



## Sustainable Rural Communities, a Vision on Migration

Recently listening to the “[Rural Vision Week](#)” conference, I found that there was a lack of discussion on how to attract new diversified professions and correspondingly educated people to fulfill these jobs in rural areas. Realizing that the purpose of the event was to involve the momentary rural stakeholders into an EU policy generating process, this was understandable. Still, it is an omission not to consider migration and not to include the demands of potential newcomers in the process.

Coming from a [background](#) of international business development for private sector companies, I mostly look for Unique Selling Points (USPs) or unique characteristics. In my point of view there is generally no principal difference between urban and rural life. Regardless of the type of economic activity, both are opportunities to live and work. Agriculture and eco-tourism are only specific USPs for rural areas; however, they do not represent any fundamental limitation to explore other forms of economic contribution.

Fifty years ago, agriculture represented more than 20% of GDP, while it is less than 2% in most of the developed countries today. Due to mechanization and the resulting scale of operation, the need for manual agricultural labor has [declined](#) and may [further](#) continue to do so. This means that if one wants to employ and support the same amount of inhabitants with “modern standards” of living in rural areas, economical diversification will be greatly needed.

Apart from relatively niche markets like eco production and tourism, opportunities for such diversification have predominantly been absent. Many young people have therefore [moved](#) away resulting in rural areas to become aged, depopulated, economically deprived, and lacking infrastructure.

Looking at the potential of rural diversification by modern services (=70% of GDP), many current job tasks could be – partially or entirely – executed remotely. The current Covid crisis has accelerated the trend to work partially or entirely from home. Naturally, a single “rural typology” does not exist here, and therefore there are multiple paths to potential rural futures. [Classifying](#) spatial and population properties, Revival sees at least four types of rural areas with related future scenarios.

For people in the first group of rural areas – commuting to bigger settlements of more than 50,000 inhabitants – an increase in remote working would likely imply the acceptance of longer commuting distances because one would have to travel less frequently. The urban-rural relationship would likely remain unchanged and the city would mostly provide centralized facilities to people from the commuting areas. This urban-rural connection represents a sustainable economic situation.

For the second group of smaller “rural” towns (settlements between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants), which are at the same time regional centers in less populated areas, the task would be to create sufficient policies and governance to attract “modern service activities” for their economies. This could be realized by offering a relatively broad spectrum of facilities to their entrepreneurs and inhabitants, probably in a more personal and less formal manner than a metropolis does. The success will largely depend on the attractiveness of the area and the price/quality relationship of their housing and infrastructure; some towns will be able to succeed, some others will not.

The third group of smaller isolated communities (between 500 and 5,000 inhabitants) has limited facilities to offer and has problems with reaching economics of scale. It faces the most complicated future because inward migration is likely necessary; this will be elaborated shortly.

Finally, for the fourth group of very small communities of fewer than 500 inhabitants (including people not living in settlements) self-sufficiency will be required. One cannot count much on any centralized facilities because economics of scale (with exception of large scale farming) is impossible to achieve in such an environment. Although in the future, [satellite](#) internet and self-driving vehicles could likely facilitate universal access to some services, interaction between people would remain restricted in choice and number. One of the main problems is the succession of activities from one generation to the next because education can mostly only be provided in cities and young people do often not return after being educated elsewhere. Still, the remoteness, spaciousness, and the often low cost of living can be an USP, attracting some highly educated professionals. Despite this, it will likely be very hard to create economic sustainability, because the structural potential of larger scale opportunities is very limited.

The most complicated outlook for the future is for the third group of isolated communities between 500 and 5,000 inhabitants. Unlike larger communities, this group neither has the potential to offer full facilities, nor are they sufficiently remote or unique to attract highly educated professionals. However, their strength lies in their community structure in which people have a lot of social interaction with each other. The number of people in this type of settlement is also sufficient to share broader experiences and to learn from each other. Nevertheless, in comparison to others, this rural category is facing restricted facilities and often does not offer the space advantage of living remote as compensation.

Remote villages tend as a result to be perceived as less attractive and they became very vulnerable regarding depopulation and ageing. There are two main factors causing this.

-1- *Outward migration*, not everyone is born in the most prosperous places in the world; neither can we fully freely move to these places. This means that there is a continuous tension and temptation to improve one's life through migration and upward mobility. Looking at the development of small villages, leaving them is often attractive. Notwithstanding, this does not imply that there is no future: everything is relative. If, for example, a carpenter from a deprived village finds a better paid job in a city, this does not mean that his original job disappears. The problem is to find a successor who is willing to work under these lesser conditions. It is like sustainable forestry, if one cuts a tree, one needs to replace it and plant a new one.

-2- *Education*, another factor is schooling. The modern economy demands more education from its workers. Manual "unskilled" labor is becoming less and less important. Lacking economics of scale, small remote villages are unable to offer proper traditional school facilities compared with larger settlements. However, recently there are hybrid and AI assisted [alternatives](#) for learning many skills. A school, covering education from kindergarten to university, but having only 100 students is theoretically becoming feasible. If young people are no longer forced to leave their village and to build their social network during their years of studies in a city, chances that they will remain part of a rural sustainable community would most likely increase. Having educated people locally available also facilitates the creation of remote, sustainable, modern services type of jobs.

The outward rural migration has in many cases reached a point of no return, where only retired elderly people stay and the younger generation has largely left their village. This can only be solved by attracting new young families. However, in general, most people who once migrated to cities will not return to settlements offering fewer facilities. This is where synergy can be found with the other part of Refival's mission: "to support and [resettle](#) refugees". The crucial point is that for refugees moving to a remote village means upward mobility from their current situation. This migration can be a starting point for further mobility steps and the "incubation" of refugee families can be offered at much lower cost compared to what is feasible in cities. Participation in a small community is very suitable to [assist](#) people to culturally [adapt](#) and [mentally](#) recover. Regardless of whether the ultimate goal is to qualify newcomers to stay in the village, to [join](#) the European labor force elsewhere or to educationally prepare people to [return](#) and rebuild their lives in their home countries, rural incubation would benefit both refugees and the communities that host them.

More than five years after I started Refival, the originally intended one-year self-funded sabbatical activity has evolved into 15,000 hours of R&D and advocacy. To continue succeeding in my mission, external support is urgently needed. Therefore, I am seeking for an organization I could pass the torch to, and which would be willing to continue Refival's activities. I am personally open for a European rural development or migration related position, allowing [me](#) to continue building positive perspectives on rural life and refugees.

Your advice on the above matter is much appreciated!

Kind Regards,

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