

PREPARE Follow-Up Statement on the Next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034)

Background: Rural Voices Must Not Be Left Behind

Since its establishment, the PREPARE Partnership has played a key role in creating and supporting national rural development networks across Europe, and in bringing them together as a unified voice at the EU level. These networks serve as vital bridges to local and subregional communities, including citizens, civil society organisations, and small entrepreneurs, both within and beyond the EU. While acknowledging the importance of farming, security and competitiveness, the new MFF proposal leaves the broader and integrated rural development behind – in clear opposition to the stated “leave no-one behind policy”. Rural citizens have been in many if not most of the countries left behind or not listened to.

The urban-led (regional) policies (including funding and research) have led to a structural democracy deficit and unequal treatment of citizens in rural areas. Sectoral lobbies still have a much too strong weight. The exodus (demography issues) of people, services and opportunities have led to a vicious circle affecting rural citizens in many ways from children to elderly and less favoured people.

Has Europe a reason – or the right - to neglect research results on the geography of discontent? Rising populism and exits might endanger existing EU-structures. This is a defining moment. The architecture of the next MFF must not overlook or dilute the value of community-led approaches. **Rural Europe cannot afford to be left behind** – not in budgetary priorities, not in political discourse, and not in shaping the future of the European Union.

Upon reviewing the new MFF proposal, it seems that the feedback and proposals related to rural development have not been sufficiently taken into account by the Commission, which is a cause for our concern.

Concerns: Rural Needs Must Not Be Ignored

The PREPARE expresses its concern over the direction outlined by the European Commission for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034:

- The proposed MFF favours a “one Big Beautiful Programme” approach, granting Member States significant discretion in determining how rural development is addressed at the national level. National and regional partnership plans may or may not include meaningful rural development components, and the extent of their inclusion remains highly unpredictable. Furthermore, the concept of “regional” is applied differently across Member States, reflecting diverse governance structures and posing challenges for consistent implementation.
- LEADER—the EU’s flagship community-led rural development approach— appears to be sidelined in the draft proposal, despite its proven role in reaching less-favoured and marginalised rural areas, and its recognised potential in candidate countries to stimulate local rural economies.
- The proposed Competitiveness Fund is unlikely to directly benefit rural development, as its expected focus on innovation and industrial competitiveness may not sufficiently align with the specific needs and contexts of rural areas.
- Agriculture retains a strong presence in the MFF, but even there, real-term cuts of around 20-25% are expected compared to the previous period.
- Enlargement is mentioned but lacks visibility, as it is embedded within broader 'Global Europe' external action funding.

PREPARE therefore calls on the European Commission, the Members of the European Parliament, and the Member States to seriously consider including the following proposals in the MFF and its related programmes for 2028–2034:

- Civil society actors and Local Action Groups (LAGs) should be included as funded partners to support coordinated efforts related to civil resilience and security, including food security, climate action, and energy transitions.
- Ensure sustained funding and structural support for rural movements and networks at local, national, and EU levels, acknowledging their crucial role in fostering bottom-up development, civil society engagement, and genuine rural representation in policymaking.
- Ensure by earmarking, expand and strengthen the LEADER/CLLD approach so it is fully aligned with core EU priorities.
- Enhance support for rural innovation beyond agriculture by establishing a distinct community-led or place-based innovation funding programme. As the current EIP-AGRI model is agriculture-led and does not sufficiently accommodate non-farming rural actors, a complementary, cross-sector programme could fill this gap and be piloted through a funded Commission initiative.
- Social entrepreneurship, small farms, and rural enterprises should not be overlooked, and access to inclusive funding should be ensured.
- Rural areas and local actors must receive a fair share of research opportunities, not be left behind in the technological and AI transitions, and be supported through appropriate capacity building.

PREPARE strongly expresses also the need to include Candidate and pre-accession countries as much as possible to the above proposal in the actual context of insecurity and EU-challenges.

In this decisive moment for the European Union, PREPARE urges EU institutions and Member States to take bold steps to ensure that rural areas are not an afterthought in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. True cohesion, resilience, and democratic legitimacy require that rural voices are not only heard—but are structurally supported, fairly funded, and empowered to shape Europe’s future.



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