

Article

What Can We Expect for the Development of Rural Areas in Europe?—Trends of the Last Decade and Their Opportunities for Rural Regeneration

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Abstract: Rural areas in Europe have been undergoing structural change for years, resulting in strong functional differentiation and fragmentation into prosperous and structurally weak areas. Rural areas are as diverse as the challenges they face. Not only various megatrends but also social, economic, technological, ecological, and political trends influence and shape the development of rural areas. In order to understand the problems and causes of the current development of rural areas, this paper provides a differentiated trend analysis for rural areas at the European level. A content analysis of more than 70 EU-funded project reports on rural areas and rural development is carried out. The aim is to identify trends and their drivers over the last decade and to summarize opportunities and challenges for successful rural regeneration. These external and overarching trends, particularly in the context of a sustainable transition, renewable energies, the emergence of new technologies and growing awareness of environmental impacts, offer rural areas more opportunities than ever before. The interplay between external incentives (e.g., European Union policies) and endogenous regional development (e.g., local actors) is crucial for the successful exploitation of these opportunities for rural regeneration.



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1. Introduction

Europe's rural areas have been and are undergoing fundamental change [1]. Until the 1960s, the term “rural” could be understood as relatively uniform, with an agricultural economy, low population density, and the dominance of certain rural lifestyles. Today, this image no longer applies. Rural areas are becoming more diverse, and several factors and trends are driving this structural change [2]. For instance, Copus et al. [3] emphasize that rural areas in Europe diversify and that each rural area is more or less unique. Therefore, “rural” is a complex term that can be defined in many ways. Depending on the research interest, rural areas can be a geographical space; an imagined, socially constructed place; or a multi-dimensional place that is simultaneously material, imagined, and socially experienced [4,5].

From a planning and geographical perspective, rural is defined as a spatial category described by size features, settlement structure, or socio-economic features [6–9]. In general, the term “rural” is used to refer to areas of open countryside and small settlements. However, rurality can also be seen as a counter-image to urbanity [10], which is questioned by other authors such as Cattaneo [11], who argues that the definition of rural can be placed in the context of the urban–rural continuum. Researchers increasingly agree that the simple dichotomy between “rural” and “urban” is highly problematic [12,13]. In fact, human settlements, with large villages, small towns, and small urban centers that are often indistinguishable, exist along a continuum from “rural” to “urban”. Unfortunately, the



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term “rural” is often used pejoratively, associated with terms such as downward spiral, underdeveloped, or remote.

Dammers, Keiner [14] and Leber, Kunzmann [15] argue that there is no standard that defines rural areas in general. Rather, they describe different types of rurality. Today, structurally strong rural areas with high productivity, service orientation, and growth tendencies stand in contrast to sparsely populated, structurally weak areas. Some areas are well suited for agricultural production, while others have potential for tourism. Differences also result from location. For example, regions located in urban-suburban areas benefit from agglomeration advantages, while peripheral rural areas lack these advantages.

For many years, spatial research, planning, and policy focused mainly on growing urban agglomerations. In the course of the structural change from an industrial to a service society, urban areas, with their advantages and spillover effects of the benefits of urbanization, have been the subject of discussion [16,17]. Rural areas, as well as small and medium-sized towns, nowadays receive more attention on the academic and political agenda to address relevant structural, economic, demographic, social, and environmental developments [18,19]. Although rural areas in Europe are very diverse, certain common patterns can be identified, which highlights the importance of finding a common ground for rural policy at the European level. Projects and working groups in the field of rural research are increasingly demonstrating this (e.g., EU Horizon 2020 Projects: RURITAGE, RURALIZATION, DESIRA, SHERPA, INCULTUM). The “The Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)” [20] is an initiative of the European Commission to develop a common European vision for 2040. It launches a debate on the future of rural areas and their role in our society. This is a new development in European policy making and could lead to a new way of conceiving European policy. The ESPON publication “Rural areas: an eye to the future” [21] and the OECD publication “10 key drivers of rural change” [22] provide further analysis and evidence of the future viability of rural areas.

Rural development is a process of improving quality of life and economic well-being while rural regeneration is “a more cyclical process, with interventions seeking to address rural decline” [2] (p. 1937). The rural regeneration concept is based on return and repopulation processes that address the problems of rural decline [2,23,24]. These processes require an inventory of current developments and trends in rural areas, from which problems but also opportunities can be identified to provide a basis for policy measures and an agenda for new generations.

The future of rural regeneration will be determined by the influences and trends of the past and present. The identification of trends is the key to recognizing them, dealing with them, or reversing them, especially in terms of economic and social development [25]. Several interrelated trends are developing along with structural changes in the changing environment. The conditions of the past, the decisions of the present, and the alternatives of the future are time bound. There is a need for a more differentiated study and more specific analysis of the current trends and drivers for rural areas and the rural regeneration process that is more specific and brings together the opportunities for rural areas. Therefore, we have asked the following questions:

- What are the trends and drivers in rural areas?
- Can we identify key issues for a positive rural regeneration?
- What changes and future policies are needed for a more successful rural regeneration?

