CAP Strategic Plans¹. **Intermunicipal cooperation** and intermunicipal companies (*intercommunales* in both French and Dutch and *interkommunale* in German) are widespread in rural development matters.

Table 3 Institutional and Administrative Frameworks in Belgium. Source: FUTURAL Policy Analysis (2025).

Institutional and Administrative Framework	
Institutional Framework	Federal state
EU Entrance	1958
Administrative Levels	6 federated entities (3 regions, 3 communities), provinces and municipalities
Power distribution across Levels	Regions play a crucial role due to federal structure
Competence Level on Relevant Policy Areas	
CAP, Rural Development (incl. LEADER)	Regions
Regional Development (incl. CLLD)	Regions
Digital Policies	Federal, Regions, communities

¹ The Brussels region did not have a plan simply because is considered as an urban agglomerate.

Social Policy/ Social Innovation	Regions, Communities
Local Government	
No. Local Units	581 municipalities
Local Government Competences	Local public affairs, social welfare- services, education, local police. Higher authorities might ask to perform additional tasks.
Local Government Autonomy Index	Medium-high

Policy framework for enhanced community-led rural innovation

Both in Wallonia and Flanders, community-led innovation in rural areas can be financed mainly through the **CAP's LEADER programme**. The budget, population and area covered by the **LEADER** programme is **very different between the two regions**. Flanders has allocated 2.5 times more than the budget to LEADER in absolute terms, and minimum allocation is also higher. Its ability to reach the rural population is therefore higher (>80% in Flanders compared to 35% in Wallonia). Despite this significant gap in terms of resources, Wallonia planned to support more local development strategies, probably preferring smaller-scale projects to the Flemish case. Only Flanders included an intervention targeting **Smart Villages** (through LEADER) in its CAP Strategic Plan, where it indicates digital innovation as one main strategy to drive rural transition and smart villages' implementation.

The **Cohesion Policy** does not foresee specific measures to finance CLLD in rural areas. However, it allows invest in innovation through other sectoral priorities (e.g., eco-innovation, business innovation). It is worth noting that, comparatively, Flanders provides more emphasis on rural areas while this is not the case for Wallonia.

At national level, there are no national policies tailored specifically to community-led rural innovation, but opportunities to target community initiatives are more broadly included in sectoral policies (e.g. on digital innovation, rural development or social policies).

Table 4 Policy framework for community-led rural innovation (Belgium). Source: FUTURAL Policy Analysis (2025).

Common Agricultural Policy- National Strategic Plan (2021-2027 period)		
	Flanders	Wallonia
LEADER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Population Coverage: 81.59% of rural population, 1.9 mln people •Local Development Strategies: 14 •Preparatory Actions/projects: 0 •Budget: € 25.28 mln (8% of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Population Coverage: 35% of rural population, 2.19 mln people •Local Development Strategies: 21 •Preparatory Actions/projects: 0 •Budget: € 9.94 mln (5% of EAFRD)

	EAFRD)	
<i>Smart Villages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Dedicated interventions: LEADER – design and realisation of local development strategies (COOP, 3.18 & 3.19). •Other interventions: N/A •R40. Smart transition of the rural economy: Smart Villages strategies projects- N/A •Budget: No target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Dedicated interventions: N/A •Other interventions: N/A •R40. Smart transition of the rural economy: Smart Villages strategies projects- N/A •Budget: N/A
<i>Selected Indicators (PMEF result and outputs indicators)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •R1: 365,013 people benefitting from advice, training, knowledge exchange or participating in EIP Operational Groups •R3: 80.71% Farms support for digital agricultural technology •R39: 39 Rural business developed (incl. bioeconomy •O1: 100 EIP operational group projects •O23: 200 Supported off-farm non-productive investment operations or units •O24: 32 Supported off-farm productive investment operations or units •O27: 240 Rural businesses receiving support for start-up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •R1: 86 people benefitting from advice, training, knowledge exchange or participating in EIP Operational Groups •R3: 0.21% Farms support for digital agricultural technology •R39: 212 Rural business developed (incl. bioeconomy •O1: 9 EIP operational group projects •O23: 314 Supported off-farm non-productive investment operations or units •O24: 263 Supported off-farm productive investment operations or units O27: n/a Rural businesses receiving support for start-up
Cohesion Policy (2021-2027 period)		
<i>CLLD</i>	CLLD measures were not activated under ERDF	No dedicated measures to CLLD in rural areas. Wallonia did not adopt any code to earmark funds to specific territories
<i>Regional ERDF Operational Programme</i>	Several specific objectives target rural areas (including via Integrated Territorial Investments) and the possibility to finance collective projects is mentioned. Examples of actions that can be financed: innovations to address societal needs, establish Living Labs & innovation ecosystems (SO1.1) data-driven digital technologies for local governance & service provision (SO1.2), skills for smart	Measures promoting innovation (in particular PME support, green and eco-innovation) are defined under PO1, PO2. Smart mobility is also targeted within PO3. In the Programme description, rural areas are very marginal in the ERDF OP and only mentioned in relations to mobility and waste management/valorization. PO5 (Closer to citizens) is mainly used to finance initiatives for urban and

	specialization (SO1.4), innovative collective projects for energy efficiency, renewable energy and climate adaptation (SO2.1, 2.2, 2.4), innovative mobility concepts , local distribution projects, multimodality (SO2.8).	industrial revitalization.
Other Relevant National Policies		
Digital and Innovation	Digital Strategy Flanders - Cluster Policy – Flemish Smart Specialisation 2.0 – Flanders Science, Technology and Innovation	Digital Wallonia 2019-2024 - Plan de relance de la Wallonie - Plan Horizon Proximité – Wallonia Smart Specialisation
Social Policies	Caring Neighbourhood – Relance Plan Flanders	Stratégie wallonne de Développement durable
Rural, Local Development	Flemish Rural Policy 2024 – 2029 - Smart Regions Flanders – Blue Deal	Déclaration de politique régionale (2024-2029)

Good practices

DigiBanks are local initiatives funded by the Flemish government to reduce the digital divide and support digitally low-skilled or low-income population into digital tasks. Since 2024, the Flemish Government has funded more than 50 DigiBanks with a financial envelope between 350,000 euros and 500,000 euros (per bank). DigiBanks are run by local partnerships which can include local authorities, civil society organisations, local training providers and educational institutions, social economy companies.

Neighborhoods in the countryside (Buurten op den Buiten) recognizes the power of small-scale local projects for social cohesion in rural areas and gives that commitment a financial boost through an annual call. This initiative provides financial support of up to €5,000 for residents who want to realise a concrete project for their neighbourhood or village within a rural area. Projects are selected throughout an open call and should aim at improving the quality of life in a village or neighbourhood and promote contacts between residents. Anyone can submit a project, from a newly formed neighbourhood committee to a hundred-year-old local association, to institutions or authorities, provided that as many local residents as possible are involved in the intended activity. Since 2012, the Flemish Land Agency has been the permanent partner of the King Baudouin Foundation for Neighbourhoods in the Countryside.

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