

# Youth-centred rural transformation towards sustainable development

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays we are living two strong dichotomies: old generations versus new generations and urban areas versus rural areas; it is important to underline that while urban areas are more resilient and have basically experienced socio-economic growth, rural areas<sup>2</sup> that are far away from the borders of metropolitan regions are suffering from intrinsic problems such as substantial unemployment rate, the lack of basic services and infrastructures and all these combined factors led young people to leave. Moreover, the current crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, the recent pandemic and the ongoing wars have exposed the fragility of our current system and the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards the sustainable economy we need (the principle of leaving no territory and no individual behind must finally become a reality). In this context, young people themselves, can represent the keystone to promote sustainable development in these disadvantaged areas: the process needs to be bilateral namely that young people have to deploy all their qualities and innovative thoughts but at the same time they have to be put in the conditions to unleash their transformative potential. Young people can be definitely seen as the future of their communities, and their involvement in rural community development initiatives is crucial in ensuring sustainable development in these areas remembering that these areas play a vital role in economic and social cohesion, including sustainable food production. In this extended abstract are emphasized the ways in which young people can assure sustainable development in rural areas, in which ways institutions can help them and which are the possible consequences of this transition.

## KEYWORDS

Youth empowerment, sustainable development, rural areas, economic sustainability, social sustainability

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## I. INTRODUCTION AND FINDINGS

Young people (generally including people aged between 15 and 24) are a key population and their empowerment as members of the society is crucial for the ineluctable ESG<sup>3</sup> transition towards Sustainable Development (SD) promoted by the United Nations “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has to be underlined that the sustainability development just mentioned must be considered in a holistic perspective with ecological, economic, and social dimensions of development intrinsically linked. Youth can create and become a positive and dynamic force for sustainable development in rural areas if they are given the knowledge and opportunities to thrive and be

involved in decision-making processes. As anticipated before, in order to achieve the predetermined goal of sustainable development in rural areas a double contribution has to be considered: young people have to exploit all their soft and hard skills that can be resumed in five roles (that will be examined after) but at the same time institutions and authorities have to include youth e.g. in decision-making processes and have to facilitate the release of their potential. Starting from the ‘young-contribution’ five roles can be explored. The first role of youth in rural development is as innovators: they are basically more inclined to new ideas, new ways of doing things and can individuate solutions that can be game-changer such as in the fields of agri-tech or IT. These innovative ideas can

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<sup>2</sup> nearly one third of the EU population (137 million people) live in rural areas in 2021 (Eurostat).

<sup>3</sup> Economic, Social, Governance.

be very effective and disruptive especially in the less-developed contexts in which they are thought. The second role is as agents of change. They have the energy and motivation to force change in their communities mobilizing their peers and working together to create positive change (e.g. promoting environmental sustainability or improving access to education and healthcare).

The third role is as entrepreneurs. Young people can start their own businesses (in many cases through the creation of startups) and create new job opportunities. In this case they can exploit a sort of 'boomerang-effect': they grow in the rural areas, then they can study, work, refine their skills in the urban ones in order to eventually come back enriched bringing back to life economically-dead areas. The creation of new sustainable businesses in these areas not only provides economic benefits but also helps to stop the bleeding represented by the migration of young people from rural areas to urban ones. The fourth role of youth is as advocates. Young people can be powerful advocates for the communities they represent and can make everybody aware about the challenges and difficulties that rural areas have to face; they not only can increase awareness about rural areas conditions but at the same time they can call for policy changes and make governments and other stakeholders accountable for their actions.

The fifth and final role of youth is as leaders. Young people with their enthusiasm and proactivity can take on leadership roles in their communities and play a fundamental role in decision-making processes. They can represent the interests of their peers and work towards a shared vision for the sustainable future of their community. Strictly related to all these roles it is important to underline a common skill fundamental to achieve all the goals linked to sustainable development in rural areas i.e. the ability to exploit the media and all their communication tools especially the social networks: they represent a real flywheel to connect people, help the spread of information and finally move towards sustainable development.

So definitely can be resumed that youth plays a significant role in the development of rural communities and the very rural community development relies on the active participation of young people who are equipped with skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm and that can address challenges linked to these disadvantaged areas coming up with sustainable solutions able to resurrect them.

Once explained the reasons behind the necessary involvement of the young people for the sustainable development in the rural areas, it is fundamental to

analyse the ways in which institutions, authorities, policy-makers, stakeholders can help them in their goal. First, it is necessary to create tools for the collection of data (research and analyses of disaggregated data) related to population, rural youth needs: the adequate knowledge of the initial state of art is fundamental for implementing targeted investments, policies, and services. This initiative, represented for example by the Rural Observatory, is important to better understand and to foster the exchange of good practices (this is crucial for developing effective policies that enhance the potential of rural areas making them more attractive).