Although Europe’s rural areas are very heterogeneous and face different local and regional challenges, many trends affecting them can be characterized at a general level. In the following analysis we will not focus on local and regional trends, but on overarching/macro trends (megatrends and specific trends) and the common issues and drivers of rural development. These can improve the understanding for a common effort of rural regeneration. We will take a closer look at the negative developments implied by the rural trends of the last decade. More important are the opportunities these trends offer. We will focus on the drivers of these trends, but also on the potential positive outcomes of these trends. It is important to outline the circumstances that are necessary for a positive outcome.

This paper is structured as follows: the introduction is followed by the state of the art for the problems and trends of rural areas and the approaches of rural regeneration and rural development. Section 3 covers the material and method for trend analysis. Reports of more than 70 EU-funded projects related to rural areas and rural development were scanned to identify 560 trend observations and 40 trends. Section 4 presents the analyses and empirical findings in response to the three research questions. The results and their implications for rural regeneration and neo-endogenous rural development in Europe are discussed in Section 5.

2. Theory

2.1. Problems and Trends of Rural Areas

Problems of rural decline have several dimensions and create a need for rural regeneration. The decline of rural areas is linked to demographic decline and changes in population structure, e.g., out-migration of people and businesses from the rural periphery, out-migration of young women, and an aging of the population [3,26–30]. When well educated people leave rural areas, this reduces the working age population, thereby negatively impacting the economic power of the region [31]. Preventing this decline and encouraging the regeneration of younger generations in rural areas and in agriculture is central for rural development policy and planning [32,33]. Population decline in rural areas leads to problems for rural society. Public services and facilities (such as health and social services) dissipate [34,35], cultural and social capital changes, and there is a loss of socio-economic and political power [36]. The economic decline of rural areas is often associated with a lack of diversification of the rural economy and a weak economic performance, which does not achieve its potential as a production and consumption location and still relies on traditional primary and secondary sectors [37,38]. These sectors depend directly on rural natural resources and are essential for the agricultural and food industry. However, it also causes environmental problems and degradation in rural areas [39].

Technological advantages and European agricultural policies have led to intensifying and expanding production. As a result, employment opportunities in the agricultural sector have declined. This is one of the main causes of the decline of rural areas [14,40]. Demographic and economic decline affects the age, skill level, and gender composition of the rural workforce, the quality of rural jobs, and livelihoods, and makes it difficult for new or existing businesses to access talent [3,35]. Frustration and disappointment with political systems are growing, and the practical question of how to stabilize structurally weak rural areas is urgent. Rural decline is a central problem in most parts of Europe.

At the same time, many rural regions have already started the process of rural regeneration and are thus pointing to possible ways of development. Today, new opportunities for the development of service-related jobs are emerging in rural areas [41]. Many regions have become centers for local recreation and tourism, which often represent the only economic alternative to farming, but can also be seen as an opportunity to develop [42]. Similarly, the expansion of renewable energy in recent years, especially solar, wind, and biomass, has created an enormous development dynamic from which many rural areas can benefit [43]. Civic engagement promotes village development and a sense of belonging. The COVID-19 pandemic, socio-political developments, and socio-economic factors are rendering rural areas more attractive due to safe living conditions, affordable housing, and increasing opportunities for remote work. Digitalization supports rural living—it is no longer necessary to live where you work, especially when housing costs are still rising in urban areas. Coworking spaces, which are growing not only in suburban areas but also in rural and peripheral locations, are a prime example of this development [32,33,44]. Younger people are rediscovering rural areas as a place to live and work, so digitalization is a great opportunity to address the problem of generational renewal and to support a positive population development. On the one hand, this can be important for the revitalization and generational change in agriculture. On the other hand, it will have an impact on the growth of younger age groups in rural areas and their rural businesses and employment opportunities [45].

Unexpected and disruptive developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have an impact on structural change in rural areas. Likewise, the current political situation with the war in Europe and its effects on the economy, food supply, and refugee flows show how fast processes can affect the environment. These developments lead to significant disparities in spatial structures. While for many regions structural change is associated with access to improved development opportunities and the overcoming of former weaknesses, for others it results in the intensification of existing problems or the emergence of new ones.

2.2. Rural Regeneration and Rural Development

Rural regeneration is often used in the context of rejuvenation, revival, revitalization, and renewal [37,46,47] and is not clearly distinguished from rural development. Thus, the terms “development” and “regeneration” are often used similarly. Rural theories distinguish between “development” as a process of improvement and modernization of quality of life and economic well-being while “regeneration” suggests “a cyclical process that counteracts downward trends” [23] (p. 146). It describes the process of renewal in rural areas and implies a process of transition and positive reinvention or revitalization, rather than simply reversing decline or attempting to restore previous levels of development. We use both terms in this paper. When we refer to rural development, we do not necessarily mean growth, but a process of change in a positive direction.

There is a strong trend in both academic and policy discussions toward solutions that take into account the local context, both in the context of intergenerational regeneration of rural areas and rural policy in general [48]. Local context implies: Rural opportunities and challenges should be addressed with locally adapted strategies and local actors who can contribute to local knowledge and resources [49].

Rural regeneration is related to endogenous and neo-endogenous theories of rural development [2,23,50–52]. Endogenous approaches imply stimulating development along bottom-up trajectories at the local level (driven from within), while the neo-endogenous approach accentuates the creation of general conditions from the outside–top-down–for “stimulating inner endogenous developmental possibilities in individual regions” [50] (pp. 54–55). The characteristics of rural areas and the challenges they are confronted with differ significantly across Europe, and the understanding of rural development policy varies accordingly. The neo-endogenous development models see local resources as the starting point of development. They are aware that development is also influenced by non-local forces of nation states or the European Union (EU) [52]. For example, national and European policies are external influences. Rural regeneration is often equated with neo-endogenous rural development [52,53].

The following conclusions can be drawn from the theoretical and conceptual considerations. The trends and drivers of rural areas, which are the focus of this analysis, can be interpreted as external influences acting on rural areas from the outside. Policymakers can react to negative external effects with top-down strategies, policy frameworks, and funding, but local and regional actors need to use their own and provided resources to actively shape their own path of rural regeneration.

3. Materials and Methods

The trend analysis method is a way to obtain ideas about possible ingredients of modern rural Europe and related future developments [53]. This is one of the most widely used methodological approaches in foresight, with which environmental information is systematically collected and interpreted. The trend analysis aims to identify and describe trends in detail, understand their impacts, and assess the impact of past and present trends on future spatial development [54]. This approach can help guide political, social, or business decisions. A trend is a pattern that is extracted from a more or less dispersed, temporally distributed set of interest-driven observations [55]. It thus corresponds to an essential basic mode of orientation in time, namely the ongoing (re)construction of past,

present, and future. Therefore, a trend is a phenomenon that causes a significant change in an existing system and could have implications for the future [56].

A distinction is made in this trend analysis: on the one hand, there are megatrends, which describe the overarching mainstream on a global or large scale [53]. These long-term driving forces are likely to have a significant effect on the future [57]. On the other hand, there are specific trends, such as technology trends and industry trends, which are constantly evolving and changing [58]. A trend does not guarantee or predict the future, but usually only lasts for a certain time period.

An important part of a trend analysis is assessing the factors that influence trends. To understand rural development, it is important to identify the drivers of rural decline and renewal. Drivers can be distinguished from trends in a way that they are the cause of change, whereas a trend is the direction of change [58]. Drivers are shifting, and their influence can decrease or increase over shorter periods of time than trends. Therefore, uncertainty and unforeseen developments are also associated with drivers if they can cause patterns of change to move in different directions: “if a driver goes one way or the opposite way the real divergence occurs and change patterns evolve differently” [59] (p. 295).

A trend analysis has methodological limitations because we only examine the variables we are interested in and extrapolate them into the future. It does not take other variables and their impact into account, adding to the complexity of the overall emerging picture [54]. The problem is that the method assumes the future to be a logical continuation of the past [54]. Disruptive developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or the current energy crisis render trend analyses difficult [60].

The aim of the following trend analysis is to identify the megatrends, trends, and key drivers that are effective in rural Europe (general developments) and to highlight key aspects (changes) for a positive rural future. This analysis is based on the methodological approach of the RURALIZATION project [53]. We proceeded as follows in the analysis:

The empirical basis of this analysis is 71 European project reports published between 2010 and 2019. The selection of project reports builds on the selected literature reviewed in the RURALIZATION project [47] and includes additional EU-reports. We selected those reports that cover the topics rural renewal, generational renewal, rural development, rural innovation, sustainability, economic and social cohesion, and agriculture. With a total of 71 EU projects, we have ensured that we are covering, as reliably as possible, many of the relevant trends in rural areas that can be identified in the context of European research projects. They have been prepared in close collaboration, often with a multi-perspective approach, in international cooperation and in a transdisciplinary format, considering scientific, political, and practical positions. Accordingly, they are not limited to one country, but have a focus on several countries in Europe or a pan-European focus. Table S1 (Supplementary Materials) lists all the projects screened for the trend analysis prepared for this paper. All these project reports were systematically analyzed through a literature review to gather observations of trends that affect rural areas. The documents were scanned according to the topics rural development, rural future, generational renewal, rural regeneration, rural economy, agriculture, rural society, and rural innovation (see also Figure 1 point 2). To identify trends related to the themes, we also used the keywords: megatrend, trend, dynamic, development, change, future, rural, global, and Europe [53] (p. 18). Using this combined approach, we were able to identify a robust number of trend observations. No specific content-analysis software was used, only queries with the listed topics and keywords.

We systematically extracted 560 trend observations from the 71 European project reports. To retrieve the information from the collected trend observations, it was necessary to merge related observations into trends. Due to similar or repetitive trend observations, the trend observations were combined into 40 trends in an iterative process. A pattern and a trend are formed only from multiple observations. For each of the 560 individual trend observations, the RURALIZATION team extracted the drivers. Drivers are particularly important for this analysis because they show the general developments behind the observations, give an indication of the causes of change, and can make connections between

observations that do not appear to be related at first glance. Then, in an iterative process, we ensure that the definition of the drivers has meaning and logic. In order to analyze the summarized trends, all the information obtained from the trend observations in the European project reports was collected and interpreted. It provides the basis for the content analysis of the topics. In an iterative process, the 40 trends were then grouped into seven topics. Using the information gathered from the trend observations and the drivers for each trend, we were able to create a summarized content analysis for each topic, including the challenges and opportunities arising from each trend.