Once created a sort of control room it is indispensable make rural areas more attractive to young people and this is surely a crucial point: institutions have to break down the wall between urban areas and rural ones through the improvement of digital (IT infrastructure and high-speed broadband connections to ensure connectivity and access to digital resources) and physical infrastructures, transports (especially improving travel options between rural and urban areas preferring sustainable mobility, including local public transport services), leisure activities, and all the services required to live adequately and prosper commercially. At the same time to stimulate a sustainable economy in these less developed areas quality employment opportunities with stable and competitive contracts, adequate social protection and support for entrepreneurship are required. About rural entrepreneurship, and particularly referring to the agricultural one, authorities have to ease the possibility to find a piece of land and the access to credit for young rural entrepreneurs and support the short supply chains in order to stimulate a sustainable economy; related to this there is also the possibility to restore agricultural lands currently uncultivated thus achieving multiple benefits. As already said before, it is also very important the concept of youth empowerment: this point required however the direct intervention of institutions (e.g. through the Rural Pact or the EU programmes like Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps programmes, Leaders/CLLD, European Social Fund and the Youth Guarantee) in order to enhance the engagement of young people in rural sustainable development; to unleash their transformative potential is indeed necessary to involve them in different situations creating a more inclusive and multi-stakeholder governance model. It is impossible to achieve a sustainable transformative change if institutions do not give them the possibility to propose and share their point of view in the 'halls of power'. This is crucial for rural

development, as young people are advocates for sustainability and environmental protection: they should be at the centre of a more inclusive multi-stakeholder governance model, engaging in decision-making at different stages (from drafting proposals to their implementation, monitoring, and follow-up) and at the same time they should be adequately represented in politics to make their needs sufficiently heard. Frameworks for empowering youth (Rural Pact, rural parliaments, and community-led local developments) are fundamental in this context and the enhancement of these programmes and initiatives can empower communities to effectively address rural challenges and drive sustainable progress.

About this, an important framework for European collaboration on youth policies need to be remarked, the so-called EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 that encompasses 11 specific European youth objectives among which the sixth-one has to be highlighted (goal 6, "Moving Rural Youth Forward") in which are underlined issues like the ones mentioned before and those that will be mentioned after (infrastructures, job opportunities, education, involvement in decision making processes); one among these issues is the establishment of a positive image of rural areas and the related preservation and promotion of rural traditions. In this context it is interesting the possibility to foster the creation of place branding initiatives to enforce territorial, social and economic cohesion.

Institutions need to intervene also in the field of training and education: about this, tailor-made (for the specific region) educational programmes are necessary to transfer the skills and the expertise especially in the agri-food sector. Another thorny issue that institutions need to address is the house: they need to implement solutions for renting or buying houses (e.g. tax breaks) to foster the renovation of abandoned houses and encourage the resettlement in these areas.

Rural areas are mainly involved in agricultural businesses; in this context the new EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) offers the opportunity to make the rural world more attractive through the institutions of different mechanisms: for example, Member States are obligated to spend at least 3% of direct payments to support young farmers (8.5

billion € of public expenditure is earmarked to help young farmers set up, invest, and maintain their business or activity in their first years). The network and monitoring system created can reassure young farmers and can help them to better share farming and business models and improvement opportunities.

Institutions must consider also the secular problem of the climate change: there is a strong connection between rural areas (and their agriculture) and the effects of global warming (e.g. droughts, floods, incipient desertification) and this linkage makes necessary the involvement of young people that, with their innate sense of climate justice, can be the promoter of sustainable and mitigation practices. Moreover, institutions need to foster the development of short supply chains (the promotion of local products can enhance place branding issues) that can contribute to more sustainable, resilient, and diversified agri-food activities, create jobs, and retain people in rural areas. In addition to agricultural policies and funds, it is unavoidable to adopt a robust inter-sectoral policy approach that considers generational renewal (breaking down the wall between rural areas and urban ones). Institutions need to play their game on the same pitch of young people and so they have to exploit a strong communication strategy (also through the social media fundamental to reach them) to promote initiatives effectively and to enhance potential and opportunities in rural areas.

Eventually it has to be underlined that also other opportunities (beyond the agricultural sector) like tourism, culture and sport have to be adequately financed because they can contribute to the sustainable development and vitality of these areas and can attract young individuals.