In terms of content, it became clear that challenges can be easily extracted from the general information. The defined challenges are very close to the original information provided by the observations. As for the opportunities, it was necessary to enrich the material with our interpretations. Thus, the defined opportunities are not so closely related to the original information and provide more additional analytical information. In order to extract meaningful opportunities, it was very helpful to investigate the circumstances under which the often rather negatively described developments could turn into positive outcomes for rural areas. These identified circumstances are important for the conclusions of this paper to show which parts of European policies need to be engaged with or changed to enable a rural regeneration.

1. Determination of 71 EU-project-reports to be analyzed between 2010 and 2019

2. Systematic investigation and evaluation of current developments in rural areas phenomena that have relevance for rural development, rural future, generational renewal, rural regeneration, rural economy, agriculture, rural society, rural innovation

3. Identification of 560 repetitive trend observations, multiple trend observations make a pattern and a trend

4. Identification of drivers for each trend observation that influence trends

5. Aggregating trend observations into 40 trends in an iterative process

6. Summarizing 40 trends under 7 topics

Figure 1. Procedure of the trend analysis.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the 40 trends and the seven topics to which they are assigned. The number of trend observations per trend is shown in brackets. Although the number of observations is not directly related to the significance of each trend, and of course does not express representativeness, it does indicate how present certain trends are in the analyzed European reports compared to others. Table S2 (Supplementary Materials) provides a comprehensive overview of each trend, including main drivers, general developments, and opportunities for all trends analyzed. The following results, as well as Table S2 (Supplementary Materials), are based on 545 trend observations. Fifteen trend observations do not relate to the other developments, and therefore are not considered.

Table 1. Elaborated trends and main drivers on European scale per topic.

Topics and Main Drivers <i>(Number of Trend Observations)</i>	Trends <i>(Number of Trend Observations)</i>
Trends that touch all systems (120) <u>Main drivers:</u> Globalization Market Liberalization	Unequal development and inequality (40) Decline of rural services and accessibility (21) Rural decline (19) Climate change (17) Exploitation of development potential (13) Globalization (10)
Agriculture and farming (113) <u>Main drivers:</u> Globalization Market Liberalization Demographic Change	Agro-economic developments (28) Young farmers and new entrants (25) New types of farming (12) Changing patterns of the employment in rural areas and the agricultural sector (11) Agroecology, bio economy, and forest ecology (9) Farm size (9) Aging and decrease of farm population (8) Diversification/specialization of farms (7) Farmland prices (4)
Economy and technology (86) <u>Main drivers:</u> Digitalization Globalization	Diversification of rural economy (14) Innovations and knowledge economy (12) Manifestations of new technologies (12) Digital economy (11) Economic growth and market effects (11) Interdependency and interregional networks (11) Resource competition (9) New forms of economies as chances for rural spaces (6)
Policy and socio-economic developments in rural areas (71) <u>Main drivers:</u> New forms of governance Diversification and individualization	Future challenges for governance and policy in the EU (16) Policy incidence and effectiveness (16) Socioeconomic developments in agricultural rural societies (16) Regional and local strategies (9) Social innovations and capital (9) Regulation and subsidies (5)
Demography, settlement System, and migration (61) <u>Main drivers:</u> Diversified and liberal lifestyles Globalization	Migration patterns (20) Concentration and urbanization (14) Increasing urban sprawl and urban-rural continuum (14) Aging population (13)
Environment, sustainability and resilience (53) <u>Main drivers:</u> Ecological awareness Climate change Ecological degradation	Sustainability transition and resilience (17) Shift towards a sustainable and renewable economy (15) (Agro-) environmental conservation (12) (Awareness on) increasing environmental impacts (9)
Food system (41) <u>Main drivers:</u> Ecological and social awareness Diversification of lifestyles	Regional and local food (22) Sustainable food and lifestyle (13) Food demand and security (6)

The following sections describe in detail the challenges and opportunities for each topic. The content of the results elaborated for the following sections is based on the analyzed reports (see Table S1 (Supplementary Materials)). The developments are mainly based on the contents of the trend observation and the opportunities are mainly based

on our own conclusions derived from the trend observations. They express under which conditions rural regeneration can be promoted.

4.1. Trends That Touch All Systems

The six trends affecting all systems (Table 1) can be divided into two groups. The first group defines trends (climate change, globalization, and exploitation of development potential) that can be seen as more general drivers. Because globalization and climate change are such important drivers themselves, they are also described as trends. They influence almost every development described in the following sections. The second group is defined by unequal development, the decline of rural services, and rural decline in general.

Besides market liberalization, globalization is the main driver affecting rural economies. In most parts of the European Union, it has led to a highly technologized and professionalized agricultural sector and a decline in the number of farms and employment opportunities in the primary sector. As a result, many rural economies have diversified. Landscape and agriculture are under increasing pressure from climate change. Developing a more sustainable society to counteract environmental degradation can be a great opportunity for rural regeneration. Key challenges in rural areas, such as social cohesion, competitiveness, sustainability, and food security, can be addressed by providing space for engaged local people to try out novel solutions that offer opportunities for social innovation and change. There are several examples of research studies regarding place-based strategies tackling these key challenges in the sense of neo-endogenous approaches, e.g., in France [61], Portugal [62], or Italy [63].

Beside these more general drivers and trends, the key developments have been and still are the growing disparities between urban and rural areas, the rural decline and aging of the rural population, and the decline in access to services of general interest (SGIs). Görmar [41] states that, for example, in Germany aging and selective outmigration often are connected to the availability of public services. This is accompanied by lower education levels, higher unemployment rates, and increasing public debt, leading to a loss of social capital, which reduces the quality of life in rural areas. These developments pose a major challenge for Europe's rural areas: How can this negative tendency, which has lasted for decades, be turned into a rural regeneration? The following opportunities can indicate where to start in order to make such a turn possible.

Firstly, inequalities between rural and urban areas are evident, so a shift in EU cohesion policy towards a more sustainable and redistributive policy can be observed, which has the potential to strengthen the socio-economic structure of disadvantaged rural areas. Secondly, rural areas close to urban agglomerations could benefit more from urban–rural networks and focus on adapting to demographic change (e.g., health tourism, silver economy). Finally, rural areas often do not realize their full potential. Place-based strategies that combine sustainable landscapes, tourism, and an attractive environment with new lifestyles and good access to digital and physical infrastructure could help make remote rural areas more attractive and successful. Dax and Copus [64] state that rural areas do not necessarily need to be situated close to a city to develop, because there is potential in addressing service requirements or community development paths.

4.2. Trends in Agriculture and Farming

The trends in agriculture and farming describe three parallel lines of development:

1. The ongoing modernization of the agricultural sector (specific agro-economic developments, new types of farming, changing employment patterns and in the agricultural sector, diversification/specialization of farms) is driven by the global food market, technological innovations in farming, the restructured agricultural labor market, and a diversified new rural economy.
2. The developments regarding demographic change and land concentration (farm size, aging and decline of the farm population, farmland prices) are driven by the

main threats facing the agricultural sector. The economic environment for farmers is generally risky (volatile prices, dependence on subsidies, increase in extreme weather events), there is a lack of skilled human capital and qualified labor in rural areas, and the farm population is aging and shrinking.

3. The rise of more sustainable agriculture (young farmers and new entrants; agroecology, bioeconomy, and forest ecology) shows the potential that agriculture could have in the future.

Recent research shows that sustainable agriculture is an emerging topic in rural development in Europe, whether it is about Romanian organic farmers adapting to agroecological principles [65], social services in farming to improve human–nature relationships in Italy [66], the efficiency of subsidies to improve sustainable farming in Spain [67], or the adaptation of sustainable measures of young wine farmers in Hungary [68].

Although there is a lack of generational renewal in agriculture, those young people who are still willing to become farmers tend to be well educated and have a new (more sustainable) view of agricultural production. If more young people could be convinced to become farmers, the already increasing share of sustainable forms of agriculture and the use of biomass for renewable energy production could be an opportunity for rural regeneration. The following key opportunities for rural regeneration have been identified in our analysis:

- New forms of support for young farmers and new entrants are emerging from civil society (e.g., community-supported agriculture, integration of social enterprises into agriculture, shared farming);
- Innovations in farming (e.g., precision farming, professional organization, combination with other domains);
- New forms of farming that integrate new lifestyles, technological innovations, and social engagement could make working in the agricultural sector more attractive; for example, new approaches, such as demonstration farms, can improve sustainability in the agricultural sector [69], or the integration of cultural tourism can be a second pillar for rural development [70];
- A diversified, sustainable agricultural sector in rural areas, producing the renewable energy that European economies need, can benefit from the new environmental policies that are expected in the future (for a complete overview of all opportunities, see Table S2 (Supplementary Materials)).

4.3. Trends in Economy and Technology

Structural change in rural areas has been driven mainly by global economic and technological developments in recent decades (see Section 4.2). For example, the diversification of the rural economy is strongly linked to economic growth and market effects, as well as to the manifestation of new technologies. The influence of the primary sector is declining in rural areas, while the tertiary sector is gaining more and more importance for rural economies. Developments in automation, digitalization, and robotization are accelerating these trends. The framework for development finance is changing (growing influence of real estate markets). As a consequence, rural areas, which are usually rich in real estate capital, come into focus of the markets, but often without a positive outcome for the rural population. As a consequence, land grabbing is a problem that nowadays is an issue in all EU-member states [71] and especially in Romania [72]. Rural areas certainly have the potential to generate innovation and knowledge. The emerging development of a digitalized economy but also new digital education offers in rural areas creates an opportunity. Rural areas with a high level of digital accessibility can be very attractive for remote workers, but this requires supporting infrastructure development (see also Section 4.1).