It seems to be useful to quote some initiatives that revealed themselves very effective in order to build rural sustainable development: The new Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps programmes (2021-2027)<sup>4</sup>, The EU CAP network's Thematic Group on Rural Youth Employment<sup>5</sup>, The Rural Pact community<sup>6</sup>, Giovani Dentro Research Project<sup>7</sup>, Youth2030<sup>8</sup>, The UN Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028)<sup>9</sup>, The World Food Forum's Youth

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4 Programs that reach more people in rural areas through inclusion measures, covering training, youth, sports, volunteering, and all fields of education.

5 identifies challenges faced by youth across the European Union and promotes exchanges of ideas and initiatives.

6 Community that comprises about 2000 members that amplifies rural voices by bringing up key rural concerns in policy agendas, making sure these voices are heard and actions are taken.

7 Research project financed by the CAP, addresses opportunities and challenges faced by youth in Italy's inland areas.

8 Comprehensive UN framework that guides its engagement with young people across topics such as peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.

9 It recognises the vital role of family farmers in addressing hunger, sustainable development, and environmental protection. It emphasises their unique ability to enhance food security, livelihoods, and natural resource management, especially in rural areas.

Action for a Better Food Future<sup>10</sup>, The COCOREADO ambassador programme<sup>11</sup>, The Ecorings Project<sup>12</sup>, Eco-Schools<sup>13</sup>, The Rural Youth in action from local to European level (RURBEST22) project<sup>14</sup>, The innovative social startup "Ca' Colonna"<sup>15</sup>, the EU-funded FARMWELL project<sup>16</sup>.

## II. METHODS AND DATA USED

The study concerning the youth-centred rural transformation towards sustainable development has been carried out through the literature review of innovative best practices in this field, the evaluation of possible solutions proposed and to be proposed at the institutional level, and a literature analysis related to current state of art.

## III. CONCLUSIONS

Rural sustainable development is in the hands of young people: they are the hope and driving force for the future of rural communities bringing a fresh perspective, dynamism, skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, and innovative ideas that can help to solve social problems and create opportunities for growth. They, acting the five roles explained in this abstract (innovators, agents of change, entrepreneurs, advocates, and leaders), can contribute to the rural sustainable development in different fields such as agriculture, healthcare, education, transportation, and infrastructure. Youth is a sort of treasure to resurrect abandoned and disadvantaged areas but there is the need for intervention on the part of institutions: they inevitably need to involve young people and exploit their tech-savvy minds, allowing them to leverage technology to enhance the productivity and easy access to services and information. Governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders have to create opportunities for young people to contribute to the development of their communities. Some of the interventions (exposed before) required by the institutions to help rural youth can be: the involvement of young people in planning and decision-making processes (to foster their

empowerment), promotion of cross-sectoral approaches in developing youth policies and strategies to reduce inequalities between rural/remote and urban areas, enhancement of fundings to youth-related projects, improvement of travel options between rural and urban areas by investing in infrastructures and sustainable mobility, raise of investments in IT infrastructure and high-speed broadband connections to ensure connectivity and access to digital resources, encouraging young people who intend to return to rural areas through targeted measure for renting or buying houses, and encouraging the renovation of abandoned houses and land through tax breaks, financial support for easier access to land, adequate social dialogue structures to strengthen industrial relations and ensure decent working conditions for all.

All things considered, there is real awareness the young people are the key players for rural sustainable development but at the same time there is necessity that institutions continue on the path undertaken and rather improve their commitment to help them in this difficult mission of sustainable transition.

## REFERENCES

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10 It aims to foster a transformative movement in policy dialogues on food and agriculture. It focuses on identifying innovative and actionable solutions for a more sustainable and promising future in the field of food.

11 Under Horizon 2020 funding, it assembled 35 young ambassadors from rural backgrounds in 2022 and 2023 to participate in trainings to foster collaboration and co-create initiatives.

12 launched in Finland, creates closed Facebook groups between farmers and consumers. It helps with centralised orders and now has 160 members in Finland, but is also gaining traction in Sweden, Italy, and Iceland.

13 It supports schools to adopt a comprehensive curriculum that incorporates climate and biodiversity education at all educational levels. This holistic approach equips students with a deeper understanding of environmental issues from an early age.

14 funded by ERASMUS+, aims to empower, engage, and foster connections among rural youth from Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Spain, and Sweden.

15 a family enterprise that aggregates one of the largest social agricultural supply chains in Italy. It represents an innovative entrepreneurial reality in which tradition is combined with a strong commitment to the community. Through the employment of vulnerable people and people with disabilities, it aims to foster integration and collaboration through work.

16 It makes social innovation research and practices more accessible to both individual farmers and farming families, with the aim of boosting their wellbeing (improving rural social sustainability).