New forms of economies (e.g., sharing economy) and diverse working models (part-time, self-employment, remote working), combined with new lifestyles that could lead to immigration and economic growth, are considered a chance or opportunity for a positive development path for rural areas. The combination of digitalization and sharing can be seen

as an opportunity to make rural areas more attractive. The establishment of co-working spaces can reduce the problem of those rural areas that do not conduct enough work [44].

4.4. Trends Regarding Policy-Making and Socio-Economic Developments in Rural Areas

Policy incidence and effectiveness are closely related to socio-economic developments in rural agricultural societies. One finding is that the influence of the global market is increasing while the influence of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is decreasing. Furthermore, European subsidies and programs respond ineffectively to economic, environmental, and social challenges, although the share of sustainable subsidies within the CAP is increasing. Policies are still not efficient enough to stop the negative impacts of current economic developments on rural areas (e.g., land abandonment, degradation, increasing artificial land use, pollution, and social marginalization).

In contrast, regional and local strategies, social innovations, and capital are emerging. Local and regional arrangements are becoming more important, as are social innovations and agricultural initiatives. If social capital and local politicians can be mobilized, social innovation can have a significant impact on rural regeneration, but new policy approaches are needed. Overarching initiatives such as the “Rural Pact” or the “EU rural action plan” [20] should provide resources to explore local potential for rural development. New developments need to be funded in order to harness the potential of the rural population’s growing awareness of the changing socio-economic conditions in rural areas. In this context, not only the economic perspective should be addressed. In terms of rural development, social, cultural, and environmental concerns should be taken into account as well [41]. Subsidies should support local strategies against rural decline. Therefore, the existing and growing attention towards sustainability provides an opportunity for rural innovation. As a result, the economic potential behind sustainable agricultural models and agro-tourism are the main economic opportunities for rural areas.

4.5. Trends in Demography, the Settlement System, and Migration

Current migration patterns and the aging of the population are part of the demographic change that has been going on for decades and will continue for decades to come. The aging society affects all areas, and rural areas in particular. Many rural areas in Europe suffer from a selective (job-related) out-migration of younger and well-educated inhabitants, mainly because of decreasing opportunities for education and jobs in rural areas. In contrast, small cities within commuting distance of large cities and metropolitan areas can benefit from digitalization and high real estate prices in large cities. There is a strong connection between aging and outmigration and the general trend of rural decline [41] (see also Section 4.1).

The EU area has already reached a high level of urbanization, so this trend could be halted or reversed in favor of a rural regeneration. Urban lifestyles are already part of many rural areas [12], and therefore it is not necessary to live an urban lifestyle to be modern. In general, cities are becoming denser, more expensive, and the quality of life there is declining, which may make small cities or medium-sized cities in rural areas more attractive in the long run. In context of the COVID-19 pandemic it became more valuable to live near recreational areas; this is especially the case in rural areas [73].

In addition, some remote rural areas are already more resilient due to past demographic and economic constraints. Those areas affected by population and economic decline that have found solutions to maintain good functionality could be models for a shrinking and more sustainable economy that is more resilient to environmental problems.

In terms of rural areas, the trends focus on demographic change and urban–rural relationships within this topic. International migration, for instance, failed to materialize as relevant for rural areas. European rural areas are expected to be affected by international migration in the future [74]. Other aspects such as seasonal workers did not play a major role, although they are a very important part of some rural areas, for example in Germany [75] or Spain [76].

4.6. Trends Regarding the Environment, Sustainability, and Resilience

The trends in this topic have a high potential for a rural regeneration. Rural areas can benefit in many ways from the transition to a more sustainable society, which is expected to occur as more policies are put in place to adapt towards climate change and environmental degradation. The four trends related to environment and sustainability, namely sustainability transition and resilience, shift towards a sustainable and renewable economy, environmental protection and (awareness of) increasing environmental impacts, offer many opportunities for European rural areas.

Several developments are expected to help rural areas become more successful. These include growing sustainable agriculture with higher profit margins, opportunities in the circular economy, new markets to produce biofuels and renewable energy, increasing environmental awareness, and slow-growth lifestyles. For example, positive impacts on rural development can be expected through the establishment of local energy value chains [43]. Policies need to be put in place to enable a sustainable transition in rural areas for those potentials to be realized. A significant adaptation of the CAP would have the greatest potential. Furthermore, the Green Deal can provide an abundance of opportunities for rural areas. Benedek et al. [43] (p. 516) argue that, for the EU, the development of renewable energy is already part of cohesion policy, since the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and the UN General Assembly in 2014 already declared a decade of sustainable energy for all. However, realizing such visions requires targeted support for local solutions and place-based strategies (see also Section 4.4), because each region has different conditions for different types of renewable energy in terms of availability and negative impacts on residents and the environment. In this context, renewable energy communities play an important role in the transition from centralized power plants towards a more distributed energy production [77].

4.7. Trends Regarding the Food System

New lifestyles and environmental awareness are increasing the demand for healthy and sustainable food in the EU, ultimately leading to a growing share of organically produced food. This development is accompanied by a growing number of small-scale food producers, increasing local and regional marketing networks, and shorter supply chains between producers and consumers. In contrast, at the global level, food demand and production are increasing as the world's population continues to grow. This trend reinforces industrialized forms of agriculture and food production.

Trends in the food system could be very valuable for a rural regeneration in Europe. New entrants and successors could increase their profit margins by setting up farm shops, farmers' markets, box schemes, and online food aggregators, as well as using short value chains to supply local cafes and restaurants. The growing market for sustainable food has the potential to attract young new entrants and successors to the agricultural sector. With the beginning of the COVID pandemic the demand for sustainable food even increased in EU member states such as Poland and Bulgaria [78], where the income is below average, compared to the other member states of the EU. However, this trend conflicts with the main goal of food security as part of European policies, mainly the CAP, because on a global level the demand for agricultural products still increases quite rapidly [25]. For example, the unsustainable use of fertilizers is still seen as necessary, but the overuse causes environmental problems [79].

In general, conventional farming is still dominant and benefits most from subsidies. However, there has been a recent shift towards sustainable food production. Sustainable landscapes are more resilient to climate change and environmental degradation, and local food chains are less vulnerable to economic crises. Therefore, a shift in governance strategies is possible, linking food security and sustainable farming as a common goal, for instance, through the increased use of animal waste instead of synthetic fertilizers [79] or the integration of agricultural information and communication technologies to make sustainable farming more efficient [80].

4.8. Results Summary

Today, the opportunities for rural regeneration are more diverse than ever before (see Figure 2). In addition to challenges such as uneven spatial development, rural decline, climate change, and environmental degradation, the decline in rural services and accessibility as well as the decline and aging of the agricultural population, we can identify a number of opportunities. Current and ongoing trends such as the shift to a more diversified economy, the expansion of organic agriculture, the emergence of new technologies, and increasing awareness of environmental impacts have the potential for a shift toward rural regeneration.

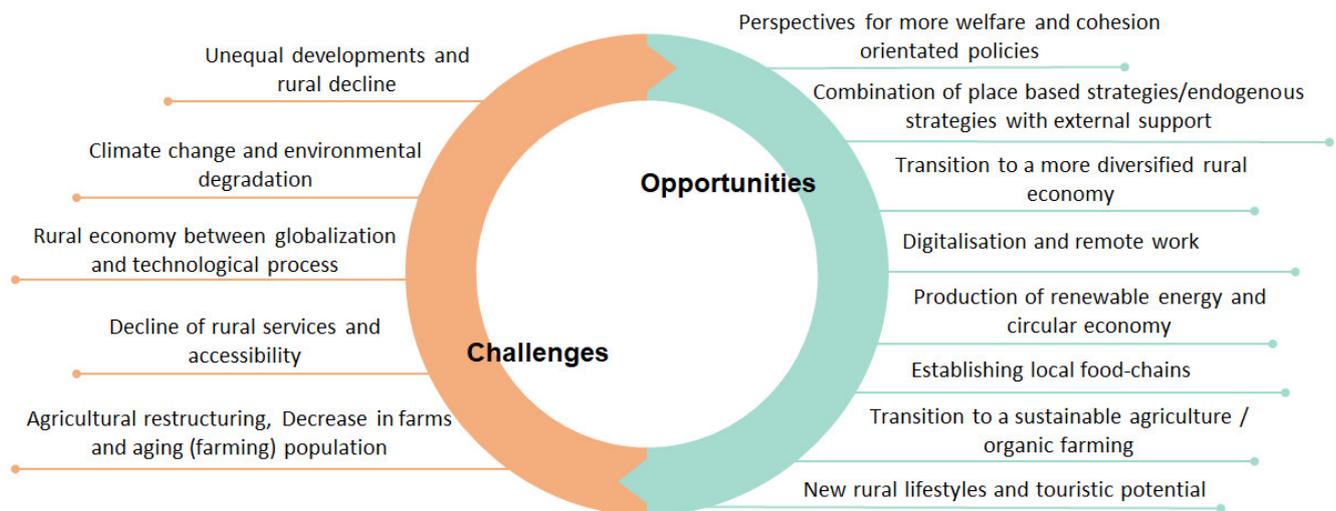


Figure 2. Opportunities and challenges for rural areas in Europe.

For instance, the new technological possibilities of digitalization open new perspectives for rural regeneration. Digitalization affects almost all areas of life: from work, shopping, and mobility, to living and social interaction, to health, education, information, and entertainment. Not least, it offers opportunities for peripheral rural areas to compensate for location disadvantages and a more diversified rural economy. Some good examples show that digitalization can provide tools for new solutions, for example in the fields of e-mobility, e-learning, telemedicine, or flexible, location-independent work organization. However, these digital tools need to be further developed and tested regarding the specific conditions and challenges of rural areas. In order to realize the potential of digitization, infrastructure is essential. This includes the development of public transport and services of general interest (SGIs) to ensure that people want to live in rural areas. Another opportunity is that rural areas will become more important for new rural lifestyles as well as tourism potential. In addition, awareness of environmental impacts offers opportunities for improvements in sustainable and organic agriculture. This also implies rural areas are becoming less dependent on global supply chains and relying more on local food systems. However, without a certain level of infrastructure, this alone will have little impact on rural regeneration.

Renewable energy is a further opportunity. The expansion of renewable energy will lead to a shift in energy production towards rural areas, and relatively decentralized energy production will become much more important in the future than centralized production in large power facilities. The energy transition is occurring in rural areas because the necessary land, potential, and resources are located there. For rural areas, this is both an opportunity and a challenge. In the future, renewable energy production will be increasingly integrated into agricultural operations and could lead to a transition towards a more circular economy.

5. Discussion

This paper contributes to the debate on the understanding of rural development and rural regeneration in Europe. The first step was to identify the main trends and their drivers for rural areas in Europe. In a second step, challenges and opportunities were formulated on how to develop these trends towards positive rural regeneration in Europe and shaping the future trajectories.

Overarching trends and drivers, and the opportunities they present, provide a framework and orientation for rural regeneration. They are not intended as measures which every rural area can and should implement. Each region needs to identify and exploit its own potential to develop. This requires not only EU and national government policies and programs, but also local social innovation of local and regional stakeholders [29,81]. They are an important factor for rural regeneration and bring together networks and community groups that build social, cultural, environmental, and economic activities and stimulate processes in regions from the bottom up [82]. Rural regeneration can be effective when bottom-up activities (e.g., local knowledge, local resources, and community involvement) and top-down activities (e.g., EU and national policies) are implemented together [81,83,84]. This is in line with the neo-endogenous approach to rural development [83].

The increased attention to local and regional resources and strengths has been reflected in recent studies that have extended the perspective from the traditional growth-oriented focus of rural areas. These studies not only focus on “hard” and measurable policy targets, but consider “soft” strategies for local actors [83]. With “Rural Well-being”, the OECD has developed a policy framework for rural development. The new approach aims to shift the focus from the economic to the environmental and social dimensions of well-being. It addresses actors and partnerships between “government, the private sector and civil society to successfully implement policies, the Rural Well-being Policy Framework focuses on governance mechanisms, including the OECD Principles on Rural Policy” [85] (p. 2). The well-being of the regional population, the use of the potential of migrants, in-migrants and returnees, a change in the function of regions (e.g., towards residential and leisure regions), the recognition of new identities, and the innovative capacity of regions can only be achieved by local actors [83]. The “Social Progress Index” (SPI) follows a similar approach. As an alternative to traditional measures based on economic indicators, the EU-SPI uses only social and environmental indicators to better reflect social development in European countries [86].

External influences, such as the policies of the European Union (EU), have the potential to affect rural areas and their development in several ways, as they define the scope for local decision-makers to unfold endogenous potential. To enable local actors to continue or initiate rural regeneration and development at the micro-level, the EU needs to provide and expand its support in terms of cohesion policy (European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)), agricultural policy (Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)), and sustainability policy (European Green Deal (EGD)) on the macro-level.

The variety of trends we extract can help to define the framework for possible pathways on the macro-level for rural regions to regenerate or develop. Which pathways are the right ones for certain regions needs to be defined by their endogenous potential. For instance, for agrarian-shaped regions the transformation towards sustainable agriculture could be the right pathway, regions with attractive landscapes could regenerate with touristic approaches, and flat coastal regions could harvest the potential in expanding their renewable energy production. On the one hand, inequalities in infrastructure and services of general interest must be reduced to be able to focus on endogenous potentials. (See also Section 4.1). On the other hand, it is necessary to develop and implement targeted, long-term, site-specific strategies, to use these endogenous potentials.

The LEADER Program, which is part of the CAP, points out how funding should work in the future. The LEADER approach supports local communities to access their local potential and human resources [87]. However, its scope is too limited to help rural communities to regenerate or develop in the long run. The funding framework should use

its potential to provide targeted support to structurally weak rural areas, even if the CAP, with its area-based support, is not very targeted. Approaches such as LEADER should therefore be integrated in cohesion policies, equipped with more means, to expand and combine the systematic basic support for structurally weak regions with approaches that harvest their endogenous potential.

The methodological approach chosen here involves some limitations. Because of the more general analysis of trends that affect most rural areas, it is not possible to develop national or regional approaches and strategies at this level. However, the trend analysis can help to better identify locally specific trends and opportunities. A content analysis will never capture the entire complexity of the text, but it will be a selective reduction. Therefore, only certain features will be the focus of the analysis. Thus, the reliability and validity of the analysis will depend to a large extent on who and what exactly is being examined in the content analysis. Each researcher has a different view of a text. In qualitative research, there is always room for interpretation.

Further research is required on how the trends manifest in spatial development on regional levels and how rural regions or rural actors are addressing these challenges and are taking advantage of opportunities for rural regeneration. It could be fruitful to analyze the evolution of rural development strategies over the last 10 to 15 years, their consistency with reality, and their logical consistency. Further research is suggested to find out whether European policies based on rural trends are manifested in the context of local policy-making. Local case studies can demonstrate whether current and emerging rural trends have been incorporated into local development approaches. Furthermore, it could be valuable to analyze whether the identified trends are considered in European policy-making regarding the domains of cohesion, agriculture, and sustainability.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su15065485/s1>, Table S1: EU-Project reports, Table S2: Content summary of all trends and drivers sorted by topics.

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